Cross Cases
by yopumpkinhead

Summary

While looking for a way to remove the Mark of Cain from his brother, Sam accidentally activates a spell that transports him into an alternate reality. There, he discovers that wizards have Laws, demons aren't just made of smoke, and Lucifer isn't the only fallen angel in town.

Meanwhile, Harry Dresden just wants some downtime to recuperate from breaking into Hades' vault and foiling Nicodemus's plans. But when a stranger named Sam Winchester turns up unexpectedly on Demonreach, and demons start going after Harry and his friends, Harry has to get on the case, and fast.

And Dean? Dean just wishes things would stop going to shit for one whole day. As if the Mark of Cain wasn't enough to deal with, now he's got an angel on one shoulder, a demon on the other, and a brother who's unexpectedly gone missing. Again.

Notes

In the Supernatural-verse, this story takes place just after S10E18, "Book of the Damned", and immediately goes AU. In the Dresdenverse, it takes place about two months after Skin Game, and attempts to stay reasonably within canon.
Deal with the Devil

Chapter Summary

In which Sam chooses between a rock and a hard place.

Sam

The chapel at St. Mary’s Convent looked more or less the same as it had most of a decade ago, when Sam had first walked inside to kill Lilith. Pale stone walls that reflected dim late-afternoon sunlight shining through broken stained-glass windows, rotting pews shoved in a pile against the front wall, tables full of unlit candles to either side. The blood sigil on the floor was gone, the floor itself looked like someone had detonated a grenade on it, and the walls were cracked and studded with bits of shrapnel, but otherwise the dust and the decay and the general air of ruin were the same.

Sam stopped before the altar, memories too old to be trusted telling him he stood in the exact spot he’d stood then, when he’d killed Lilith, when he’d opened the Cage. When he’d released the devil upon the world and started the Apocalypse.

Fitting, he thought.

Then he turned around to face the figure who stood behind him. “Lucifer,” he said.

Lucifer smiled. “I’m impressed, Sam,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d actually come this far.” He still wore the body Sam remembered him in, the dead man named Nick, whom Sam had learned years later was a distant relative of the Campbells. Sam didn’t know if Lucifer wore that body because it was (still, even after two hundred years) the form Sam associated with him; or if Lucifer’s true form, massive and eye-searing and mind-breaking, was simply too inconvenient when his goal – for now – wasn’t to destroy Sam.

He’d been back for almost three years, ever since Castiel had returned from Purgatory. At first he’d been quiet, so quiet Sam had convinced himself that the chills along his spine, the glimpses from the corners of his eyes, were nothing but bad memories. You spent two centuries in Hell, you were bound to have some nasty flashbacks now and then. He’d had several dozen good reasons for taking on the Trials to close the gates of Hell, but one of them had been the hope that maybe, if he sealed Hell, he could convince himself that Lucifer was locked away for good.

But he never finished the Trials, because he’d do anything for Dean even if it meant letting the demons stay free and the devil lurk at the edges of his mind. Dean had betrayed that with Gadreel, and Sam hated that it had taken him so long to clue in to Gadreel’s presence because he’d thought, the whole time, that the flickers of angelic power he felt here and there, the blank spots in his perception, were Lucifer. Still, it had been a relief, just for a moment, when he learned the truth. Because if he’d been possessed by some other angel it meant Lucifer was still just a hallucination.

Only Gadreel had left, and the angelic presence had remained, getting stronger and stronger, until it was just like old times with Lucifer appearing at Sam’s shoulder to mock him, to taunt him, to cheer him on when he veered dangerously close to the edge trying to find Dean after he’d run off with Crowley. Until finally Sam had to admit that it wasn’t just hallucinations and flashbacks. Lucifer was
real, and he wasn’t going away. So Sam had decided to make the best of it.

*Lucifer-level magic*, Metatron had said. *But you can’t exactly ask him.* Sam wondered whether Metatron had forgotten who he was talking to, or just hadn’t thought Sam would go that far. He hadn’t wanted to, had held out hope that Castiel or Charlie would come up with something. But the Book of the Damned and its “biblical” side effects had turned out to be at least as bad as Lucifer, and better the literal devil you know.

And Dean was running out of time.

*Sorry, Bobby,* Sam thought. *This probably wasn’t the kind of choice you meant. But I’m not going to let Dean become a demon again.*

“You know why I’m here,” he said to Lucifer. A reminder not of his task - they both knew that all too well - but of how stubborn, how determined Sam could be when it was Dean on the line.

“Yes,” Lucifer agreed. “You want me to remove the Mark of Cain from your brother.”

Sam nodded. His teeth were clenched so hard it hurt, but it was that or scream, scream and run and give up and accept Dean was lost. And Sam could never do that.

“What I don’t get,” Lucifer continued, casual, careless, “is why you think I’m going to help you. Are you planning on offering yourself to me? Is that all?” He met Sam’s eyes, and Sam took a deep breath against the memories. “Because that isn’t nearly enough. You’ll be mine in the end one way or another, Sammy my boy.”

“I’m offering you Heaven,” Sam ground out, and then nearly choked with relief because he’d seen the flicker of interest in Lucifer’s eyes, before he was able to hide it. “Heaven,” Sam repeated, “and all its angels.”

“Really,” Lucifer said.

“God’s gone,” Sam reminded him. “Raphael and Gabriel are dead. Michael’s in the Cage. You get out of the Cage and go up to Heaven, there’s a whole host of angels just looking for an archangel to lead them. You could even take Hell, if you wanted it; Crowley’s not exactly winning ‘boss of the year’ right now.”

“Heaven and Hell,” Lucifer mused. “And in exchange, I remove the Mark from your brother?”

“Remove the Mark,” Sam said, “and leave Earth alone until the end of Dean’s natural lifespan.”

Lucifer’s eyebrows jumped to his hairline. “Sam,” he said incredulously. “You’re giving me Earth?”

“After Dean’s lived and died naturally,” Sam whispered, “I don’t care what happens to Earth any more. It’s never done a damn thing for us.”

He thought he should feel bad, somehow. He was supposed to be the compassionate one, the one who didn’t like killing, the *saving people* half of “saving people, hunting things”. But he kept seeing Dean with demon-black eyes, Dean with ordinary black eyes from getting punched in the face, Dean injured and broken and with the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. Dean saying, *what if the bus wants to go over the cliff*, and Sam wondered again if Dean had thought maybe that was the only way he’d finally get to put down some of that weight.

He wouldn’t let the bus go over the cliff until Dean had had a long and happy life, but Sam had realized a while ago that he didn’t much care if, after that, after they were both gone, the bus decided
to take a nosedive. He’d done his part, done everything he could to keep it safe, and it wasn’t
eough. Would never be enough, no matter how many times he gave everything in the attempt. So
he held his breath and waited while Lucifer considered it, and hated himself for knowing Lucifer
well enough to spot it when Lucifer reached his decision.

“I remove the Mark of Cain from Dean and let him live his natural life on Earth in peace,” Lucifer
said, “and in exchange, I get Heaven, the angels, Hell... and you.”

“That’s the deal,” Sam said. He felt like his chest was full of knives (remembered fire and ice,
remembered chains and blood and pain), but he made himself stand straight, made himself meet
Lucifer’s eyes.

Lucifer grinned, bright and wide and eager. “I accept.”

Sam swallowed. “Yes.”

Bright white light flared through the room, and distantly, past the high-pitched whine of angel Grace
screaming through his brain, Sam heard thunder boom overhead, heard sudden winds rattle the
chapel walls. Power flooded him, cold and terrible and horribly, sickeningly familiar, the tiny spark
of Grace that had clung desperately to his soul ever since Death brought it back reaching out to the
gate beneath Sam’s feet, finding the rest of itself and dragging it free of the Cage, and Sam forced
himself to relax, to not fight, waiting for Lucifer to shove him down into a tiny corner of his own
mind—

—but then the light faded, and the electric whine, and Sam staggered and collapsed against the altar.
He could feel the cold marble against his palms, feel his legs shaking under him, feel the breath
rasping in his throat. Lucifer was inside him; he knew that with every fiber of his being — yet Sam
was still in control.

“I thought you might want to be around to say goodbye to your brother,” Lucifer said, and Sam spun
to see him standing a few feet away, still wearing Nick’s form. He smiled gently, spread his hands.
“Your bargain was quite... generous. It doesn’t hurt me to be generous in return.”

Sam clenched his jaw, feeling his stomach roil. Two hundred years as Lucifer’s chew toy; he knew
that wasn’t the only reason. Rather, Lucifer was doing this because he knew - knew that Sam had
learned how to give up, how to vanish inside his own mind where even an archangel couldn’t reach
him any more; knew it would hurt Sam that much more to make him stay around to see the pain on
Dean’s face when he realized what Sam had done. Possibly even knew that Sam had harbored a
deep, secret hope that Dean would be able to kill them, Lucifer and Sam both. It would kill Dean to
do it, but he’d die human, and Sam had run out of other options.

But Lucifer knew all that, so he’d left Sam in control of his body. It took everything Sam had not to
throw up, not to scream, not to collapse. He’d promised himself that he would find a way to save
Dean. This was the way he’d found. He wouldn’t give up now.

Still, he couldn’t quite keep himself from dawdling as he pushed himself upright, away from the
altar. Couldn’t keep himself from dragging his feet, moving aimlessly around the broken chapel,
trying to work up the willpower to leave, to go back to the car he’d stolen and drive the twenty-odd
hours back to the bunker.

To face Dean.

Yeah, he was gonna need a few minutes.
A glint of red in the shadows, illuminated by the flickering lightning, caught his eye, and Sam let himself wander over to it. Probably nothing, leftover blood from the 1972 massacre (though that should be long since dry and brown, he thought), or maybe blood from Lilith’s death and the Cage’s opening. But when he got closer, crouching down to peer into the shadows behind a damaged, rotting pew, he saw that it wasn’t blood. Something was embedded in the moulding at the base of the wall, next to the edge of the crater left behind by the Cage’s opening.

He dug in his pocket for his flashlight, pulled it out and flicked it on. The light illuminated a small carving of a pentacle - a five-pointed star surrounded by a circle - with a tiny red ruby embedded in the center of the star.

“What’s that?” Lucifer asked curiously. He’d followed Sam over (technically didn’t have to; he was inside Sam and seeing through his eyes, but his illusory body had walked over at least), and was frowning at the carving.

Sam glanced up at him. “It’s not yours?” he asked. He’d sort of figured any occult symbols carved into the foundations of the church built over the door to the devil’s Cage would be related to that Cage. And a ruby… well, that wouldn’t be much of a stretch, considering who’d brought him here.

“No, actually,” Lucifer said, sounding baffled enough that Sam believed him. He crouched beside Sam, squinting at the pentacle, then he said suddenly, “What’s that behind it?”

Sam frowned. The carving was on a piece of moulding that sat a little apart from the rest, the lines at its edges too clean for an accidental break. He tugged the moulding away from the wall, revealing a yellowed piece of paper taped to the plaster behind it. He worked it free carefully, mindful of the damage decades of exposure and neglect had done to the paper, and unfolded it.

My dearest Louisa, it read, words printed in a neat and delicate hand. I’m sorry to leave so abruptly, but something’s come up and I must return home. I’ll miss you dearly. If you ever wish to see me again, speak these words and we’ll be reunited. -Maggie.

Sam had been reading out loud - a habit he’d picked up because he hated Dean hovering close enough to try to read over his shoulder - and now turned his attention to the Latin written at the bottom of the paper: “Inter aditum, quam viam,” he read. “Coniungere simili simile, et aperiunt viam—”

“Wait, Sam—!” Lucifer yelped, eyes going wide, and Sam tried to cut himself off, but even as the last syllable left his lips he felt power surge through him, felt the world tilt beneath his feet, and then he was falling, plunging into darkness.

A million years passed, or maybe just a few minutes. Sam became aware, slowly, that he was sprawled on something uneven and hard. Dirt, he realized. Dirt and sticks and bushes. A forest…? His head ached, and past the ringing in his ears he could hear birds chirping and a low steady roar. He forced his eyes open.

Definitely a forest, and a Midwestern one at that (and Sam thought it said something about his life on the road that he could tell a Midwestern forest from a Southern or Eastern or Western one). Narrow trees, thick thorny underbrush - though Sam had, fortunately, managed to land in an area relatively free of brambles - a hill sloping down and away on one side and up to a crest on the other, topped by the battered, broken ruin of an old stone lighthouse. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted low through the trees, rapidly dimming behind thick stormclouds that boiled on the horizon, and a cool breeze kept the leaves in gentle, swaying motion. Lucifer was nowhere to be seen, the cold hum of his Grace under Sam’s collarbone faded to almost nothing.
But Sam barely paid attention to any of that, because there was an unfamiliar man standing over him. Even from flat on his back on the ground, Sam could tell the guy was extremely tall, maybe even Sam’s height, albeit with a leaner build. He had badly-cropped dark hair, wary dark eyes, and the pale skin of someone who didn’t get much sunlight. Sam’s first thought was hunter, given the guy’s worn jeans and T-shirt with the logo of a Chicago news station, beard scruff, the old scar under one eye. But over the jeans and T-shirt, the guy wore a heavy black leather inverness coat, its mantle hanging down to his elbows, and in his left hand he held a wooden staff. Definitely staff and not just walking stick - it was thick and sturdy, almost as tall as the guy himself, and etched with runes and protective sigils.

And, perhaps most importantly, he wore on a chain around his neck a silver pentacle with a ruby in the middle, just like the one carved into the wall of St. Mary’s.

“Huh,” the guy said, his voice deep and dry. “And here I thought this week was going to be boring.”
I was doing my rounds in the prison under Demonreach, running laps through the tunnels past the mounds of glowing, pale-green quartz crystals that held some of the nastiest monsters known to…

Well. At this point, known probably only to the spirit of the island, a few members of the Senior Council, and some of the supernatural world’s heaviest hitters. Even I didn’t know much about them, despite being their Warden, except that they were all nightmares beyond imagining.

I mean, hell. The place had several naagloshii in freaking minimum security.

Still, you spend enough time around gibbering horroterroras from the deeps, eventually you get a little inured to their whispers. And I’d had plenty of practice. My rounds involved a lot of running and a lot of parkour over the crystal mounds. I’d gotten into the habit while I was stuck on Demonreach for a year thanks to a “parasite” living in my brain. Only the island’s spirit, its genius loci, could suppress it enough to keep it from bursting from my skull and killing me. My ex-apprentice Molly had extracted the “parasite”, which turned out to be a baby spirit of intellect, born from the sacrifice of a fallen angel’s shadow in my brain. Yes, I know that means I was technically pregnant. Shut up.

Anyway. Two months had passed since then, and I figured there was no harm in staying in practice. My badass parkour skills had saved me twice in Hades’ vault, after all. Even so, I nearly faceplanted when I vaulted over a mound the size of a garden shed and found Alfred Demonreach, the island’s spirit, waiting on the other side. It was a huge, hulking figure, ten or twelve feet tall, and draped in a dark cloak. Green pinpricks of fiery light peered at me from the shadowy depths of its hood, watching as I stumbled to an awkward landing.

“Alfred,” I greeted it.
SOMEONE HAS ARRIVED, it informed me.

"Someone?" I repeated. "Who, Molly? Thomas?" I didn't get a lot of visitors out here - the island wasn't exactly easy to reach, being in the middle of Lake Michigan and surrounded by hidden, treacherous stone reefs. It was also... not evil, exactly, but the prison full of horrifying monsters, and the dark and powerful magic required to keep them contained, leached a grim darkness into the very air around it. I didn't notice it anymore, thanks to my bond with the island, but it tended to drive away everyone else. Only a few close friends were stubborn enough to visit me out here.

NO. SOMEONE NEW. SOMEONE STRANGE.

I frowned. The reefs and the island's unpleasant aura kept away casual sailors, and its existence had been scrubbed from official records long ago. Anyone coming here had to know about it, and had to have a reason to brave the reefs and the oppression. I focused on the island, on the local intellectus I had with it - an intimate, absolute understanding of the island and everything on it. Immediately I knew that the stranger was near the top of the hill on which the ruins of the lighthouse stood, lying on the ground, not moving - unconscious, maybe? I had no idea how the person had gotten all the way up there from the dock before Demonreach found me, and then I realized, they probably hadn't. While I didn't dare attempt to open a Way off the island - that kind of dark power wouldn't link to anything pleasant in the Nevernever - I knew that it was possible for people with a whole lot more firepower than me.

Which meant that if this guy had come via a Way through the Nevernever, he was almost certainly bad news.

Demonreach was still watching me, waiting patiently. It was the spirit of the island, bound to me after I did a ritual to claim the island as my sanctum, and while I wasn't stupid enough to think of it as a servant, it did have moments when I kind of wanted to put it in a suit and give it a British accent. "All right," I said. "Let's go see who it is."

Demonreach nodded, and led me up through the tunnels and out of the prison. As we walked, I focused again on the stranger lying unconscious in the woods. Intellectus is a strange thing: while I was on the island, I didn't have to think to know things like where to put my feet when I walked to avoid tripping, and if I paid any attention, I knew where every living creature and plant was. It wasn't a map in my head - more like the way you know, instinctively, where your limbs are, and whether and where something's touching them. I could sense the stranger, enough to guess by height and build that it was masculine, and I could get a very general sense of his essence. Not much, and usually it works better when someone's conscious and feeling strong emotion, but I had a faint impression of blood and cold.

In and of themselves, blood and cold aren't necessarily bad. Blood is life running through your veins. Cold is winter: harsh ice, empty darkness, base survival. Metaphysically, cold also represents logic, detachment, objectivity. Still, when they were present together in someone who'd managed to show up on Demonreach apparently via a Way through the Nevernever, it was an ominous sign. So I grabbed my black leather inverness coat - a gift from Molly to replace the one I'd lost a couple years ago during the battle at Chichén Itzá - and my staff as I left the cabin at the base of the lighthouse. The coat was enchanted against a variety of physical and magical threats, and the staff was a focusing tool. I still hadn't gotten around to carving myself a new blasting rod, but the staff made a pretty good substitute. I didn't touch the big case that sat tucked away in a corner, though even without opening it I could sense the gentle warmth that emanated from the broadsword it held. Amoracchius was not my weapon to wield - I was just holding on to it until I found the right person to bear it.
Outside, the breeze had kicked up, and I heard a rumble of thunder off in the distance - a storm was coming. Crap. I’d planned to take the *Water Beetle* back to the mainland later, check in on Murphy, socialize a bit. My friends had given me several pointed reminders about how isolated I was out here, so I’d been making an effort to spend a little more time off the island, now that I could do it without a baby intellect spirit accidentally exploding my brain. But a storm would make travel across the lake difficult, if not impossible. And I still had the mystery stranger to deal with.

I sped up a little. At the very least, I didn’t want to be caught outside in the rain when dealing with an unknown potential threat. Demonreach matched my speed, leading me to a spot just off the path that wound down the hill to the abandoned shipping town on the island’s edge. The guy was sprawled in the underbrush in an ungainly tangle of limbs. I waved Demonreach back - the spirit wasn’t exactly a reassuring thing to wake up to, and I didn’t want to spook the guy if I could avoid it - and went to see who I was dealing with.

He was tall and muscular, wearing a battered canvas jacket, worn jeans, a threadbare button-down shirt, and scuffed and stained combat boots. His jacket was open, and I could see the handle of a knife tucked into an inner pocket. Despite the knife, his face, framed by long, shaggy brown hair, was young, almost childishly innocent.

Then he stirred, eyes blinking open and darting around for a second before focusing on me, and the innocence vanished like a switch had flipped. Surprise, confusion, wariness all flashed across his expression.

“Huh,” I drawled. “And here I thought this week was going to be boring.” I leaned casually on my staff. "Who are you and how did you get here?"

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, trying to simultaneously keep an eye on me and look around. "My name is Sam," he said. His voice was surprisingly light for such a big guy, with an earnestness that matched the innocence that had returned when I hadn't immediately attacked him. His eyes were hazel, almost gold in the fading sunlight, and he looked up at me with wide-eyed worry. "I have no idea how I got here. I don't even know where 'here' is."

"You were in Maryland?" I asked, and he nodded. "What's the last thing you remember?"

He blinked, brow furrowing in confusion. "Lake Michigan," he repeated incredulously. "I was just in Maryland..." Seeming almost dazed - and who knows, he had just been unconscious - he stood up carefully. As he moved, I thought I caught a glimpse of a gun tucked into the back of his jeans, but he shrugged his coat into place before I could be sure. He looked around again, taking in the trees, the water you could see if you looked far enough, the approaching storm. Then he turned to me, and I saw the moment of surprise when he made to look down at me and had to look up instead. Not very far - he was only a couple inches shorter than me, but since I'm closer to seven feet tall than six, that meant that Sam having to look up to look someone in the face was probably a very rare occurrence. "So who're you?" he asked me.

"Harry Dresden," I said. I watched his face for any sign of recognition. Not to toot my own horn, but I'm fairly well-known in supernatural circles. You destroy an entire vampire court and become the Winter Knight, people tend to remember your name. But I might as well have said "John Smith" for all the reaction Sam had. Weird. Either he already knew exactly who I was, and his confusion was completely an act; or he really had never heard of me.

"You were in Maryland?" I asked, and he nodded. "What's the last thing you remember?"
"Ah..." He scrubbed a hand over his mouth. "I was... in an abandoned convent. I found an old note, I was reading it..." I realized suddenly that he kept glancing at my pentacle necklace. It had been my mother's, the only tangible thing she'd left me. I'd had the silver pentacle my whole life, and a few years ago my fairy godmother gave me the ruby that fit in the center. (Yes, I have a fairy godmother. It's not all it's cracked up to be.)

Sam noticed me noticing, and said, "The note was hidden behind a carving just like your necklace. Ruby and all."

I felt my eyebrows climb to my hairline. "Really," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "You have anything to do with it?" The corners of his mouth flickered as he spoke, not quite a smile, but there was something off in the way he was watching me, something I couldn't quite make out. I was having a hell of a time getting a read on the guy. He managed to be innocent and wary and curious and vaguely threatening all at once, and even when I focused both my wizard's senses and my intellectus on him I still didn't get anything more than that sense of blood and cold. Although now that I was paying attention, I realized that my intellectus was what was picking up the wary and the threatening. If you just looked at him you saw warm hazel eyes and that flicker of a smile, but my intellectus told me he was balanced on the balls of his feet like he expected me to attack him - or planned to attack me.

A cold flash of anger surged through me, that someone would dare show up on my island, the closest thing I had to a home, and even think about attacking me. I suddenly wanted to lash out, to burn him where he stood, to crush his bones and—

Whoa. Down, Harry. I started reciting multiplication tables in my head, pushing the mantle of Winter back into a distant corner of my brain. The mantle marked me as the Winter Knight, soldier and servant of the Fae Queens of Winter, and it gave me nice boost of power and durability. But it came with one hell of a downside: it ratcheted up my instinctive brain by a factor of like a thousand, pushing me to act on my most base instincts. Which in this case were territorial, protective - an animal wanting to defend its space.

Sam noticed my hesitation, and probably the sudden tension in my body. His eyes lost some of their warmth, his hands moving closer to his weapons as he watched me warily. I took a deep breath, finishing the multiplication tables before the mantle could react to his increased hostility, and forced myself to relax. Making it as casual as possible, I shifted my stance, adjusting my posture to give him a little more space. A moment later I sensed some of the tension leave him, ever so slightly. Great, maybe we could have a conversation without anybody getting punched.

"No," I answered his question, as if our little moment of posturing hadn’t happened, and brushed my fingers over my amulet. "This was my mother's. She left it to me when I was born."

He watched me for a second, and I could practically see him debating whether to let the moment go as well. Finally, to my relief, he asked, "What was her name?" Casual, like he was making conversation, but come on, I'm a private investigator, or at least I was before vampires blew up my office. I know what it sounds like when a cop’s chatting up a suspect.

Still, I was curious now, too. So I said, "Margaret LeFay."

He nodded to himself. "She ever go by Maggie?"

"Sometimes," I said.

Sam nodded again. "The note was addressed to someone named Louisa, from Maggie. It said, 'if
you ever wish to see me again, speak these words and we’ll be reunited’.”

“What words?” I asked.

“Inter aditum, quam viam,” he recited, and dammit but his Latin was flawless. “Coniungere simili simile, et aperiunt viam.” He paused, looking around expectantly, then frowned. “Huh. Last time I barely finished saying it when… whatever happened and I ended up here.”

I frowned, too. The spell I used to open Ways was the much shorter and simpler “Aparturum”, which I’d learned from my grandfather. Every wizard has their own spell language, their own words to act as a buffer between mind and magic, but Mom, who knew more about the Ways than pretty much anyone, probably hadn’t even needed to verbalize the spell. So the complex Latin seemed strange, to say the least. Besides which, if you’re not a wizard, you can chant Latin, or Greek, or Egyptian or Hebrew or Japanese, all you want and all that’ll happen is you get a little hoarse. Even if you are a wizard, magic only works if you mean it, and someone just reading a note they found isn’t going to mean it.

Sam was watching me with that earnest expression again, like he was genuinely very interested in what I was thinking. I said, “It’s not supposed to work like that.”

He huffed out a little laugh, flashing dimples that made him look younger than he probably was. “No kidding.”

“You still have that note?”

He looked around, squinted at the tangled underbrush where he’d been laying, patted his pockets, and finally shook his head. “I must’ve dropped it.” He glanced out over the water, then back at me. “You said this was an island?” I nodded, and he continued, “Think you can get me back to the mainland? I need to get home.”

“Back to Maryland?” I asked.

He hesitated. “Kansas.”

I eyed him for a second, but he didn’t elaborate on why a guy from Kansas had been poking around an abandoned convent in Maryland where he just so happened to find an instant-Way spell, apparently left behind by my mother, that had deposited him on my sanctum. That wariness was back, in his expression this time as well as his posture, and I knew he was expecting me to press the issue.

I considered. On the one hand, as far as places for me to confront unknown, possibly extremely powerful enemies go, Demonreach was my best option by a long shot. The island was my sanctum; I had an advantage here that I didn’t have anywhere else. Besides that, the island’s spirit was an immensely powerful being in its own right. If I asked Alfred to throw Sam in the prison under the lighthouse, it wouldn’t hesitate.

On the other hand, while his story had more holes than substance, I had no actual evidence that Sam was an enemy, that he was anything other than a vanilla mortal who’d stumbled across something strange. He didn’t seem particularly perturbed about being magically transported from Maryland to Lake Michigan, but that could just mean he was a minor talent in the Paranet, or someone like the cops from Special Investigations, who had the thankless job of being the official police responders to anything supernatural in Chicago. Or that he just wasn’t easily rattled. He hadn’t threatened me, despite what the Mantle thought, hadn’t done anything suspicious except for showing up unannounced. I didn’t have any reason to refuse to take him back.
Besides, you know what they say about flies, honey, and vinegar. If I played nice, made up for the Mantle’s hostility, maybe he’d open up a little more and fill in some of those holes in his story. And I’d planned to go back to the city anyway.

“We’ll need to move fast to beat the storm, but I can get you back to the docks in Chicago, and give you a lift to the airport or train station if you need it,” I offered.

He nodded, looking relieved, the wariness fading again. “That’d be great. Thank you.”

“No problem,” I said. Not that I believed myself - in my experience, this kind of weirdness was always, always a precursor to problems.

Well, who needs boring, anyway.
Interview with a Wizard

Chapter Summary

In which witches are discussed, and Sam tells the truth, from a certain point of view.

Chapter Notes

Happy 4th of July to my American friends!

Sorry for the long delay between chapters - I intended to get this chapter out earlier, but all my normal writing time this month went to my Anime Expo cosplay. Also, the revelations about the Mark of Cain in the *Supernatural* season finale really threw my plot for a loop, and I've been trying to figure out how to handle it in this story. (A few possible options: ignore it and go with my original plan, which I don't like because a) I like incorporating canon whenever possible, and b) the new information would make for some interesting encounters in the Dresdenverse; change the first chapter of this story to happen after the Season 10 finale and incorporate the new info; or come up with some other way entirely to deal with it. Any preferences?) Anyway, hopefully now that AX is over and I'm not scrambling to make a cosplay, I'll be able to get chapters out more frequently!

Harry

I led Sam down the winding path through the trees toward Whatsup Dock, which my brother Thomas and I had built several years ago. The path was less overgrown than it had been when I first found the island, thanks to how much I’d been using it the last year and change, but it was still old and uneven and difficult to walk on. Or at least, it should have been. I had my *intellectus* to keep me from stumbling, and Sam moved with a deceptively easy grace that spoke of years of practice. Still, we were walking fast, driven by the flashes of lighting and claps of thunder over the lake that were getting closer by the minute, and neither of us spoke until we reached the dock and the battered old boat tied there.

The *Water Beetle* technically belongs to Thomas, but he lets me use it while he’s off doing White Court things. It’s an old commercial fishing boat that looks like it was pulled off the set of *Jaws*, forty-two feet long with faded paint and marks along the sides that were a testament to the battles it had seen. Sam stopped walking when he saw it, brow furrowing skeptically.

I grinned cheerily at him. “She’s no luxury yacht, but she’ll get us there.”

He flashed me an even more skeptical look, but didn’t say anything, following me across the sand, onto the dock and then the boat. I kept an eye on him as he stepped from shore to dock, the point where Demonreach’s dark influence ended, but if he noticed the difference, he didn’t show it. Which was another odd thing about him. Just about everyone I’ve seen on the island has had some reaction, however small, to that border. A sigh of relief as they step out of the grim weight of the island’s aura,
a reflexive straightening of the spine as if shaking off something heavy. Even the purely vanilla mortals, the ones with no magical senses, could tell something had changed. I was starting to think that it was less that Sam didn’t have a reaction to the weird things around him - the transport to the island, my name and appearance, the island’s aura - and more that he was very good at not showing those reactions.

He helped me cast off, his movements awkward enough that I guessed he hadn’t spent much, if any, time on boats before. Then, while I steered the boat carefully through the reefs surrounding the island, he wandered away toward the bow. The storm was getting more intense, and I was really beginning to regret deciding to leave now. You don’t want to be on a boat on Lake Michigan in the middle of a thunderstorm. But we’d already cast off, and the storm was coming up from behind us. If I was fast, I could beat it to the docks.

The wind whipped the lake into frothy, angry waves over the hidden reefs, and I had to concentrate on steering for a few minutes, until we were out on the open water. When I finally looked for Sam again, he was standing at the very point of the bow, face turned into the spray like a dog leaning out a car window. The wind had reddened the skin over his cheekbones, but he didn’t seem otherwise bothered by the late-April chill or the approaching storm. I watched him for a minute, but he really seemed to just be enjoying the ride.

Finally I called, “Having fun?”

He startled, blinking a few times like he was coming back from some daydream, and flashed an embarrassed smile. “Yeah, I guess,” he admitted.

“Go boating much?” I asked.

He shrugged one shoulder. “Not really.”

Which I’d already guessed. Trying to make it sound like small talk, I said, “So what do you do?”

“I, uh. I’m a librarian,” he said. “A researcher.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Sounds boring.”

Again that embarrassed smile, and Sam looked away over the water. “You’d be surprised.”

The guy was really starting to give a new meaning to the word “cagey”. “So what was a research librarian doing in an abandoned church in Maryland?” I asked.

He glanced back at me. “Researching.” Before I could press him, he added, “What about you? What do you do?”

I considered giving him as unhelpful an answer as he’d been giving me. Fair’s fair, after all. But at the same time, I knew that if I was in Sam’s place, teleported to a strange island by unknown magic, confronted by a tall scary guy in a black coat who’d almost attacked him for no reason, I’d be wary, too. So I decided to lay my cards on the table. “I’m a wizard.”

That got his attention. His gaze sharpened, fixing on me with startling intensity, and I had to very quickly refocus to avoid meeting his eyes. I didn’t want to risk a soulgaze, not until I had a better idea of who - or what - I was dealing with. “A wizard?” he repeated. “Like a witch?”

“Like a wizard,” I said. I picked up my staff where I’d lain it on the floor next to me, out of the spray, and waved it vaguely. “You know, Gandalf—”
He cocked an eyebrow at me and said dryly, “Harry Potter?”

I scowled. “I hate those books.”

He grinned, a quick flash of teeth that seemed more genuine than most of his other expressions, and looked away again, out toward the lights of the Chicago skyline just coming into view on the horizon. “If my brother was here he’d be making ‘yer a wizard, Harry’ jokes all the way to the city.”

It was the most information he’d offered up yet - that he had a brother - and I filed it away for reference. But there was something else I was curious about, first. “Most people,” I said casually, “are telling me ‘there’s no such thing as wizards’ by now.”

“It’s not the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard,” Sam said.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you believe it.” He leaned on the railing, folding his arms and squinting into the spray and the gathering darkness. “And half an hour ago I was in Maryland.”

He had me there. I studied him again, thinking. He seemed human enough, even to my wizard’s senses. I didn’t buy the librarian thing for a second - what librarian is built like a brick wall, moves like a hunting cat, and carries a knife and a gun? No, I figured he was a mercenary, maybe, someone who made a living doing dirty jobs for the highest bidder. Guys like that tend to run into weird on the job, enough to get inured to it even if they never bother to look into it beyond what they’re paid to deal with. It’d explain his careful lack of reaction to anything, and his even more careful refusal to share any real information about himself. It would also explain the sense of blood I’d gotten from him on the island, although the cold part was still a mystery.

Maybe that was all there was to it. A merc for hire, who’d stumbled across a mysterious note my mother had left behind decades ago and somehow managed to invoke the spell to open the Way to Demonreach and survive the trip. I’d take him back to Chicago, put him on a plane, and that would be that.

Ha. I crack myself up.

Sam

It took effort for Sam to keep his posture loose, relaxed, with his back to a witch. He’d suspected, of course, given Dresden’s choice of jewelry and his parentage, but witchcraft wasn’t hereditary and lots of people wore occult symbols without having power to back them up. Although, he’d never heard of a witch wanting to be called a wizard before - maybe Dresden thought “witch” was too girly? Either way, Sam needed to stay calm and not pick a fight, which meant not revealing that he was a hunter. A fight with a witch on a small boat in the middle of Lake Michigan, with a thunderstorm biting at their heels, was a dangerous idea under the best of circumstances, and right now Sam wasn’t equipped for a witch hunt. He’d only brought his gun and Ruby’s demon-killing knife with him to the church. He hadn’t figured he’d need anything else.

Fortunately, Dresden seemed to accept his I-believe-you-believe line, so as long as Sam was careful, he should be able to get away clean. He could call a taxi when they reached the docks, claim he didn’t want to bother Dresden further and taking a taxi to the airport was no trouble. Then, when he was far enough away, he’d drop a line to Mike or Rudy or some other hunter to check up on Dresden, make sure he was the harmless kind of witch and not the kind that killed people for shits
and giggles.

Although if Sam was going to do that, the least he could do would be to see what other information he could pick up, make sure he wasn’t sending a hunter in blind. He turned around to face Dresden, leaning against the railing. “So,” he said, in his best making-small-talk voice, “what’s the difference between a wizard and a witch, anyway?”

“Semantics, mostly,” Dresden answered easily. “Sometimes people use ‘witches’ to mean the small-time practitioners, minor talents who can’t do much more than light candles or make simple protection charms. But mostly, we use ‘wizards’ because we needed a rebranding after the witch hunts a few centuries back. And because it sounds cooler.”

“We?” Sam said. “There’s other… wizards?”

“A few,” Dresden said lightly. “And before you ask, no, there’s no such thing as Hogwarts.”

Sam snorted. The guy might be a witch, but he reminded Sam a lot of Dean - the same devil-may-care attitude, the wisecracks. Which didn’t mean Sam could lower his guard - exactly the opposite - but it did make it easier to keep talking to him. “All things considered, I’d rather not have kids running around turning each other into ferrets and casting death curses.”

“Well,” Dresden said, “even if there was a Hogwarts, polymorphing and killer curses are illegal under the Laws of Magic, so you don’t have to worry about that anyway.”

“The Laws of Magic?” Sam repeated, letting his surprise into his voice. He’d never heard of witches having any kind of governing laws before.

Dresden nodded. “They exist to stop people from doing crap like that. Using magic for that kind of evil is just plain wrong. Plus, it gets the attention of the muggles. Better to deal with it ourselves and keep it from happening in the first place.”

Sam made a noncommittal noise and turned back to the open water. Based on what Dresden was saying, he figured there was a decent-sized coven operating in Chicago, one which was taking great care to avoid attracting the attention of hunters. Usually witches didn’t have the self-control for that kind of thing - they tended to operate on the concept of “I have power, so who’s going to stop me?” - but it wasn’t impossible. The coven was probably mostly harmless, if what Dresden was saying was true. Sam would just give Mike a heads-up when he got back to civilization, and let the other hunter take care of it.

The wind was kicking up, bringing the waves with it, and Sam didn’t try to continue the conversation as Dresden’s attention fixed on handling the boat in the choppy water. Sam found a bench and hunkered down; he could hear the rain coming closer, a steady roar on the water behind them. He figured it was about fifty-fifty whether this was a typical late-April thunderstorm, or a result of Lucifer being free and riding along in Sam’s head. He’d know for sure when he could get to a computer and check for cattle die-offs and the other typical signs.

He could still feel Lucifer’s Grace, a cold faint whisper under his collarbone, but the angel himself hadn’t made an appearance since St. Mary’s. His absence worried Sam; he couldn’t figure out what Lucifer was up to, couldn’t think why he would stay silent for this long. His favorite pastime was tormenting Sam, and he had no reason to stop now. It wasn’t worth hoping that whatever bizarre spell had transported Sam from Maryland to Lake Michigan had somehow knocked him out, made him weaker, but Sam wasn’t sure what else it could be.

His thoughts were still chasing themselves in circles when they finally reached the docks. The rain
caught up to them as they eased past the breakwater, drenching them both instantly. The sun had set, as well, and the thick clouds blocked out the moonlight while the downpour dimmed the lights along the docks and, combined with the rolling thunder, made talking all but impossible. Sam waited at the railing as the boat slid up to a dock, then vaulted onto the slick wood and went looking for a dock cleat to tie the boat off while Dresden tried to keep it reasonably steady in the waves.

He wasn’t sure if it was hunter’s instinct, his own semi-latent psychic abilities, or some extra sense of Lucifer’s that first picked up the cold slithering energy rapidly approaching from somewhere behind him on the wharf. He turned, squinting against the rain and the darkness, but even with flashes of lightning to illuminate the area he couldn’t spot anything unusual. He started to turn back to Dresden, mouth open to call up and ask if he could see anything from his higher vantage point in the wheelhouse.

Then Dresden shouted, “Sam! Drop!”, and even as Sam hit the deck, the air above him filled with brilliant, scorching fire.
In which Harry hates rain, and Sam does something he hasn't had to do in a very long time.

Harry

The storm had caught up to us, and it was taking all my concentration to keep the Water Beetle from banging into the dock or the other nearby boats, so I was glad when Sam vaulted over the railing to help tie her up. The storm was a big one, the kind that charges the air with its own power and washes away everything else. I’d spelled my coat to be waterproof, among other things, but even so the rain was pouring down hard enough that I was soaked to the skin. I was thinking warm thoughts about Murph and her house’s central heating when I sensed… something.

It was hard to describe. Sam had felt like cold and blood back on the island, and this was like that blood sense had suddenly flared up in him. Reacting to something, maybe. I squinted through the rain at him, in time to see him turn, eyes narrowing as if he was looking for something out along the wharf. I followed his gaze, but the heavy rain meant I couldn’t see much further than the end of the dock. I extended my wizard’s senses, brushing past Sam’s cold bloody energy and pushing against the weight of the rain, searching—

—and found a wave of malevolent energy rushing toward us. I snatched up my staff, as a timely flash of lightning gave me a glimpse of what was coming.

There were nine of them. They were maybe eight or nine feet tall, with sunken red eyes and lean muscular bodies covered with metallic silver skin that blended into the rain. I had an impression of inhumanly-long fingers and toes tipped with knife-like claws, and protruding mouths that couldn’t quite close around rows of silver needle teeth. Demons of some kind, creatures called from the Nevernever and bound to the summoner’s will.

And they were all running toward us.

“Sam!” I shouted. “Drop!”

I had to give the guy credit - he didn’t hesitate, didn’t question, just hit the deck. I pointed my staff at the closest demon, who’d made it all the way to the dock in the second it took for me to shout at Sam, and bellowed, “Fuego!”

A column of fire blasted out of the staff and slammed into the demon’s chest, shoving it right off the side of the dock. Point for me. Except the spell should have been stronger, enough to blast not just one demon but the two behind it, at well.

The rain.

Crap.

Water is a spiritual cleanser as well as a physical one. Given a bit of time, water washes away
gathered energies and grounds any loose-flowing power. Normally this is only a problem for delicate or longer-lasting thaumaturgy, constructs built by magic that are more sensitive to smaller amounts of water. Unfortunately for me, the rain was coming down hard enough to mess with even my evocations, the instantaneous spells I use in combat.

Fortunately for me, I’m what we in the business colloquially refer to as a magical thug. I have a lot of metaphysical muscle, if not finesse. The rain would make things more difficult, sap some oomph from my attacks, but I could compensate for that. I still held my staff pointed at the rest of the approaching demons, so I lowered it slightly and yelled, “Infriga!”

This time I drew on the cold inside me, my connection with Winter via the Mantle. The rain-slicked wood of the dock immediately froze solid, a sheet of ice that sent two demons skidding wildly. The remaining six, further behind, had an instant to react and dug their claws into the ice for stability. They jumped, catlike, sailing through the air over Sam to slam into the side of the Water Beetle. The boat rocked violently as they scrabbled up over the railing. They spread out across the Water Beetle’s deck, their eyes glinting bloody red in the flashing lightning, their claws coming up to tear out my throat.

---

**Sam**

Sam scrabbled to his feet. He had no idea what the things were - the ragged shreds of his psychic senses were screaming demon!, but he’d never seen a demon look like that. Maybe what was left of his sanity had finally fled and he was hallucinating again, or maybe they were something dug up from the deepest reaches of Hell or Purgatory. Whatever they were, they were pretty clearly going after Dresden. And the guy might be a witch, but Sam wasn’t about to let these things rip him to shreds.

He pulled Ruby’s knife from his coat and leaped on one of the two that had fallen when Dresden turned the water under their feet to ice. It had been focused on trying to get back up and go after Dresden and Sam caught it off guard, the knife slamming into the base of its skull. Reddish-gold light flashed beneath its silver skin, around its eye sockets, through the needle teeth, and it collapsed in a boneless heap.

A godawful screeching sound erupted from behind Sam - two voices, the other one who’d slipped and the one who’d been knocked off the dock, who had climbed back up in time to see Sam kill its companion. Sam yanked the knife free and spun, but they were already moving. Sam flung himself to the side, and the claw-tipped hand that would have torn his throat out instead caught him on the elbow. He rolled with the blow, fetching up against one of the pillars along the side of the dock, then had to dodge again when the other one leaped at him.

He slashed its reaching arms with the knife, not a killing blow but enough to make it howl in pain and fall back. He wanted to follow it, plant the knife into its throat, but its companion was already coming at him again, and Sam didn’t have time to do anything but dodge.

---

**Harry**
Three of the six demons jumped up over the wheelhouse railing at me in a single motion, knifelike claws extended and needle teeth gaping. I waited until they were all at the apex of their motion, then pointed my staff at then and roared, “Forzare!” An invisible wave of energy rolled toward them, scattering them like bowling pins back over the sides of the boat and into the water. “Strike!” I quipped.

The other three demons, however, had apparently expected something like that because they had started moving the moment I’d blasted the first set. They swarmed up into the wheelhouse, coming at me from three sides. The air was suddenly filled with knife-like claws and I ducked, trying to get out of the way. Something hit my back hard enough to make me gasp out the air in my lungs, but the spell-enhanced leather of my duster kept the thing’s claws from slicing open my spine.

I let the blow push me down to the deck, spinning my staff as I went. The demons had been braced for another spell, so when I just knocked the legs out from underneath one of them with the heavy wood, it went over like a felled tree. That bought me enough time and space to roll sideways and come back to my feet with my back against the side of the wheelhouse. The position wasn’t just good for keeping them from attacking me from behind: between the waves and the demons climbing all over it, the boat was rocking wildly, and I needed stability for my next move.

I flipped my staff over, bracing the top end loosely in the angle where the wall met the deck, and pointed the butt at the nearest demon. “Arietus!” I roared, and the seventy-seven kinetic storage spells carved into the wood all fired at the same time. I still hadn’t had time to make myself new rings, but the staff version had been damned effective against Lasciel back in Hades’ vault, and it was just as effective here. The basic idea for the spell is to store a little bit of kinetic energy from every movement the staff made. Each little bit wasn’t much on its own, but released all together, the energy amounted to something like a semi truck going freeway speeds, focused on a space about the size of a baseball.

The blast hit the demon squarely in the chest. Even over the pounding rain and crashing thunder I heard a chorus of brittle snapping sounds, and the demon’s chest turned inside-out. A moment later the demon exploded in a burst of clear goo. Demons like that, summoned from the Nevernever, create artificial bodies out of ectoplasm to function in the real world. Deal enough damage, and you destroy the body and send the demon’s essence back to the Nevernever. The rain might have been weakening my attacks, but it was probably also making it harder for the demons to hang on to their constructed bodies once they took any damage. At least the weather was being universally unfair.

I had just enough time to glance back at the docks, to see if Sam was all right. I caught a glimpse of him ducking under a demon’s claws, but they were too far away for me to get a better look. A lot further away than they had been a few seconds ago, and I realized abruptly that the Water Beetle was drifting away from the dock. The demons’ momentum must have pushed it some when they leaped on it, and now the waves were tossing it in all the wrong directions. I’d have to hope Sam could hold his own against the demons on the dock, because even if I could take out the ones that remained on the boat, I would be too far away to help him.

Speaking of the demons on the boat, the ones I’d knocked down had regained their footing and were coming at me again. I flung my arms out to the sides, shouting, “Arctispinae!” The rain wouldn’t hurt this spell much - I still needed that extra bit of willpower to cast it, but gathering water out of the air was a hundred times easier. Winter cold froze the rain into thin needles of ice that exploded outward from me, shredding the demons’ silvery skin and drawing clear ectoplasmic blood. Without waiting to see if it bothered them, I called on more Winter cold to form a heavy ball of ice at the end of my
staff, and cried, “Forzare!”

Normally it takes a bit of effort and reasonably damp air to get an ice globe the size of a bowling ball out of that spell. With all the rain, I ended up hurling a ball of ice nearly two feet in diameter straight into the needle teeth of another demon. Silver teeth and clear goo went flying, and the demon’s body collapsed into itself.

Two down, three to go. They’d knocked me around a bit, but so far it was only bruises, and all I had to do was take out the rest and go help Sam—

Wait. I’d had six of them on the boat with me.

A heavy weight slammed onto me from above, smashing me flat on my face to the deck. I lost my grip on my staff and it tumbled away, but I was too busy trying to keep my head covered by my arms to care. One of the demons had crept up on top of the wheelhouse while I was distracted, and was now crouching on my back and doing its level best to chomp my head off. The collar of my leather coat was keeping its teeth at bay, but it was only a matter of time before it managed to get through. With my arms occupied trying to shield my head, I couldn’t reach for my staff, couldn’t push myself up—

—but I could press my left hand against the side of the demon’s skull. “Ventas fulmino!” I panted against the wood of the deck.

I hadn’t done that particular spell in well over a decade, though I’d used its cousin against a naagloshii a few years back. It was a lot easier to do this time, and not just because the storm was stronger. I’d gotten stronger, too, learning more about magic and energy and how to channel it to my purposes. Lightning was already flashing around us every few seconds, and all I had to do was nudge it.

The bolt hit the demon square in the spine, and a billion volts of electricity flowed through its body. The power surged into my left hand - the side of the body which takes in energy - and I had barely enough time to point the finger of my right hand at one of the other demons. Lightning jumped from my fingertip to slam into its body, and it threw back its head and shrieked in pain.

I barely heard it. The last time I’d done this spell I’d had my staff to use as a focus, to protect me from the surging power of the storm. This time, I had nothing, and worse, I was lying flat on a rain-slicked boat deck. The lightning wanted to go everywhere but where I was sending it. White-hot pain blasted through me, and my muscles contracted hard enough that I actually bucked up off the deck despite the weight of the demon on my back. I gritted my teeth and focused doggedly on the shape of the spell in my mind, willing the lightning to go where I wanted. It took several subjective eternities for the bolt to finish zapping through the first demon, through me, and into the second, but probably less than a second of actual time passed before the last of the electricity left me. The two demons I’d electrocuted both exploded in twin bursts of charred ectoplasm, and I collapsed in an exhausted heap to the deck.

Where I had one whole instant to rest before the last two demons lunged forward and hauled me up into the air, knifelike claws going for my throat.

---

Sam
Sam ducked under one monster’s arm, dodged a bite from the second, slipped on the ice still covering the dock and landed hard on his back. The first creature followed him down, claws digging into the canvas of his jacket, and Sam managed to get a foot between them and kick it away. The second, apparently thinking the first had the kill, had turned toward the boat, legs bending deep in preparation for leaping across the widening gap between dock and boat. Sam lunged up and stabbed the thing in the spine. Yellow light flashed and the creature went limp; Sam pulled the knife free and shoved the body over the side of the dock into the water, then spun, braced for another attack from the one he’d kicked.

But it was nowhere on the dock, and Sam looked out toward the boat through the rain to where the thing was just scrambling over the railing onto the lower deck. Shit, he thought. The boat had drifted far enough away from the dock that there was no way Sam could make the jump. But Dresden had seemed to be doing fine on his own; he was a witch, after all.

Then the rain shifted and Sam saw one of the creatures lifting Dresden up by the throat, its long claws raised to stab him through the eyes. 

Shitshitshit. There wasn’t time for Sam to do anything, no way he could reach the boat. He could try to shoot the thing, but even if he managed to hit it at this distance and in this storm, it wasn’t likely to hurt it much. There was one thing he could do from here, one slim possibility, if these things were really as demonic as his psychic senses insisted, but he hadn’t done it in years, hadn’t drunk demon blood in years—

Dresden put both palms on the arm of the creature holding him, and suddenly the rain pouring down over it froze solid, becoming a pillar of ice encasing it completely. Then Dresden pulled his hands back and slammed them down on the creature’s frozen arm. It shattered and Dresden dropped free, landing on his feet but staggering a little - right into the grasp of another of the damned things. It wrapped one long arm around Dresden’s chest, pinning his arms to the side; clapped its other hand over his mouth, drawing his head back and exposing his throat. The last creature, the one that had just jumped over from the dock, raised its claws, about to go for the kill.

No time. Sam was already long past damned, and who needed demon blood when you were sharing a body with the father of demons? He shoved the knife back inside his jacket, raised one hand toward the creatures, and focused.

Even after all these years, it was horrifically easy to call up the power rushing through his veins, dormant for so long but now supercharged with Lucifer’s Grace. Easy to reach out through the wind and the rain, easy to find the creature’s essence, its soul.

Easy to crush it.

Lighting flared and thunder boomed directly overhead, as if the storm itself welcomed the reawakening of Azazel’s Boy King. Reddish-yellow light flashed deep in the skull of the creature about to slit Dresden’s throat, and it collapsed in a heap. Sam turned his attention to the other one, still holding Dresden but frozen in surprise at its companion’s abrupt death. That one, too, was easy to kill. Another flash of light and Dresden was free, the last of the creatures - the demons - dead at his feet.

Dresden turned to stare at Sam, dark eyes wide. Sam lowered his hand, panting. Lucifer’s Grace hummed under his skin, but he barely felt it. He’d forgotten the rest of it, what happened when he pushed his powers too hard with not enough blood. Pain roared through his skull, sharp and hot and all-consuming. He had time to think, at least they’re all dead, then the pain flattened him and he spun
away into darkness.
The Curious Case of Sam Winchester

Chapter Summary

In which Sam is a puzzle, Harry tries to flirt, and Murphy does her best Tiny Tim impression.

Chapter Notes

I had to make a few assumptions for this chapter. Harry never really makes clear how thresholds work for a third party; early in Grave Peril he says "it has to be someone who lives" in the house making the invitation for someone to cross unhindered, but in Cold Days he makes a throwaway comment about the Little Folk not warning him about Andi because he forgot to invite them over the threshold into Butters' apartment. I'm going with, you aren't considered invited if you're carried in by someone who themselves wasn't invited.

Also, afaik Supernatural hasn't raised the issue of Sam's anti-possession tattoo since it was removed so Crowley could help him kick out Gadreel, but I imagine Sam would have had it redone at the first opportunity. (This is backed up by recent behind-the-scenes photos of Jared Padalecki, who has the tattoo again while filming Season 11.)

Harry

Being trapped between two demons trying to tear your throat out is never a good situation, but it wasn't the first time I'd been in it. Which probably says something about my life. My arms were pinned to my sides and my staff was somewhere on the other side of the boat, but I didn’t actually need either of them to cast. I focused my will on the demon in front of me, preparing another spell—

Bright red-gold light flashed deep in the demon’s skull and it collapsed like a broken puppet.

—or that could happen.

It was so unexpected that I froze for a second in shock, and apparently the demon holding me in place had been caught equally off-guard. Before either of us could react, I felt cold bloody energy slither past my ear, heard a sound like static over the pounding rain, saw a flash of light out of the corner of my eye. The arms around me fell away and the last demon dropped bonelessly to the deck.

A chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold spring rain. I recognized that energy, its shape, its intent. Not just where it had come from, but what it did, what it was for. I’d only seen power like that used once before, two years ago at Chichén Itzá when my grandfather had used the Blackstaff to end the lives of over two hundred people with nothing more than a word and a gesture. Sam had just done the same, only he’d done it to demons. And that was, in a way, even scarier than seeing my grandfather do it to humans.
Demons manifested in the mortal world usually can’t die; if you destroy their bodies they just return to the Nevernever. The only time I’d ever heard of it happening was ten years ago, when Michael Carpenter used the holy sword Amoracchius to kill one, and even then we hadn’t been sure it was really dead. But I had no doubt that the two demons sprawled at my feet hadn’t been banished back to the Nevernever. They’d been killed.

I turned to look at Sam, who stood at the end of the dock, one hand still outstretched toward the Water Beetle, his face twisted into an expression of fierce concentration. He looked up at me, and even through the rain I could see the determination melt into despair, sorrow.

Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he, too, collapsed in a heap.

Well, crap.

It took me longer than I liked to get the Water Beetle pulled back up against the dock and tied off safely, long enough that the demons’ bodies had dissolved into clear ectoplasmic goo that vanished into the rain. Finally I managed to get over to where Sam still lay crumpled on his side. The rain was letting up, the storm fading to distant rumbles, so at least I didn’t have to worry about him drowning. There was a smear of rain-thinned blood on his face that seemed to have come from his nose, and more blood on his arm where his jacket had been torn by a demon’s claws.

I put my fingers against the skin of his throat to check for a pulse. His aura buzzed and sparked against my hand, and if the cold part had faded to almost nothing, the blood part was powerful enough that I tasted iron in the back of my mouth. I’ve shaken hands with some heavy hitters in my time, and whatever Sam was, the strength of his aura put him at the high end of that list. But his pulse was rapid and irregular, and his skin was way too hot for someone lying passed out in a late-spring rain.

I couldn’t exactly take him to a hospital, not without knowing what he was. A lot of supernatural creatures prey on humans, and if one of them woke up injured and exhausted in a hospital full of vulnerable people, well, it wouldn’t be pretty. Even if he was a human who just had an incredibly strong magical talent, a hospital wasn’t a good choice. Magic and technology don’t get along so well, and even if I managed to get him inside and settled without blowing anything up myself, there was a real risk that his magic would do the trick all by itself. And my go-to guy for getting patched up unofficially was out of town, so I couldn’t take Sam to him, either.

I’d have to settle for Plan C. Murphy’s house.

Which sucked, because I’d been looking forward to hanging out with Murph, just the two of us. She’d only been allowed to go home from the hospital last week, and with one arm and one leg mangled by Nicodemus, she still couldn’t do much except sit on the couch and watch bad daytime soaps. But dammit, we’d hardly had any time to just be together in years. But I couldn’t just leave Sam here. And then there was the matter of those demons - where had they come from, and why were they attacking me?

I thought about it as I hauled Sam up from the ground into a fireman’s carry and headed to where my car was parked. Someone had to have sent those demons after me - and they’d been after me, not Sam; they’d come straight for me and ignored him except when he’d attacked them. Of course, that didn’t mean they weren’t somehow related to Sam - if they were operating under his orders, then it could have all been an elaborate setup. Something designed to convince me Sam was on my side, by giving him a chance to save my bacon. But that seemed unlikely, because I was pretty sure the unconsciousness, at least, wasn’t an act - and any plan that relied on Sam knocking himself out and leaving himself at my mercy was pretty stupid.
But other than the thing with Nicodemus a couple months ago, I couldn’t think of anything I’d done recently to piss off someone enough to summon a horde of demons from the Nevernever to kill me. And even if demons like that were ol’ Nicky’s style - which they weren’t - he’d retreated to lick his wounds after getting thoroughly trounced by Mab’s long game. I didn’t think he’d be coming after me anytime soon, not until he’d had a chance to recover. But if it wasn’t Nicodemus, then I had no idea who it could be. Which I really didn’t like. If you don’t know who’s after you, you don’t know where the threat is coming from, and it’s a lot harder to plan for it.

My car, at least, was where I’d left it, in a corner of the harbor parking lot designated for boat owners. I think Thomas paid a fee or something to keep the space, though right now I wished he’d paid for a space a lot closer to the docks. Sam was a big guy, he and I were both soaked, and while the rain was on its way out, it was still drizzling vaguely. I was going to be glad when I got to Murphy’s place, with its heater and the change of clothes I’d left there the last time I was in town.

The car was an old Chevy Caprice from the sixties, its vomit-colored sides scratched and dented, its seats stained and sagging. It wasn’t the Blue Beetle, but I’d picked it up last month for ridiculously cheap from the granddaughter of its deceased former owner and hauled it over to my trusty mechanic Mike, who’d managed to get it running well enough to get me from point A to point B with a minimum of fuss. I settled Sam in the back seat, then climbed behind the wheel. The engine took a few tries to turn over, but finally coughed to life, and we headed out into the rain-slicked night.

Karrin Murphy lives in a dinky little colonial in Bucktown that she’s been steadily updating over the years, with new siding, reinforced steel doors, and enough magical wards to make most nasties think twice before trying to blow it down. Sam still hadn’t woken up by the time we got there, so I parked in the tiny driveway, hauled him out of the car and back up over my shoulder, and went up to the door.

Murphy must’ve heard us coming, because I was just lifting my free hand to knock when the locks began to click over. A moment later the door opened a crack and a blue eye peered out at us. “Harry?” Murphy said incredulously.

“Heya, Murph,” I said. “I, uh, kinda ran into some trouble on the way over.”

“All I know is that his name’s Sam,” I said. “He helped me, but burned himself out in the process. I didn’t want to just leave him lying there.”

“A lot more than ‘some’ trouble,” Murphy said. I heard a crutch thumping as she moved, then the door opened a bit more. She didn’t invite me in. I couldn’t blame her; she was injured and vulnerable, and taking extra precautions against anything that might try to get at her by wearing my face was wise. The house’s threshold tingled against my wizard’s senses as I stepped through the door. The house had been in the Murphy family for generations, and that kind of familial bond, that love and caring and devotion, builds up over the years into a magical protection. The threshold around Murphy’s house was strong enough to keep out all but the really heavy hitters of the magical world, if they tried to enter uninvited. I could enter, but I was leaving behind a big chunk of my power at the door. Sam would be weakened, too, when he woke up, which was just as well.

A flash of grey streaked toward my feet and I had an instant to brace myself before thirty pounds of cat slammed against my knees. Mister is my tomcat, though he’d been living with Murphy ever since my apartment burned down. He has grey fur and a bobtail, and one of his parents was a freaking saber-toothed tiger or something. He wound around my legs while I tried to get Sam and myself into the house without tripping, and even without crouching down I could hear him purring.
Murphy was waiting for me on the other side of the door, propped up awkwardly on a single crutch, her injured arm still bound against her chest in a sling, her damaged leg in a heavy cast. The bruises had mostly faded, leaving only dark circles under her eyes. She was wearing a ratty T-shirt that was about five sizes too big for her, and ragged sweatpants with one leg cut off to accommodate the cast. My heart knotted at how small she looked, how frail. Karrin isn’t a big person to begin with - barely five feet tall, with shaggy blond hair, blue eyes, and a face that looks more like someone’s kindly aunt than a fierce ex-cop who’s gone toe to toe with some of the biggest baddies I know. In the oversized clothes and with the single crutch, she looked like the world’s saddest Tiny Tim.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Don't give me that look," she said. "I'm fine."

I snorted. "Was it that obvious?"

"You're an open book, Dresden," she replied, and grinned. I smiled back, then followed her as she made her slow limping way back into the living room. "Put him in the guest room," she said, nodding to Sam. "We can get you both dried off and you can tell me what crazy adventure you've stumbled into this time."

I did as she said, dodging Mister as I walked through the house to deposit Sam on the bed in the guest room and wrestle off his dripping clothes. I checked his body for any further clues to his identity as I did so. He had a handful of recent bruises and not-so-recent scars, nothing I wouldn’t expect from someone living a rough-and-tumble life. More curiously, he had a tattoo on his chest over his heart, an oddly-drawn pentacle surrounded by flames in a distinct pentagon shape. The ink hadn’t faded much yet, meaning it was a recent job, maybe in the last year or so. I couldn’t think what it might mean. A pentacle on its own, like my necklace, is a symbol of order. Five points to represent the five elements, air, earth, water, fire, and spirit, surrounded and contained by a circle to represent willpower, control. Fire can represent different things in different contexts - a positive force, one that warms and illuminates; or a negative force, one that consumes and destroys. But I had no idea what it meant paired like that with a pentacle.

Murphy followed me into the bedroom, slow on the crutch but too stubborn to not help, and passed me a stack of towels. She made to sit down on the edge of the bed to dry off Sam, but I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Be careful," I warned. "I don’t know if he’s human and I have no idea how he’s going to react when he starts to come around."

She cocked an eyebrow at me. I told her what had happened, starting with finding Sam on Demonreach, while I dried off and changed and she began toweling Sam off and tending the cut on his elbow. I noticed she kept her gaze fixed firmly on her work while I was undressed, and interrupted my description of the demons to say, “Such modesty, Ms. Murphy.”

“Hah,” she said, though she still didn’t look at me. “I’ve seen you naked before, Mister Dresden.”

“I don’t think the middle of a life-or-death battle among three fairie queens is a representative sample,” I retorted.

“Maybe not,” she agreed, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “But I’m not going to be up for anything interesting for a while yet, and I’d prefer to avoid temptation.”

“Hmm,” I said, drawing it out. “I suppose you have a valid argument. Although one could argue that not all interesting things would require you to—”

She threw a damp towel at me, her aim remarkably accurate despite still not having turned around and having only one arm available. The towel hit me in the face with a gentle thwap. “You’re a pig, Dresden.”
“Yet you still haven’t kicked me out on my ass,” I answered. I dropped the towel on the floor beside the one I’d used on myself, and pulled on a pair of clean and, more importantly, dry jeans. Only then did Murphy turn to look at me, a smile lighting her face.

“I’m still thinking about it,” she warned me lightly. “But apparently you have demons after you now.”

“Yeah,” I said, sobering a little. I finished telling her about the fight with the demons and what Sam had done while I got dressed the rest of the way.

By the time I was done, Murphy had Sam dry and bandaged and tucked under a blanket, and had begun rooting through the pockets of his jacket. She set aside a pearl-handled Taurus pistol and a serrated, bone-handled knife with odd runes carved along the blade, then pulled out one of those fancy new phones with the giant touchscreens, wrapped in a heavy-duty protective case. Its screen was black and empty. Either it had been turned off, or all the magic going around earlier had killed it.

Murphy studied the phone, then me, then apparently decided that trying to turn it on while I was in the room would be an exercise in futility. She set it on the nightstand next to the gun and the knife. “So,” she said thoughtfully, “does that mean he’s not a wizard?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “If he *is* a wizard, it means he’s not a human one. But he acted like he didn’t know what wizards are. Outside of stories, at least. But he asked if I was a witch.”

Murphy shook her head, mostly to herself. I knew how she felt. Sam didn’t make any sense - he could kill demons with a thought, but apparently used a smartphone. He hadn’t been surprised that magic existed, but hadn’t known about the Laws of Magic. If not for the phone, I’d’ve pegged him as a budding warlock, a human with magical talent but no formal training, who like as not would break one of the Laws and get summarily executed by the White Council for it. But humans with that kind of power don’t get along with technology. At all. It’s because we have souls - we can be conflicted, we can and often do change our minds, we make choices. All that conflict stirs up the energy around us, causes bad things to happen. In the old days, we turned milk sour. Now, we blow out computer chips.

On the other hand, most supernatural creatures get along fine with technology. They don’t have souls, so they don’t have that conflict. They are what they are, and they can’t go against their nature any more than a human could break the laws of physics. So it was possible that Sam was something nonhuman. But he wasn’t pretty enough for a Sidhe or a White Court vampire - not that he was bad-looking or anything, but those guys are to eye candy what gourmet chocolate is to dollar-store candy coins. He wasn’t tough enough to be a shapeshifter like Goodman Grey, not if garden-variety demon claws could slice his arm open. And I couldn’t think of any nonhumans, magic-using or not, who wouldn’t be at least peripherally aware of the White Council and wizardry.

I frowned, absentmindedly picking up the knife to study the runes while Murphy dug a battered leather wallet from an inner pocket of Sam’s jacket. Like everything else about Sam, the symbols along the blade of the knife were unfamiliar to me. I needed to talk to Bob - maybe he’d know something.

Then Murphy said, “You might be right about the mercenary thing.” She held up a handful of cards: drivers’ licenses, four of them, all from different states and all bearing Sam’s picture. “Joseph Perry, Paul Frehley, Peter Gabriel, Dave Grohl…” She put those down and held up an FBI badge, also bearing Sam's picture. “Dickey Betts?”

I frowned. “Is that real?”

“No,” Murphy answered immediately. “Although it's a very good fake. But Dickey Betts is a
musician, and I'm pretty sure most of those others are too. And he's got three credit cards under three more names in here.”

I eyed Sam again. He still hadn't moved, looking young and oddly vulnerable where he lay under the blanket. “Why would he have a fake FBI badge if he's got the horsepower to kill demons?” I wondered aloud. “Usually things from our side of the fence stay away from the law, wizard or not.”

“Beats me,” Murphy said. “Look at these.”

She handed me a pair of photos she'd pulled from a deep pocket of the wallet. One of them, battered and faded, was of a much younger Sam, his arm around a gorgeous blonde girl. They were both smiling, bright and wide; I could just make out what looked like a college dorm room behind them. The other photo was newer, a headshot of a man in his early to mid-thirties with a model's features and a soldier's close-cropped hair. The background was the same bland grey canvas as the photos on Sam's various fake IDs, and the picture was cropped like them, but the man was looking slightly off-camera, a grin tugging at his mouth, the corners of his eyes crinkling as if whoever was behind the camera had just told a joke.

His hazel eyes were more green than Sam's gold, and he had freckles and darker hair, but Sam had mentioned a brother, and I had a suspicion that this was him. There was no name on the back of the photo, or on the other one, and I handed them back to Murphy. She put everything back in the wallet and set it on the bedside table. “Do we just... let him sleep?” she asked dubiously.

“What else can we do?” I said. “If he burned himself out killing those demons, it could be a couple hours before he comes around.”

She nodded and carefully hauled herself up onto her good leg. I reached out to steady her and she glared at me. “I've been getting around on my own for a week,” she said pointedly.

I held up my hands in a gesture of surrender. “Didn't say you hadn't.”

“I had more than enough people fussing over me in the hospital,” Murphy continued. “You want to be helpful, go grab some beers from the fridge. Otherwise, get out of the way.”

I Spocked an eyebrow at her. “Aren’t you still on painkillers?”

Murphy narrowed her eyes at me. “Beer. Now.”

I gave up and tossed off a mock salute. “Aye aye, Captain. Two beers, coming right up.”

Murphy just rolled her eyes.
Not In Kansas Any More

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Lucifer have a heart-to-heart.

Chapter Notes

More minor assumptions in this chapter! Neither Sam nor Dean ever, as far as I can remember, acknowledges the French Mistake universe after that episode, or anything that happened in it. I also can't recall any instances of Lucifer himself telling an outright lie to anyone in general, or Sam in particular. He does say a few things that turn out to not be objectively true, but he believes that he's telling the truth when he says them. And Hallucifer skates on the edge of lying several times, but they're Sidhe truths that Mab herself would be proud of.

Sam

Sam woke up slowly. His head was throbbing, but he was lying on something soft, which didn't jive with his last memory of passing out on a cold wet dock in a Chicago harbor. He squinted his eyes open enough to see that he was in a darkened room, the only light coming through the half-open door. He lay on a bed that was a little too short for him, his heels at the very edge of the mattress, wearing only his underwear and with a blanket covering him.

Lucifer was sitting on the dresser on the opposite side of the room, watching him.

Sam sucked in a breath, licked his lips and swallowed hard. Lucifer said, “It's about time you woke up.”

“How long was I out?” Sam asked.

“Almost two hours,” Lucifer said, a hint of a whine in his voice. “You really screwed us up, Sammy-boy.”

Sam swallowed again. The headache had faded a little, and experience said it would be completely gone after he’d been up and moving around a little. He felt sick, remembering how easy it had been to call up that dark power, to kill those creatures back on the dock. He’d promised himself - had promised Dean - that he’d never use it again, but no matter what he did he couldn’t seem to keep that promise.

But he’d saved Dresden’s life. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, noticing that someone had bandaged the cuts from the silver creature’s - the demon’s - claws. He could hear voices somewhere beyond the half-open door, Dresden’s baritone rumble and a softer, lighter - female? - voice, though he couldn’t make out any
words. His clothes were draped over the dresser and a small wooden chair beside it, drying; his weapons lay on the bedside table, along with his phone and his wallet. It was easy to guess that Dresden or his companion had searched Sam while he was out. Sam would have done the same if the situation was reversed, though it didn’t make him feel any better about it. If they’d gone through his wallet, they’d know he was using fake IDs, and they’d probably found the FBI badge he’d still had in a pocket of the coat—

“They did,” Lucifer said, and Sam jumped. Lucifer smirked at him, clearly pleased by the reaction, and continued, “They looked at everything, Sammy. They know you’re a liar, they know you’re just pretending to be normal.”

Sam gritted his teeth, looked away. Made himself ignore Lucifer and reach for his clothes. It had been a lot easier to ignore him back when Sam had thought he was just a hallucination, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t still try. His pants were still damp and cold, but he pulled them on anyway, because he didn’t want to just sit in this bedroom in his underwear until they dried. He needed to get back to Dean, needed to make Lucifer fulfill their bargain and remove the Mark of Cain. After that, it wouldn’t matter what would happen. Dean would kill Lucifer and Sam with him, or the world would end, but either way it wouldn’t matter.

Lucifer kept watching while Sam got dressed, which made Sam’s skin crawl, but it wasn’t like he could do anything about it. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from keeping half an eye on Lucifer in return, memories of the Cage clamoring at the edges of his mind. Lucifer seemed oddly on edge, one heel thumping against the front of the dresser, fingers drumming along the top, leaning forward a little like he was trying to hurry Sam along by force of will. If it had been Dean, Sam would have slowed his movements as much as he could just to annoy him, but fire and pain licked at the edges of his memory and it was all he could do to not trip over himself rushing.

But apparently five years free of the Cage was long enough to override some of the fear, and as he wrestled his damp t-shirt over his head, Sam found himself saying, “What? Are you expecting something?”

Lucifer glared at him. “No.”

“If you’re in that much of a hurry,” Sam continued, because apparently he had no sense of self-preservation, “why not just take over? I said yes; it’s not like you don’t have permission.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, the one who remembered was screaming in terror, but he ignored it because Lucifer had actually looked away at that, scowling into the shadows behind the door for a moment before turning back to Sam, his face a mask of carefully-crafted boredom. “Are you done, Sammy?” he drawled, but now that Sam was paying attention he could hear the edge to his voice. “Or did you forget how to dress yourself?”

“No,” Sam said. Lucifer wasn’t pushing him and he couldn’t understand why, but it had to mean something and Sam was going to find out what. “My clothes are still soaked.” He held up the sodden mess of his button-down as evidence, giving it a hard shake that failed to smooth the crumpled sleeves. “You’re an angel, you’ve probably never had to deal with wet clothes.”

Lucifer rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers; in an instant the shirt Sam held - and the clothes he was already wearing, and the jacket draped over the chair - were bone-dry and unwrinkled. Sam couldn’t quite stop a flinch - but he also noticed the way Lucifer swayed and braced himself against the dresser with one hand. The sight was so strange that Sam froze, staring, and blurted, “Are you okay?”

“Shut up,” Lucifer snapped, and flames and blades flickered around the edges of Sam’s vision but
for once he barely noticed; he was too busy putting the pieces together.

“You’re weak,” he breathed, still staring at Lucifer. “You’re really weak.”

“I’m an archangel,” Lucifer said, but it was a child’s pout and Sam didn’t even bother to pretend to listen to him.

“That’s why you aren’t taking control,” he said. “You’re too weak, you wanted me to think it was just a—a gift or something, but no, it’s because you couldn’t hold it right now if you wanted, could you?”

There was a long silent moment, then Lucifer’s face broke into an abrupt scowl and he snapped, “Fine. No, I’m not exactly at my peak right now. Getting yanked out of the Cage by my Grace was… worse than I expected. Then we got dragged here, and let me tell you, keeping you intact on that ride wasn’t easy. And then you went and burned a bunch of what little power I had left on killing those things.” He hesitated, and actually shuddered. “Besides, you left me in that Cage all alone, Sammy. Michael had his vessel, all that shiny soul power. I didn’t have you any more. He’s not exactly happy about being stuck in the Cage.” Lucifer’s too-pale eyes met Sam’s. “And I think you have an idea of what Michael does when he’s upset.”

Phantom agony ripped through Sam’s body and mind, the part of him that remembered screaming and sobbing, and he had to grab hard for the nightstand to keep from collapsing. He swallowed, gritted his teeth, forced himself back upright. Nodded jerkily. “Yeah, I remember.”

Lucifer looked away again, his foot tap-tap-tapping against the dresser. Sam shoved down the memories and stood up straight again, fumbled for his shirt and tried to pull it on. It caught on the bandage wrapped around his elbow; almost without thinking he peeled the bandage off, wadded it up, and tossed it in the trashcan behind the door. The wounds didn’t hurt anyway, not compared to the remembered pain lurking in the corners of his mind. But then he realized that there weren’t any wounds there, not any more. He poked at the perfectly healthy skin, then looked up at Lucifer.

“What?” Lucifer said, all innocence. “I might be weak, but you’re my vessel, Sammy. I gotta take good care of you.”

Sam snorted. He knew this routine all too well - Lucifer was playing for sympathy, playing the slighted good guy. He’d tried it a few times in the Cage, before he’d realized that it only worked if you weren’t simultaneously torturing the guy you were trying it on. Sam pulled the shirt on the rest of the way, noticing as he did so that Lucifer had also fixed the holes in the sleeve left by the demon’s claws. He’d learned, in the Cage, that Lucifer was vain. Apparently vain enough to waste his limited power on fixing up Sam and his clothes.

It wasn’t until he’d shrugged back into his jacket that he worked up the courage to ask, “Can you still—”

“Remove the Mark from your brother?” Lucifer interrupted. He was trying for a bored drawl, but Sam could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “Sure, no problem. Once I’ve had some time to recover and we get outta this place.”

“Good,” Sam said, and nodded. “Okay, good. Um. How long will that take? For you to recover?” Because Lucifer had to know as well as Sam did that as soon as Dean figured out that Sam had said yes again, he’d try to do something about it. If Lucifer was still this weak and Dean was still amped up on the Mark, well, that wasn’t a fight Sam wanted to place any bets on. Lucifer needed to die, of course, but not before saving Dean.
“Hard to say,” Lucifer said. “This place has a lot more ambient power lying around, though I’m not sure I want to touch it. Back in our reality it probably would’ve taken until the new moon, but here―”

“Wait,” Sam interrupted. A chill had gone down his spine at Lucifer’s words. “What did you say?”

Lucifer blinked at him, looking honestly surprised. “You didn’t notice, Sammy? This isn’t our reality.”

“What?” Sam whispered.

“We’re. In. Another. Reality,” Lucifer said, like he was talking to a particularly stupid child.

“No way,” Sam said. “That’s not— We’re not— We just got zapped to Chicago—”

“I told you I would never lie to you, Sammy,” Lucifer said impatiently. “It’s—”

Sam gave him a flat look, momentarily distracted. “You’ve lied to me. A lot.”

“Never,” Lucifer said, and had the gall to sound offended. “Oh, there were times when you made assumptions and I didn’t correct them, but I’ve never lied to you.”

Sam glowered at him. Lucifer shrugged and waved a hand, dismissing it. “Anyway, the point is, I’m not lying to you. We’re in another reality.”

That was impossible. Impossible, yet... Sam remembered a man who looked like Castiel but died like a human. A woman who looked like Ruby but who’d been gentle and kind and everything Ruby wasn’t. A house that looked liked Bobby’s from the inside, but was all fake walls and Halloween props. It had been bizarre, so much so that when he’d woken up the next day, he hadn’t quite dared to ask Dean if it had really happened. Reality had been a tenuous thing in the year or so between when he’d gotten his soul back and when Castiel had (temporarily) taken Lucifer away; he hadn’t wanted to know, then or now, how much of what he’d seen was nothing more than hallucinations.

“That was real,” Lucifer said, making Sam jump again. Part of him wished Lucifer would stop doing that, stop answering Sam’s thoughts; the rest of him knew that now that he’d thought about how much it bothered him, Lucifer would never stop doing it. “Balthazar was never the brightest crayon in Heaven’s box,” Lucifer continued, “and as far as distractions go it was a pretty ridiculous one, but it was real.”

“But Balthazar was the one who did it, and he had a ritual,” Sam said. He sat down hard on the bed, fingers digging into the blankets. “All I did was read that note—”

“Oh, please,” Lucifer said. “Come on, Sammy, I know you’ve got a brain in there somewhere.”

“It was a spell,” Sam said, irritation creeping into his voice. “I know. But it shouldn’t have just worked like that, not without preparation, the proper rituals, the intent—”

“It was a loaded gun,” Lucifer interrupted, exasperated. “Set up by a witch so it wouldn’t need any of that. All it needed was for someone to read the words.”

“And bang,” Sam muttered. He frowned, running his tongue over his teeth absently as he turned it over in his mind. The note had been directed at someone, probably one of the nuns at the convent, with the intention of reuniting her with the woman who’d left behind the spell. Dresden had said Maggie was a witch, so if Louisa the nun wasn’t, it’d make sense for Maggie to set it up so that Louisa wouldn’t need to perform the full ritual, complete with obscure and difficult-to-obtain
ingredients, in order to follow her.

It didn’t explain why they’d landed on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan instead of in this reality’s version of the convent, but the spell was over forty years old; maybe it had started to go bad, or had gotten messed up in the massacre or Lucifer’s raising. Or maybe the connection was those ruby-studded pentacles, not the location. Being in another reality did explain the bizarre demons - or at least, why they looked so strange - and while it didn’t explain why they’d attacked, Dresden was a witch. It wouldn’t be unreasonable for him to have demonic enemies.

Sam blew out a breath and dragged his hands back through his hair, shoving it out of his eyes. “Okay, so we’re in another reality. How do we get back? Will Balthazar’s ritual work?”

Lucifer rolled his eyes. “Oh, please, Sammy. When have our lives ever been that easy? No, it won’t work. Not without knowing how to target it. That ritual was for our reality and the other one, and only those. If you tried it here, we’d be lucky if we ended up in some other random reality instead of scattered across the multiverse by our component atoms.”

“Oh,” Sam said. “Okay then.”

“If I had the note the witch used,” Lucifer added, “I might be able to piece it back together, but someone didn’t hang on to the note.”

Sam flinched reflexively - in the Cage, any disapproval in Lucifer’s voice meant days or weeks of agony - but Lucifer didn’t seem inclined to torture him right now. To cover the motion (never mind that Lucifer was inside him and knew his fears intimately), Sam reached across the dresser and picked up his phone. Its screen was black - he’d turned it off when he’d left the bunker yesterday, in case Dean got his head out of the Mark long enough to notice Sam was gone and try to find him - and he started to thumb the power button on reflex. But then he remembered that if they were in another reality, the phone wouldn’t work; and if Lucifer was lying and they weren’t, then he still didn’t want Dean to be able to find him just yet. He sighed and dropped the phone into a pocket. At least the sixty bucks he’d spent on weatherproofing the thing seemed to have paid off - it didn’t appear to have been damaged by either the rain or the fight with the silver creatures.

“Oh,” he repeated. “We need information first. Then, if that spell really was set up by Dresden’s mother, he might be able to help us figure out a way back.” He stood up from the bed and began gathering his weapons.

“Oh, sure,” Lucifer muttered. “And you don’t think a witch is going to have a problem helping a hunter?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Maybe they don’t have hunters in this reality. Maybe he won’t care. It’s not like we haven’t worked with witches before.”

Lucifer made a dissatisfied noise, staring into space with a frown. Sam frowned back. “What?” he said irritably. “If you’re too weak to just zap us back, then we have to do things the human way.”

“The human way,” Lucifer sneered. “Sure. Because you dirt monkeys have the first clue how any of this works.”

“Hey, it was a human witch who did the spell in the first place,” Sam snapped, frustration and fear momentarily overriding the self-preservation he’d learned in the Cage. “And it’s not like you’re good for anything right now.”

Lucifer’s jaw tightened and he looked away. Sam, fully prepared to be smote down where he stood
for that (gritting his teeth against the memories of fire and agony), was so taken aback by the non-
reaction that he just stood there and stared at him for a minute. Lucifer’s shoulders were hunched, his
heel still tapping restlessly against the dresser, and it was a few seconds before the hunter part of
Sam’s brain managed to make itself heard over the terror and the frustration to point out that Lucifer
looked…

“Are you afraid?”

Lucifer twitched. “What?” he demanded, then scoffed. “Why would I be afraid?”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “I thought you said you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Who says I’m lying?” Lucifer snapped.

“Either you’re afraid,” Sam shot back, “or you won’t lie to me. Which is it?” The part of him that
remembered was screaming at him not to push, not to defy Lucifer, not to back him into a corner.
But Sam needed to know how important the not-lying thing was to Lucifer, whether it was worth his
pride, whether Sam could even remotely trust it.

“Why can’t it be both?” Lucifer whined, but Sam kept glaring at him and finally Lucifer turned
away, his shoulders sagging. “All right,” he said quietly. “Yeah, I’m scared. This place is…” He
hesitated, visibly struggling to find the right word; finally he settled for, “Contaminated.”

“Contaminated?” Sam repeated. “With what?”

“Darkness,” Lucifer said, which was just about the definition of vague and unhelpful. “Even if I was
at full power, I don’t—” He shook his head, his expression more serious than Sam had ever seen it.
“I’m going to do what I can to recover my power as fast as possible. I don’t want to stay here.”

Sam swallowed hard. For just a moment, Lucifer had sounded frighteningly sane. Sam was used to
the devil being a capricious madman, whimsical and devious and beautiful and horrifying all at once;
ever in two hundred years had he seen him like this. It sent a chill down Sam’s spine.

“Well,” he said, and forced confidence into his voice. “I guess we better get moving then. I’ll see
what I can get out of Dresden, and you—” The words tangled in his throat, two hundred years of
agony reminding him to never give Lucifer an order. But if Lucifer noticed the slip, he didn’t show
it, his gaze still distant and pensive. Sam clenched his jaw and tried again. “And you can focus on
recovering.”

Lucifer didn’t answer. Sam checked his weapons, the gun a reassuring weight under his jacket,
Ruby’s knife tucked carefully into his sleeve. He doubted they’d do any good against whatever
Lucifer was afraid of, but with the devil in his head and reality gone sideways again, he wasn’t about
to give up what few psychological safety blankets he had. Whatever was going on in this reality, it
was bad enough to scare one of the most powerful beings in Creation. If Sam was going to get back
to Dean and remove the Mark, he needed to keep his broken brain in one piece.

He swallowed again, steeling himself. Then he pulled open the bedroom door and headed out to talk
to Dresden.
Harry

Murphy had built a nice little nest for herself on the couch in her living room, with pillows to prop up her broken leg and arm, her laptop - powered down in anticipation of my arrival - on the coffee table nearby, and the TV remote within arm’s reach. She resettled herself there while I retrieved a pair of bottles from the fridge. Mac’s beer is the best in town. Hell, it’s the best in the tri-state area at least. He’d have an aneurism if he knew Murphy was keeping it in the fridge, which is why no one admits to doing it.

Ambrosia of the gods in hand, Murphy and I spent a few minutes bouncing around ideas for who sent the demons after me. But neither of us had the first clue who it might be. Murphy agreed that Nicodemus was probably out, and she used her landline to make a few calls to some of her contacts in the Brighter Future Society, but an hour later we weren’t any closer to guessing who was responsible.

Finally Murphy set aside her beer and looked me directly in the face. “Harry,” she said, “you don’t need to babysit me. I’m fine.”

“Huh?” I said eloquently.

She huffed a sigh. “Normally at this point in a case you’re running around the city talking to people, following leads, and probably getting shot at. While I’m glad you aren’t getting shot at, you also aren’t making any headway on who sent those demons after you, or what the deal is with Sam.”

“Oh,” I said, still eloquently. “Murph, I’m talking to you. You’ve got the BFS contacts, you know what’s going on in the city—”

“But I’m not Thomas, or Michael, or anyone else you’d normally have dialed up for help by now,” she interrupted. “If you’re worried about leaving me here with Sam, don’t. I’m injured, not helpless.”
I looked away at that, my heart lurching. I still remembered, all too clearly, Karrin’s agonized cries as Nicodemus broke her. It wasn’t the first time she’d been injured because of me, either. “It was my fault,” I said, my voice gruff. “I shouldn’t have put you in the line of fire, and now I’m doing it again because I didn’t have anywhere else to take Sam—”

“Harry,” she said harshly. “I’m the one who fucked up. What Nicodemus did to me was my fault, not yours. So yeah, if you don’t trust me to handle myself then fine, I get that. I deserve it. But at least be honest about it.”

I stared at her. “What? No! I know you can handle yourself, Karrin. It’s not that. It’s…” I hesitated, trying to get the caveman in my brain, who wanted to hold Karrin close and growl at anything that threatened her, to shut up. Likewise the Winter mantle, which wanted to go out and smash things until it had smashed whoever had sent the demons. Finally I said, “Sam’s an unknown. I wouldn’t leave him alone with anyone, because I don’t know what’s going to happen when he wakes up. Maybe he’ll handle another unfamiliar face well. Maybe he won’t. And if he wakes up bad…” I shook my head. “You’re an amazing fighter, but what he did to those demons—”

“I can’t fight that,” Murphy said, and sighed. “Okay, I’ll give you that one.”

“I don’t like any of this,” I admitted. “It doesn’t make sense for Sam to be connected to the demons, but it makes even less sense for him not to be.”

“Too big a coincidence,” Murphy agreed. But we’d already gone over all of this repeatedly over the last hour or so. She blew out a breath. “All right. I—”

Footsteps in the hall and a polite cough interrupted her, and we both turned around to see Sam standing in the living room doorway. He looked remarkably good for someone who’d been unconscious and soaking wet an hour ago. His clothes were dry and looked like they’d been washed and pressed, and there was no sign of claw marks or bloodstains on his jacket sleeve. Something else to add to the pile of puzzle pieces that made up Sam. You can’t just magic away damage like that - the laws of physics apply to magic, too, and you can’t create something out of nothing. Illusions could hide the damage, but I couldn’t think why Sam would bother covering up an injury he knew we knew he had.

He flashed a shy smile and an awkward wave, gaze going from me to Murphy. I could see the curiosity in his eyes when he noticed her casts, but he didn’t otherwise react. “Uh, hi,” he said.

“Hi,” Murphy answered warily.

“Sam, this is my friend Karrin Murphy,” I said. “Murph, Sam.”

Murphy said, “Nice to meet you, Sam…?”

“Winchester,” he supplied. It sounded like an automatic response, but he was watching us too closely, almost like he expected a reaction. But the name Sam Winchester didn't ring any bells for me, and apparently not for Karrin either. Sam added, “You’re a cop?”

Murphy blinked, and Sam nodded to the mantle over the fireplace, where a row of photographs in neat little holders sat beside a rack holding a pair of Japanese swords. One of the photos was of Murphy in uniform, her mother beside her. Not many people would have noticed it that soon after coming into the room. Sam’s expression was still neutral, and finally Murphy said, “Retired.”

“…Ah,” Sam said. He shifted, somehow managing to look like an awkward teenager despite his size. “So, uh, I think I have an idea what’s going on, how I ended up on that island, but I want to check
something first. Do you mind if I borrow your laptop for a minute?"

Murphy blinked again, and she and I traded a glance. It was one thing to know he carried a cell phone; it was another thing entirely for him to want to use a computer. Cell phones have a certain practicality to them that I could see a powerful supernatural creature desiring, but I’ve met very few big-leaguers who would even have the first clue how to use a computer.

Sam looked between us, visibly confused. “...What?”

“Nothing,” I said, and raised an eyebrow at Murphy. It was her computer, after all. More importantly, it was her choice whether or not to send me far enough away to safely turn it on, while Sam was still in arm's reach of her.

She grimaced. “Fine. Dresden, kitchen. Grab some more beers while you’re in there?”

I made an exaggerated face at her, but headed into the kitchen and leaned against the little table. Murphy’s house was tiny - I could still see most of the living room, including the couch where Murphy sat, and if Sam tried anything funny I could be back in a few long steps. Sam watched me go, still obviously confused. “What?” he said again. “Got something against computers?”

“I’m a wizard,” I told him, raising my voice to be heard from the kitchen. “Wizards and technology don’t get along that well.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. Murphy, bent over her laptop while it booted up, added, “By ‘don’t get along’, he means he’s fried three of my computers already.”

“Huh,” Sam said. He sat down at the end of the couch, keeping a careful distance between himself and Murphy. The Winter mantle said, good. Murphy belongs to us. No one else goes near her. I told the mantle to shut up. I was still glad that Sam was keeping his distance, but for practical reasons. While he seemed to be taking care to appear nonthreatening, if he did start something, the further away he was from Murphy, the easier I could react.

Murphy handed the laptop to Sam and he settled it on his knees, glancing from it to me thoughtfully. “I know demons can mess with technology,” he said, “but I’ve never heard of witches doing it.”

“Wizard,” I corrected him. “Minor talents can sometimes still use technology without much trouble.”

“And you’re not a minor talent?” he asked dryly. His attention was mostly on the computer, long fingers tapping along the tiny keyboard effortlessly. I was hit with a sudden flash of jealousy. I’ve never gotten to use a computer. Why do all the other kids get to use computers? I’m a wizard, dammit. I’m supposed to be the one with the cool toys.

“There’s nothing minor about Dresden,” Murphy said, equally dry. Sam snickered and then tried to pretend he hadn’t, and I glared at Murphy. She gave me a sweet smile.

It would be undignified to stick out my tongue at her, so I didn’t. Instead I stalked over to the fridge and pulled out three more beers, then returned to my perch on the edge of the kitchen table. Murphy had leaned over to watch what Sam was doing on the laptop, and now her brow furrowed.

“Are you using my laptop to look up porn?” she demanded.

“No!” Sam said, then paused and looked again at the computer screen. “...Not on purpose.”

“‘Dick Roman’?” Murphy read from the screen. “Is that what the kids are doing behind the bleachers these days?”
Sam pulled an exasperated face. “He's a businessman. Was a businessman, until Leviathan killed him and took his place, and then my brother killed Leviathan. You've never heard of him? Roman Enterprises? They were huge a few years ago, Dick Roman was all over the news, they thought he was going to run for president—”

“No,” Murphy said.

“Right,” Sam said. “So then…” He bent his head over the laptop again and typed some more.

Still watching the screen, Murphy said, “What do earthquakes in Italy and Boston have to do with a nonexistent businessman?”

“Has Boston even had any earthquakes?” I asked from the kitchen. “I don't think I've ever heard of an earthquake in Boston.”

“Exactly,” Sam said, in the tone of one who's just proven something beyond a doubt. He sat up straighter and handed the laptop back to Murphy. “Because there wasn’t an earthquake in Boston. Not this Boston.”

“‘This’ Boston?” I echoed. “I'm pretty sure there's just the one.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. He shoved his hands through his hair, puffing out a breath. “I know what's going on here, why everything's so weird.”

Murphy shut down the laptop and set it aside, then gestured for me to come back in. “Do you,” she said.

“This isn't my reality,” Sam said.

I stopped in the middle of passing a bottle to Murphy and stared at him. “What.”

“That spell I found in the convent, it didn't just send me from Maryland to Chicago,” Sam said. “It sent me to an alternate Chicago in an alternate universe.”

“Well,” I said, “I was going to give you a beer, but it sounds like you're enough out of touch with reality as it is. Alternate universes?”

Sam flinched at my words, tried to cover it with a shrug. “I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. It's happened to me before.”

“Is that even possible?” Murphy asked me. “I mean, that's weird even for us.”

“It's—” I started, and then stopped, remembering. “...Okay, actually Vadderung said something about alternate realities last year, when I asked him about the... what was going on when I first came back. But that's—” I shook my head. “He was talking about some seriously major stuff being involved in creating an alternate timeline. Massively powerful time magic.”

“I have no idea how they're created,” Sam said, then paused, his gaze flicking to a corner of the room for a moment before returning to me. “All I know is that this is just like what happened last time, only this reality has magic.”

“As opposed to…?” Murphy said.

“The other one we got sent to, it didn’t have magic, so we couldn’t get back on our own. We had to wait for Raphael to open the door from the other side.”
“The ninja turtle or the painter?” I said.

He gave me a flat, exasperated look. “The archangel.”

I had my mouth open to make another witty jibe, but stopped at that and frowned. I’ve met an archangel before: Uriel, Heaven’s spook, who’d demonstrated more than once that he was insanely powerful. Like, “destroy entire galaxies with a thought” powerful. I had no idea what Sam might’ve been doing with another archangel, much less why an archangel would have been involved with throwing people into different realities, but if anyone had the mojo for it...

Sam must have seen something in my expression, because he pressed, “Look. I know it sounds crazy. Believe me, I do. But you’re not like any witch I’ve ever seen—”

“Wizard,” I muttered under my breath.

“—and you said yourself that that’s not how transportation spells are supposed to work,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard me.

“And you were expecting us to know you,” Murphy said thoughtfully. “When you said your name. You were expecting a reaction.”

Sam nodded. “In my world, a witch - uh, wizard - and a cop would’ve recognized me.” As he spoke, his eyes flicked to the corner of the room and back again.

I fought the urge to look over my shoulder. Sam’s glances behind me were making my shoulder blades itch. It felt way too much like he was looking at someone back there. Cautiously, I extended my wizard’s senses, trying to see if I could pick up on anyone else in the room. I could feel Sam’s aura, bloody and cold - balanced again, not like when he’d been unconscious - and the wards humming along the walls of the house, but that was it.

Sam shifted in his seat, putting his hands together and digging the thumb of his right into the palm of his left where a faint, years-old scar marred his skin. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, more rigidly controlled. “That note, that spell, it was a loaded gun, a ritual where all that was left was to read the words. But Louisa never got the note - Azazel probably killed her - so when I found it, I triggered it instead. The ritual was probably tied to those pentacles, which is why I ended up near you.”

“Not a bad hypothesis,” I admitted. “Who’s Azazel?”

“A demon,” Sam said. “He massacred the residents of St. Mary’s back in 1972.” He dug his thumb into his palm again.

“Okay,” I said. I dropped into a chair facing Sam and Murphy on the couch, setting my beer bottle on the coffee table between us. “Let’s go with that for a minute. You’re from an alternate universe. What, exactly, are you?”

He lifted his chin slightly, his shoulders squaring. “A hunter.”

I blinked. “A hunter?” I repeated. “Like, you kill Bambi?”

“No,” he said, and a sad smile flickered across his mouth. “And that kind of hunting, you don’t kill Bambi, you kill Bambi’s mother.”

“Har har,” Murphy said dryly. “What other kind of hunter is there?”
“Bounty hunter,” I suggested. “Maybe there’s spaceships.” I looked at Sam. “Are there spaceships in your reality?”

His serious expression went exasperated. “No. No spaceships. We thought there might be UFOs once, but that—Never mind.” He shook his head, waving a hand in annoyance. “You don’t have hunters here?”

“Other than the kind that kill Bambi’s mother?” I said. “I don’t think so.”

“What do your kind of hunters kill?” Murphy asked.

“Supernatural stuff,” Sam said. “Ghosts, demons, vampires, werewolves…” He met my eyes, deadly serious again, and abruptly I got it.

“Witches,” I said. “Oh.” I looked away before a soulgaze could start. That explained a lot of Sam’s reactions on Demonreach and the boat.

Murphy looked between us. Her expression was still neutral, but her body had gone stiff and tense. To Sam, she said carefully, “We gonna have a problem?”

“Hope not,” he answered, equally careful, though he was still watching me. “You said you don’t kill with magic. We usually leave the ones that aren’t hurting anyone alone.”

“Sounds fair,” I said. Assuming he was telling the truth, it wasn’t even like I could claim any moral high ground on the subject of killing witches who hurt people. The White Council executed any wizard who broke one of the Laws of Magic, with very few exceptions.

Still, it didn’t explain his powers, and that was what I really wanted to know. I didn’t think it was an accident that he’d dodged that part of the question entirely. I sat back in my chair and made my voice casual. “So can all hunters kill demons with their minds, or are you just special?”

Sam flinched at the word special, then dug his thumb into his palm again. “No,” he said softly. “It’s….” He closed his eyes for a second, as if in pain, then sighed and opened them again. “I’m psychic. It’s complicated.”

I raised an eyebrow. “In this alternate reality of yours, are psychics different than wizards?”

“Yeah,” he said, and his voice took on a lecturing tone, like a teacher explaining to a student. “Psychics are humans who are born with power. Talking to spirits, sensing auras, reading thoughts. Stuff like that. Witches mostly make deals with demons for their power.” He met my eyes again, and again I had to look away before a soulgaze started. I didn’t think he was doing it on purpose, or rather, I suspected that it really was something he just did normally. Looking someone in the eyes is a powerful gesture, even when you aren’t a wizard. It lowers barriers, reveals emotions and thoughts, and Sam wielded it like a conversational sword. It lent some weight to the idea that he was from Somewhere Else - anyone who knew anything about wizards in our world knew not to meet our eyes directly.

“So how do you go from talking to ghosts and sensing auras to killing demons?” Murphy asked. “Kind of a jump there.”

Sam smiled, rueful and humorless. “Yeah. Like I said, it’s complicated. I’m the only one left with that kind of… power.” He said power like it like it was a dirty word. “Until now I hadn’t used it in years. Wasn’t even sure I still could, but…” He trailed off and shrugged a shoulder, looking embarrassed.
“Well, I appreciate the save,” I said dryly. Thinking about soulgazes had given me an idea, and I sat forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “Look, Sam, this alternate-reality stuff is pretty freaking out there—”

He chuffed a humorless little laugh. “Tell me about it.”

“—and there’s not an easy way to prove it. But there’s something we can try. Do you know what a soulgaze is?”

His brow furrowed. “No.”

“It’s what happens when a wizard looks someone in the eyes,” I said. I could hear my own voice take on the same lecturing tone Sam’s had a minute ago. “It lets us see who they are, deep down. Everything, good or bad. Not specific thoughts or anything, no mind reading, but your core, what’s in your soul. And you’d see the same thing about me. It’s not something to do lightly - whatever you see, it stays with you, fresh, forever - but it’s a real good way to find out if someone’s trustworthy.”

Sam had twitched about halfway through my explanation, his eyes darting back to that far corner. When he looked back at me, his expression was strained. “So… you see someone’s soul,” he said.

“It’s a little more complicated than that, but yeah, basically,” I said.

He took a deep breath, his tongue running across his teeth as he thought about it. Then he shook his head. “No,” he said. His voice was tired and pained, and his shoulders sagged. “I can’t—I’m not going to do that to you.”

I blinked. That wasn’t how people usually reacted - the ones who didn’t know what a soulgaze was didn’t know enough to be reluctant, and the ones who did knew enough to realize how important it was. Sam looked away, digging his thumb into his palm again. “I guess this means you’re not going to believe me,” he said. “Or trust me. I, uh, I get that, I do. It’s fine.” He stood up from the couch, shrugging his jacket into place. “I’ll get out of your way.”

“Hold on,” I said. I stood up too, not quite blocking his path to the front door. “I know I made it sound dramatic, but—”

Sam shook his head again. “I’m not going to do that to you,” he repeated. “It’s not worth it.”

“You’re saying that like you think I’m going to see something awful,” I said.

He met my eyes once more, and this time I didn’t look away. Sam’s eyes were haunted, and as the barriers between us began to fall I was suddenly overwhelmed with an awful despair, a guilt and sorrow and hopelessness that took the breath from my lungs and left my knees weak—and then at the very last possible instant, Sam tore his gaze away. He suddenly seemed old, like a soldier who’d been at war for far too long. “Yeah,” he said, very, very softly. “You will.”

Hell’s bells. The soulgaze hadn’t even started for real, and I was shaking from the intensity of it. Sam stepped around me and headed for the door. “Thanks for helping me out,” he said.

“Hey!” I protested. Even if he’d stopped the soulgaze, I’d felt it beginning, which meant he had a soul to be gazed. Which in turn meant he was human, or close to it. Most of the really powerful supernatural nasties don’t have souls - they’re defined by their nature alone. If Sam had a soul, that drastically cut down on the number of possible baddies he could be, even if he wasn’t telling the truth about an alternate reality. I followed him to the door, grabbing him by the shoulder. He stopped, but didn’t turn around. “Wait,” I said. “So you don’t want to do the soulgaze, fine. But if you’re really from some alternate universe, you’re going to need help. And if you’re not, if this is some kind
of elaborate setup—”

Sam sighed. “—then you want me where you can see me.” He did turn around then, running a hand over his mouth. “Guess I can’t blame you.”

“Don’t take it the wrong way,” I said lightly. “I’m a wizard. We’re paranoid by nature.”

He smiled a little at that. “Hunter. Likewise.”

“Great,” I said. “Now let’s see if we can figure out what the hell’s going on.”
A Sound of Thunder

Chapter Summary

In which Charlie is a *Harry Potter* fangirl, Dean really doesn’t get along with phones, and Crowley regrets ever meeting the Winchesters.

Chapter Notes

It was harder than I expected to write Dean, and I expected it to be pretty damn hard. Dean is in a weird headspace at this point in time in canon - this chapter is roughly concurrent with the events of "The Werther Project", wherein Dean freaks out about Sam nearly giving his life to the Werther box; but it's also less than a month from Dean telling Sam he wants to see Sam burning on the funeral pyre in "The Prisoner". Canon is... not exactly consistent about how the Mark affects Dean mentally, so I'm trying to write him as caught between the Mark's feelings and desires, and Dean's own; and one of the two is stronger at any given time. Hopefully Dean comes across in this story as having varying degrees of success fighting the Mark, rather than just randomly falling in and out of character.

Dean

It was nearly dinnertime before Dean noticed that he hadn’t seen Sam for a while. Not seeing him for half a day was normal now that they had the bunker, with their own bedrooms and enough space for two adult men to live separate lives. But he couldn’t remember seeing him since yesterday, when they’d said goodbye to Charlie and Castiel.

He’d noticed that Sam had been distracted at the pizza party two nights ago, but had chalked it up to disappointment that the Book of the Damned hadn’t panned out. The kid was a nerd; even if the book hadn’t been a possible lead on removing the Mark of Cain, Sam wouldn’t have liked having to burn it. He’d seemed okay enough when they’d finally packed it in for the night, all three humans tipsy from too much beer while Castiel looked on bemusedly. And he’d seemed fine the next day, when they’d seen Charlie and Cas off after lunch.

Charlie was planning to do more searching for a solution to the Mark, but her car had been trashed by the Steins during their attack on the cabin, so Castiel had offered her a ride. He was still driving that ridiculous gold Continental, since even though his Grace had been restored, his wings had been damaged enough by Metatron’s spell that he still needed wheels. Cas hadn’t said where he was going, but he and Sam had spoken quietly in the hall for a few minutes, when they thought Dean wouldn’t notice. Dean suspected they were plotting some other intervention for him.

A small part of his brain was grateful for their worry. Dean knew full well that the Mark was dangerous, that what it was doing to him wouldn’t end well for anyone. But another part - the part that liked the Mark and the power it gave him, the part that was getting bigger with every day that
passed, every creature he killed - was annoyed. He was using the Mark for good, dammit, and if
Cain had been able to keep it under control for centuries then certainly Dean could do the same,
harnessing that dangerous power to protect the world.

*Until you destroy it,* a little voice that sounded suspiciously like Sam whispered at the back of his
mind.

Dean shoved that thought away. Positive thinking. Which would be easier to do if he knew where
Sam was, if he could be sure the kid wasn’t going to pop out from some forgotten hallway with the
puppy eyes and a “we’re worried about you” speech.

“Sam?” he called. He was sitting at the table in the library, his feet propped up on a corner of the
table and his laptop open in front of him, and he could hear his voice echoing down the halls to either
side. But echoes were all he heard, and when they’d faded the silence of the bunker wrapped around
him again. “Sam!” he shouted, more forcefully this time.

Still only echoes.

Dean frowned. After they’d seen Charlie and Cas off yesterday, Dean had gone down to the
bunker’s little gym to try to burn off some of the Mark’s restless energy. When he’d come back up a
couple hours later, there’d been a note on the table from Sam: *Running errands. Back in a while.*
They needed more groceries anyway, so Dean hadn’t thought much about it; he’d spent the next
hour or so on the laptop until he’d found signs of a vamp nest a few hours’ drive away. He’d texted
Sam to join him, but never got an answer, and finally the restlessness had taken over and Dean had
gone alone.

That, at least, had been fun - six vamps, solo, his personal best (if you didn’t count the time he’d
been halfway to fang city himself and had killed an entire house full of ‘em, which he mostly tried to
forget about because that whole time had been awful. Positive thoughts). He’d torn through this new
nest, the Mark singing its praises in the back of his mind, and by the time he’d gotten home and
showered the blood and the sweat off, all he’d wanted to do was drink a few beers and pass out
while watching *Speed 2: Cruise Control.* He hadn’t given Sam a second thought - Sam probably
would have just given him that damned look again anyway. But now that Dean was thinking about
it, the bunker had had the same empty feeling last night as it did now, as if Dean was the only living
creature in here.

“SAM!” he shouted again. Still nothing, and now real worry started battling the Mark’s contempt of
Sam. *What if he ran into something, the Steins or some old enemy with a grudge, what if he’s in
trouble right now—*

*He’s an idiot, and any trouble he gets into is his own fault—*

*He’s my brother, dammit.*

Worry won, and Dean kicked his feet off the table and stood, prowling down the hall to the
bedrooms. He called Sam’s name a few more times as he checked each of the rooms, but the feeling
of an empty building only increased. Kitchen, gym, computer room, shooting range, even the garage -
nothing. The old claptrap truck Sam had acquired at some point was gone from the garage, the oil
stain under its usual parking spot dry enough that Dean suspected Sam hadn’t returned from his
errand run yesterday. It was unusual for Sam to leave without him, much less stay out overnight
without a word of warning, and the knot of worry in Dean’s gut increased. He dug out his phone and
dialed Sam, but the call went straight to voicemail. He left a message anyway: “Where the hell are
you? Call me.”
He stood for a minute or two in the garage, staring at the phone in his hand, thinking. Finally he called Cas, but the phone rang four times and went to voice mail. Dean left another call me message, then dialed Charlie. She picked up on the third ring, about half a second before he would have started wondering if his phone was even working. He could hear loud music fading in the background as she moved away from the source. “Charlie, hey.”

“Hiya,” she answered. “Did you know there’s such a thing as a Harry Potter night at the bar? They have butterbeer and chocolate frogs and they’ve even got the 8th Horcrux onstage—”

“That’s great,” Dean said, smiling despite the worry. He had only a vague idea what she was talking about, but he could hear the excitement in her voice, a welcome sound after seeing her pale and wounded and on the run from those Stein sons of bitches. “Is Cas still with you?”

“No, he dropped me off yesterday afternoon at the train station in Kansas City,” she said. A door thumped and the music cut off, replaced by soft traffic sounds. “Is something wrong?”

“Nah,” Dean said. “He just wasn’t picking up his phone.”

“Y’know, for someone who makes his living pretending to be a Fed, you’re not a very good liar,” Charlie said. “What’s wrong, Dean?”

Dean sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course she’d see right through him. “I can’t find Sam,” he admitted. “Haven’t seen him since yesterday, and his phone is off. You heard from him?”

“I haven’t,” she said. “Do you think—”

“I don’t think anything yet,” Dean interrupted. “He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself. It’s just weird, is all.”

“Weird, yeah,” Charlie agreed. The excitement was gone, replaced by worry, and Dean mentally kicked himself. She didn’t need this dumped in her lap, not after almost getting killed trying to help him. “He destroyed the book, Dean. Those Stein bastards might be after him now.” She took a deep breath. “You want me to look around, see if I can track him down?”

“Nah, I don’t think we should be that worried yet,” Dean said, and tried to make it sound like he hadn’t been thinking the same thing. “Just—”

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it away from his ear to check the name on the screen. Cas. He held the phone up again. “Cas is calling me back,” he said to Charlie. “Just let me know if you hear from Sam, okay?”


“Yeah,” he agreed. He hung up on her and answered Castiel. “Hot date, or what?”

“What?” Cas echoed, sounding puzzled.

Dean sighed. “You didn’t pick up. Did I interrupt something, or—”

“Oh. No. My phone rang and I was trying to answer it, but the woman said it was rude to have a phone ringing in a library, and it took me several minutes to soothe her.”

“A library, Cas?” Dean said. “What are you doing in a library?”

“Er,” Castiel said, and Dean groaned inwardly. Castiel being hesitant probably meant he and Sam
were plotting something. But then Cas said, “My Grace was hidden in this library. The energy released when I recovered it was… destructive. I wished to help repair the damage.”

“...Oh,” Dean said. That actually made sense; he had an idea of what kind of power an angel’s Grace represented. Even as depleted as Castiel’s was, there’d probably been quite the shockwave. And Cas had developed a thing for cleaning up his messes, after Sam’s wall and Leviathan and now Metatron’s spell.

“You wanted something,” Castiel said abruptly. “Why did you call?”

Right. “Have you heard from Sam in the last day or so?”

“Not since I left the bunker,” Cas said. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Dean sighed and leaned against the garage wall, scrubbing a hand down his face. Friends were great to have, except when they could see right through you. “Nothing. I just haven’t seen him since yesterday.”

Castiel was silent for a long time, long enough that if it had been anyone else Dean would have thought the call dropped. Finally he said, “I can’t think of anywhere he might have gone. Did he say anything?”

“Well, just that he was doing a grocery run,” Dean said. “Cas, what if the Steins went after him? What if he’s—” He cut himself off as a memory flashed through his mind, one of the clearest from his stint with the black-eyed squad: a then-unfamiliar voice on the phone, Sam’s cry of pain, Dean’s own voice, whatever jam he’s in now, that is his problem. It didn’t matter that he’d been a demon at the time, didn’t matter that now he was in his right mind again, he couldn’t think of anything that would ever make him abandon Sam like that again. He’d done it once, and once was too much.

“I’m sure he’s fine, Dean,” Castiel said, his voice gentle. Maybe with his angel mojo back he could tell what Dean was thinking. Or maybe Dean was just that transparent. “But… I’ll look around a little. Just in case.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Okay.” He hung up before Castiel could attempt to be reassuring again.

*             *             *

Three hours later, Dean still hadn’t heard from Sam, and his gut was so twisted with fear that he couldn’t sit still. He prowled through the bunker, stubbornly ignoring the Mark’s insistence that he forget about Sam and go burn some of that restless energy killing things. He’d checked every corner of the place, had gone out to the street to make sure Sam hadn’t parked out there and somehow snuck inside without Dean noticing, then done it again twice. Finally he made himself sit back at the table in the library, flip open his laptop, and start searching for anything unusual. Maybe Sam had tripped over a case while he was running errands, maybe his phone battery had died and he just hadn’t had a chance to recharge it yet.

Maybe if Dean pretended hard enough, he could convince himself that he wasn’t looking for reports of a dead body.

There was nothing interesting in the news of any of the nearby towns, but the Kansas City Star’s website had a bright red “BREAKING NEWS” banner scrolling along the top. Dean glanced at it - “...second terrorist attack on Maryland convent in less than ten years...” - but Maryland was too far away to care about—

Why was there something familiar about a terrorist attack on a convent in Maryland?
Dean frowned, clicking the link to read the full article. It was one of those reverse-chronology, updated-as-new-information-arrived reports, and the top of the article was mostly comments from Ilchester police downplaying the event (“‘Pillar of light’ is an exaggeration, it was probably just some kids who got their hands on illegal fireworks”) and meteorologists complaining that while this freak weather event almost perfectly matched the one from 2009, they still didn’t know what caused either one. But the description of the weather event - a massive thunderstorm that had sprung up in the space of about three minutes, spawning four tornadoes and apparently also causing mass livestock deaths for miles around - was even more familiar to Dean than the convent.

He and Sam and Bobby had spent months tracking those same weather patterns, years ago when they were hunting Lucifer.

Oh no.

Dean’s stomach roiled as pieces came slamming together in his brain: a convent in Maryland where Castiel had sent him in the desperate hope that he could stop Sam from freeing Lucifer; Lucifer wearing Sam’s body; Cain and Crowley both saying Lucifer was responsible for giving Cain the Mark in the first place.

No, Sammy, no no no…!

His hands were shaking so hard that he nearly dropped his phone twice trying to dial Cas, but finally it rang and Cas’s voice said, “Dean? What’s wrong, I can hear you praying but it’s not making any sense—”

Dean hadn’t even realized he was doing it, didn’t care. “Did you feel anything weird? Uh, about—”

He skimmed the news article for timestamps. “—about two hours ago, over in Maryland.”

“I felt something,” Castiel admitted, “but I don’t know what it was. My Grace is still very weak, and I’m not entirely, ah, tuned back in to Angel Radio—”

“No, please tell me it didn’t feel like Lucifer,” Dean whispered. “Damn it, Cas, tell me it’s not Lucifer.”

Castiel didn’t say anything for a long time. When he did finally speak, his voice was tight with controlled emotion. “You still haven’t heard from Sam, have you.”

Not a question. Dean closed his eyes and leaned his head on his hand. “Cas—”

“I’ll meet you in Maryland,” Castiel said. “Call Crowley. He can check the Cage.” He hung up.

Dean swallowed back bile, swallowed back the voice of the Mark singing its glee that Lucifer was on the loose again, that it would finally have a challenge. But the Mark wouldn’t shut up, wouldn’t stop pushing against him, a nearly tangible force pulsing through his veins and he dropped the phone on the table to wrap his fingers around his arm and squeeze, hard, until the pain overrode the Mark’s song and he could think again.

It probably said something about his life that he still had the King of Hell’s cell number programmed into his phone, below the number for the wayward angel and once-King of Heaven. Crowley’s phone rang long enough that Dean started composing a voice mail message while pacing around the table, but then it clicked and Crowley’s oil-slick voice purred, “Squirrel, what a surprise. Did you miss—”

“Shut up,” Dean snapped, and Crowley actually did, probably out of surprise more than anything. “You need to go check Lucifer’s Cage. Right now.”
“What?!” Crowley yelped, loud enough that Dean pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment. When he put it back, Crowley was saying, “Why do I need to check Lucifer’s Cage? What have you done this time?”

“Just do it,” Dean said, and hung up before he would be tempted to throw the phone across the room. This was all Crowley’s fault anyway; he’d tricked Dean into taking the Mark in the first place —

Oh no, you wanted this, the Mark crooned in his mind. You wanted this power, you wanted to be the one who took down Abaddon after little baby Sammy stole the Trials from you—

Shut up!

Dean gripped his arm again, thumb digging into the Mark where it throbbed against his skin. His hands were shaking and he was grinding his teeth so hard his jaw ached. The Mark kept pushing, cooing gently, scornfully, about how weak Dean had been before he’d accepted it, how he’d been shown up by the baby brother who was so incompetent he’d let Lucifer free not once but maybe twice now, and almost before he’d realized it Dean had grabbed a chair and flung it across the room.

It crashed into a bookshelf and splintered, sending books and broken bits of wood flying. Dean clenched his fists, breathing hard, even that small act of violence enough to - momentarily at least - quiet the Mark. The thundering in his ears faded to the buzzing of his phone against the table.

Crowley, calling back.

Dean scooped up the phone. “Well?”

“What is wrong with you two?” Crowley demanded. “Lucifer’s gone, but you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“Damn it,” Dean whispered. He sank back into a chair and dropped his head into his hand again.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it.”

Crowley was still talking, and Dean made himself tune back in. “—about the Mark, isn’t it,” Crowley grumbled. “Moose, in his infinite mooseish wisdom, decided to ask Lucifer of all people for help.”

“We have to find him,” Dean said. “Looks like he did it at that convent in Maryland.” His voice came out tired, resigned, and Crowley hesitated before answering.

“I’ll meet you there,” he said. “Bring backup.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed tiredly. “I’ll be there.”
Decide How to Play the Cards

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Lucifer talk, Harry and Murphy argue, and pizza causes confusion.

Chapter Notes

I set the once-a-month update schedule at the beginning of this fic in the hope that I wouldn't feel guilty if life got in the way of updating on occasion, but here we are, two weeks without a chapter and me feeling guilty. Whoops!

Sam

Sam splashed cold water on his face, trying to clear his head. He’d excused himself to the bathroom and Dresden had reluctantly allowed it; Sam suspected Dresden thought he was going to make a break for it out a back window or something. He wasn’t - not yet at least - but he needed a few minutes to pull his thoughts together. He’d forgotten how hard it was to deal with people with the devil lurking at the edge of his vision, making snide comments and rude gestures and generally being a huge freaking distraction. And the whole soulgaze thing really hadn’t helped. When Lucifer had realized what it meant, he’d started laughing so hard he’d fallen off the bookshelf he’d been sitting on and spent the next five minutes rolling back and forth across the floor in hysterics.

“I still think you should’ve let him do it,” Lucifer said. He sat on the edge of the sink, his heels drumming on the cabinet door like a kid’s, forcing Sam to maneuver awkwardly to get at the faucet without bumping into him. “It would’ve been hilarious!”

“Hilarious,” Sam repeated dryly. He scrubbed the water off his face; met his own eyes in the mirror. Apparently having the devil riding along in his body was as good as a full week of sleep. The bruised circles under his eyes were gone, and his skin was no longer sallow and sickly from too many nights lying awake and listening to Dean scream. His hair dripped into the sink and he shoved it back irritably. “Dresden can’t help us if he goes insane from looking at—” He broke off, not quite able to articulate it. The shredded rotting broken thing that used to be my soul, duct tape and safety pins and nothing else, so damaged that even I didn’t want it back—

“And now you’ve gone and proven Dean right, he thought at himself. You’re not trustworthy, you’re not strong enough to handle anything important. You’ve had the devil in your head for less than four
hours and you’ve already fucked it up, not just ending up in another freaking universe but you can’t
even hold a conversation without losing it, without making everyone realize just how crazy you are—

Sam’s stomach churned and he sat down heavily on the closed toilet seat. Stupid, he thought at
himself. Stupid to think you could do this, that you could deal with Lucifer and pretend to be human
and not fuck everything up even worse, that you wouldn’t just fall to pieces the moment there was
any pressure, Dresden knows you’re nuts and it’s just a matter of time before he decides to ship you
off to the madhouse and then where will Dean be—

“Sam!”

Hands on his wrists, freezing cold and gripping tightly enough to hurt, and Sam blinked until his
eyes focused on Dean’s face, hovering just a few inches from his own. Dean’s green eyes were wide
and worried, and he tugged gently at Sam’s wrists. Slowly Sam realized his fingers were clenched in
his own hair, and he made himself let go and allowed Dean to pull his hands down. “Sam,” Dean
said again, softer this time. “Calm down, man. We got this. Okay? We can—”

—and then Sam remembered Dean wasn’t there, remembered who was there with him, and yanked
his hands away so hard he nearly fell over. Dean stepped back, his cropped hair and denim jacket
blurring and melting into blond curls and a delicate white nightgown. “Sam,” Jessica said, gentle but
insistent. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay, but you need to calm down—”


Jess pouted for a moment, then her form blurred again and suddenly it was Bobby standing there,
grey hair poking out from under his tattered baseball cap, and Sam recoiled again and he shifted
again, now with short messy hair and an ill-fitting trenchcoat, and Castiel said, “Sam, this is
ridiculous—”

“Stop it,” Sam whispered. “Just… just stop it, please.”

Castiel sighed, and then it was Lucifer standing there in his old vessel’s body. He crossed his arms,
sulking. “Why? You like them.”

“Well, you aren’t them,” Sam snapped.

“You don’t like me,” Lucifer complained.

Sam starred at him. “You tortured me!”

“You dragged me back into that Cage!” Lucifer said. He waved a hand, as if it didn’t matter.
“Besides, I protected you from Michael.”

The really frustrating part was that Sam knew he meant it. To Lucifer, centuries of unimaginable
torture were a perfectly reasonable response to being re-imprisoned in the Cage he hated so much.
And he had protected Sam from Michael. Sometimes. But Sam didn’t think Lucifer would ever
understand how those times had been the worst, when the pain faded enough and reality came back
enough, when Sam realized who’d saved him, when he’d been pathetically, sobbingly grateful.
When he had loved Lucifer for being the one to stop the pain, and it had hurt all the more when
Lucifer got bored with fixing what Michael had done to him and gone back to his own amusements.
Or maybe Lucifer knew exactly how much worse those times had been, and had planned it that way.
Sam swallowed, gritted his teeth, dug his thumb into his palm and tried not to let the agony of those
memories overwhelm him.

Lucifer waited, but when it became clear Sam wasn’t going to answer him, he sighed and slouched
against the closed bathroom door. “You’re my vessel, Sam. You’re supposed to love me.”

“And you’re supposed to love humans,” Sam shot back. “How’s that working out?”

Lucifer scowled. “You know, I really did want to make you happy,” he said. “That’s how humans work, right? Make ‘em happy and they love you. But you, Sam…” He waggled a finger. “I can’t figure out how to do it. What does it take? What do you want?”

“Hah.” Sam closed his eyes, suddenly too tired to even look at Lucifer any more. What did he want? Too easy, even if it was impossible. Take me back. Take me back to Stanford, before I ruined everything. Let me save Jess. Let me save Dad. Let me save Dean. Everyone I let down. Ellen, Jo, Bobby, Kevin. Let me give Dean his life back, before he got stuck being babysitter to the guy who drinks demon blood and starts the Apocalypse and fucks up sealing Hell. Turn me back to before I was the freak, the monster, the thing to be hunted—

“Sam,” Lucifer said, and his voice was horribly gentle. “You know I can’t—”

“Yeah,” Sam interrupted. He didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want to think about just how impossible it was. Didn’t want to listen to any more of that awful gentleness, because how fucked up did you have to be for the devil to pity you? “I know. So maybe… maybe can you just… stop distracting me?”

He opened his eyes in time to see Lucifer slump in an exaggerated pout. “That’s boring,” he whined.

“Do you want to get back to our reality or not?” Sam said. Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed the edge of the sink and hauled himself to his feet. “We should probably head back out there,” he said, and made his voice steady. “They’re going to think I made a break for it.”

“We could, y’know,” Lucifer said. He hooked his thumbs together and fluttered his hands like wings. “We don’t need to stay here and deal with them.”

Sam shrugged. “They might be able to help us. It won’t hurt to stay a little longer. We can always leave later.”

Lucifer rolled his eyes, but said, “Fine. You’re holding the reins, we do things your way.” He paused, his eyes unfocusing for a second like he was listening to something, then his face lit with a wicked grin. “And if you hurry, you can listen to them argue.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, but took the hint and opened the bathroom door as quietly as possible - Lucifer slithered out of the way at the last second - then eased into the dark hallway. Sure enough, he could hear Dresden’s deep voice and Murphy’s lighter one, not shouting but clearly heated. Sam edged closer to the living room entrance, careful to stay along the wall where he was less likely to be seen. Lucifer, who didn’t have to worry about being seen by anyone other than Sam, hurried over to where the hall opened up into the living room and stuck his head around the corner like one of the Three Stooges.

“—could run off, and at worst he turns on you, Karrin,” Dresden was saying. “I’m not—”

“I can handle myself,” Murphy interrupted. “You know as well as I do that this doesn’t smell like a ploy to get me alone. I agree he’s hiding something, but if he wanted me dead, getting you involved up front is basically suicide. And if he wants you dead, this is sure a dumb way to go about it.”

“Maybe,” Dresden admitted. “Though you have to admit, it wouldn’t be the dumbest thing someone’s done to try to take me out.”

Murphy snorted. “Okay, true. But you need to talk to Toot and Vadderung, and you can’t do that
with Winchester tagging along. I’m not seeing a lot of options here.”

Lucifer twisted to look at Sam, his head rotating on his neck about ninety degrees further than a human’s should, and cocked an eyebrow as if to say, *are we staying or going?* Sam fought down a shudder and glared, but took a few silent steps back from the living room. He reached out and twisted the handle on the bathroom door, loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Dresden had been saying, “I know, but there has to be—” but broke off at the sound of the door. Sam came around the corner into the living room to find Dresden pacing anxiously back and forth in front of the fireplace, while Murphy scowled from her seat on the couch. Neither of them did a great job at hiding the fact that they’d been arguing about him.

Sam pretended not to notice anyway, leaning against the wall and smiling faintly. “So what’s the plan?” he asked.

“Dresden’s going to go talk to some people,” Murphy said before Dresden could speak. He scowled at her, but she ignored him.

Sam nodded and said to Dresden, “You want me to stay here or go with?” If they were worried he was trying to get one of them alone, then letting them choose who he stayed with might alleviate some of that suspicion.

Dresden hesitated, trading a meaningful look with Murphy. Sam waited, and finally Dresden sighed. “Okay, fine. Sam, stay here with Murphy. But I want you to swear on your power that you won’t hurt her.”

Sam frowned. “Do what?”

“Swear on your power,” Dresden repeated. Sam’s confusion must have shown on his face because Dresden added, “You don’t know what that means?” Sam shook his head, and Dresden continued, “If you swear an oath by your power and then break it, your ability to use your power gets messed up. Damaged. Do it enough and you could end up with no power left at all.” He stared at Sam, eyes narrowed. “You’ve really never heard of it?”

“Nope,” Sam said. He kept his face carefully blank. At least in his own reality, promises were just something to be broken, intentionally or not. And in truth, something that could do that - get rid of his psychic abilities for good - sounded appealing, but there was no way he was going to tell Dresden that. The guy already didn’t trust him. So he said, “But if you want me to do it, I will.”

Dresden’s mouth thinned, and he looked over at Murphy again. She just raised an eyebrow, and Dresden finally caved. “Yeah,” he said. “Swear on your power that you won’t hurt Murphy - via action or inaction - and that you’ll behave as a guest in her house.”

Something about how he said *behave as a guest in her house* suggested that that statement meant something important as well, but Sam didn’t want to ask and make Dresden even more suspicious. Sam would probably be fine as long as he didn’t do anything obviously threatening or rude. Plus, he’d realized something that could be useful. “Okay,” he said. “I swear by the power I carry within me that I won’t hurt Murphy by action or inaction, and to behave as a guest in her house.”

“Hey!” Lucifer protested from his seat on the bookshelf. “That’s my power you’re putting on the line there, Sammy!”

*Exactly,* Sam thought at him. *So we behave ourselves while we’re here.*

Lucifer grumbled under his breath in Enochian. Sam ignored him in favor of watching Dresden, who
didn’t look particularly happy, but also didn’t argue Sam’s wording. Murphy rolled her eyes and said to him, “The sooner you get going, the sooner you’ll be back with information. Besides, the pizza’s going to get cold.”

“Pizza?” Sam asked. He felt like he’d missed something.

Dresden just waved a hand as he headed for the door. “Like that’s going to stop them.” He paused, one hand on the doorknob, and fixed Sam with a glare that was surprisingly intense despite not meeting Sam’s eyes. “You hurt Karrin, an alternate reality won’t be far enough to run. Understand?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good,” Dresden said darkly. He pulled open the door and stormed out in a swirl of black leather and grumpiness.
The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Winchester

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Murphy commiserate over their respective fuck-ups, and Mister gets belly rubs from the devil.

Chapter Notes

I've seen the headcanon floating around that Sam learned to speak Enochian while trapped in the Cage. It makes sense to me, since Lucifer and Michael probably spoke it to each other and wouldn't have bothered switching to English for the benefit of the human they both hated with a passion. He might not be completely fluent, but at least in this AU, Sam knows several important phrases.

Also, Mister has canonically interacted with ghosts (specifically, crashing against spirit-Harry's knees) in the Dresdenverse, and Harry has mentioned that cats are very "magic-friendly", including being able to walk across circles of power without breaking them. So it seems reasonable that a cat could interact with an angel's self-projection outside their vessel.

Sam

The front door thumped closed behind Dresden, leaving Sam and Murphy to face each other awkwardly across the living room. “So, uh,” Sam said. “Want me to grab you anything? Water or beer or something?”

Murphy eyed him for a second, then finally shrugged her good shoulder. “Sure, I could go for another beer. Fridge, bottom left. Grab one for yourself if you want.”

Sam followed her directions, dodging a massive grey bobtailed cat that emerged from under the kitchen table to wind around his ankles, and returned with two bottles. He didn’t recognize the label - some local brewery - but Dresden had never gotten around to handing Sam the bottle earlier and he was thirsty, and anyway it had to be better than some of the crap he and Dean suffered through in back-country pubs. He popped the caps and passed one to Murphy, then sat down in the chair across from her and took a sip. Then blinked and pulled the bottle away from his lips to peer at the label again, because wow.

Murphy watched him, obviously amused. “Never had Mac’s before?”

“Nope,” Sam said, and took another sip, more slowly this time to savor it. “It’s, uh, it’s good.”

“He’s won a few competitions,” Murphy said.

“I can see why.”
Murphy grunted. She was trying to rearrange the pillows supporting her, probably, Sam thought, to have better access to the gun he suspected she had hidden under them. But with only one good arm, she was having trouble juggling her own bottle, the pillows, her crutch, the laptop, and the TV remote. Sam lunged forward to rescue the crutch as it started to topple, and propped it against the coffee table where it was still within Murphy’s reach but out of the way of her movements.

He hadn’t been expecting a thank-you, but it still surprised him when Murphy glared at him instead. “I don’t need help,” she snapped. “I can take care of myself.”

Sam held up both hands. “Okay,” he said, as mildly as he could.

Murphy sighed. “Sorry. I just… I hate people assuming I can’t do things myself.”

“Oh didn’t say you couldn’t,” Sam said. Murphy glared again, apparently thinking he was teasing, so he said, “Look, uh, a demon wrecked my elbow last year—” rolling his arm to demonstrate—“Then this guy looking for my brother messed it up worse. It took forever to heal - I couldn’t use my arm at all. I could still do everything I needed to with one arm, but…” He shrugged. “It would’ve been nice if I didn’t have to.”

Murphy looked up at him, a little frown line between her eyebrows; after a moment she relaxed a little. “Yeah, I guess.”

Sam swallowed, looked away. He’d meant it as a peace offering, a way of saying he wasn’t trying to insult her, but the memories were still too fresh, too painful. Even after Dean was cured, he hadn’t ever offered to help with anything, had just teased Sam about how long it was taking his arm to heal. Sam hadn’t been sure whether it was because Dean assumed Sam had everything under control, or because he felt guilty about the whole demon thing, or because he just didn’t care, but either way Sam hadn’t wanted to press him about it, not when Dean already had so much to deal with. And it didn’t matter anymore - the dull ache that had lingered even after his elbow had healed was gone now, something else to thank Lucifer for. Before the silence could get too awkward, he said, “So, uh, mind if I ask what happened?”

Murphy’s turn to look away. When she spoke her voice was flat and cold. “I fucked up. Bad.”

Sam made an encouraging noise, leaning forward a little, giving her all his attention. It usually worked wonders on getting people to open up to him, and Murphy was no exception. She bit her lip, staring down into her beer, then said softly, “You ever do something so awful that you just… just know no one will ever forgive you for it? Even if they say they do? Even if it turned out okay in the end?”

Sam couldn’t quite stop a bitter laugh. “Yeah,” he said. “I do, actually.”

“You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine,” Sam offered. He didn’t think his own attempt at a smile worked much better.

“Really,” Murphy said, and the corner of her mouth flickered in something that didn’t manage to be a smile.

“You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine,” Sam offered. He didn’t think his own attempt at a smile worked much better.

Murphy considered it, then shrugged. “What the hell. It’s not like my name’s not going down in history for this.” She resettled herself against the pillows; Sam resisted the urge to offer help and instead just sat forward a little more, mirroring her posture, making his expression open and gentle. Lucifer, thankfully, wasn’t being distracting for once - he sat quietly against the wall petting the big grey cat, which seemed entirely unconcerned that the person rubbing its belly was the devil. Sam pushed them to the back of his mind and focused on Murphy.
“Do you know about the Swords of the Cross?” she asked. Sam shook his head, and she explained, “They’re holy swords. Like, knight-of-God holy. They were created for two linked purposes: oppose the Fallen, and save the souls of humans corrupted by the Fallen.”

“The Fallen?” Sam asked.

“Fallen angels,” Murphy clarified. “In particular, the thirty Fallen who follow Lucifer, who formed the Order of the Blackened Denarius.”

Sam felt his eyebrows go up. Across the room, Lucifer had looked up at the mention of his name, and now he leaned forward a little, listening to Murphy as well.

Murphy continued, “There are three Swords, one each for faith, hope, and love. I’d been holding on to the Sword of Faith while Harry was…” She veered away from whatever she’d been about to say, her jaw working for a moment. “Out of town for a while. A couple months ago, he asked me to back him up on a job that involved the Denarians. Things went south. One of Nicodemus’s goons - Nicodemus is the leader of the Denarians, the oldest and most dangerous - was about to kill Harry.”

She had to stop for a moment, her voice wobbling. Sam waited, silent and patient, and finally she continued, “I had Fidelacchius at his throat. Tried to make him call off his goon. He surrendered instead. Gave up his coin and the Fallen helping him. That’s—It’s what the Knights of the Cross are for,” she said, her voice almost pleading. “To rescue the humans, to convince them to give up the coin and save their souls. The Swords have power as long as they’re used for that purpose. I should have— But Nicodemus ordered his thug to kill Harry anyway, so I—”

Her voice broke and she looked down and away. Her good hand, holding her forgotten beer bottle, trembled. Sam thought he could see where this was going; he prompted her gently, “So you tried to kill him? Even though he’d surrendered?”

Murphy nodded. Her shaggy blond hair hid her eyes, but he could see the splotches on her lap where tears were falling. “Fidelacchius lost its power. Nicodemus destroyed it. He almost killed me, too, and—” She broke off again, but Sam could hear the pain in her voice, could guess what she didn’t want to say out loud. And I almost wish he had. He waited again, giving her time to collect herself. Dean could have gotten away with handing her a tissue, but Sam didn’t have that kind of charm, so he didn’t move, didn’t say anything. Finally Murphy scrubbed a hand across her face and lifted her head. “It worked out in the end,” she said, and couldn’t quite manage a smile. “The hilt was still intact and someone who’s a lot more deserving than me picked it up and turned it into, if you can believe it, a holy lightsaber.”

“A holy—” Sam repeated, incredulous.

“Lightsaber,” Murphy said. “Yep. He’s the geekest guy I know, so it’s kind of fitting, I guess. And he’s a real Knight, not like me, so he won’t put the sword in danger again. So maybe it’s what God wanted. What he planned, you know?” She shook her head, and added in a smaller voice, “Just… even if that was the plan, even if it’s God’s will… I’m the one who’ll always be remembered for this. It doesn’t matter how much good I do, I’ll always be the idiot who got one of the Swords broken.”

She took a deep breath, then a swig of beer. Sam kept waiting, and finally her expression settled into neutrality again. “Okay, your turn. What did you do that’s unforgivable?”

“Well,” Sam said, and then hesitated, the words sticking in his throat. It was stupid; everyone in his reality knew what he’d done, but there was a little part of him that didn’t want to tell her, didn’t want the people in this reality to know how horrible he truly was. He swallowed and tried again. “I, uh. I kind of started the Apocalypse.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. That Apocalypse.” He worked his jaw, looked down at his lap to realize that he was digging his thumb into his palm around the beer bottle. “Although the Antichrist actually turned out to be a pretty nice kid. We explained to him what was going on, what Heaven and Hell wanted him to do, and he, uh. He took himself off the board so neither side could use his power.”

“...Right,” Murphy said. Her turn to wear the I’m a nice cop, tell me your story face. “So what happened? How exactly do you start the Apocalypse?”

“I trusted a demon,” Sam said. Even all these years (centuries) later, the memory sat like a bullet in his gut. “There were six hundred sixty-six seals on Lucifer’s Cage, and sixty-six of them had to be broken before he could escape. This demon had been helping us try to stop them from being broken. She… saved our lives a few times. More than a few. Saved my life after—” He cut himself off; he didn’t think he could talk about Dean’s death right now, and that part didn’t matter anyway. “I trusted her. She told me that the last seal could only be broken by the demon Lilith. Said that if we killed Lilith, the seal couldn’t be broken and Lucifer could never escape. So I went with her to find Lilith, and I…” He shrugged, swallowing hard. Lucifer was still smirking and Sam made himself keep his eyes on Murphy. “I killed her. But Ruby lied. She’d been Lilith’s agent the whole time, she’d spent years setting me up, getting me to trust her. Lilith was the last seal. And when I killed her, Lucifer broke free.”

“So, your world…” Murphy said.

“We managed to stop them,” Sam said. “Put Lucifer and Michael back in the Cage—” Memories of terror and agony flared through him, fire and ice and overwhelming angelic rage. Sam worked his jaw, dug his thumb into his hand. Lucifer wasn’t smiling any more.

“Sam?” Murphy said, then, when he didn’t answer, “Sam!”

He forced himself to take a breath. Forced himself to let it out again. Then repeated it a few times, until the pain receded and the world was just Murphy’s tiny living room again. “Sorry,” he said, and his voice only shook a little. “Bad memories.”

“I’ll say,” Murphy said. She gestured at his bottle of beer and he took the hint, drinking deep before trying to talk again.

“Sorry,” he repeated, and this time his voice was stronger. “So, we managed to stop it. But it took us most of a year, and a lot of people died. A lot of good people, a lot of innocent people. And even though we stopped the Apocalypse, it left power vacuums in both Heaven and Hell. Things haven’t gotten a whole lot better since then, between the angel wars and Leviathan and... “ He shook his head. “All those deaths, that’s all on me.”

“Wow,” Murphy said quietly. “I guess you win for biggest fuck-up.”

Sam snorted. “Great.”

She lifted her bottle toward him. “Here’s to us, the world’s biggest fuck-ups.”

He smiled despite himself, and clinked his bottle against hers. They finished their drinks in silence, Murphy seeming lost in thought and Sam trying not to let the memories overwhelm him. Lucifer, apparently bored of their melancholy, had produced a long string from somewhere for the cat to chase in circles. The string shone red and wet and Sam didn’t let himself look too closely at it.
When both their bottles were empty, Sam picked them up and stood to take them back into the kitchen. "Want another one?" he asked.

"Sure," Murphy said, and added jokingly, "We can drink ourselves into a stupor. Best way to handle shitty memories."

Sam smiled a little. "Actually, I was going to ask if I can borrow your computer again. I want to do some research, figure out the big differences between this reality and mine and maybe see if I can get a lead on how to get back."

"Sure," Murphy agreed. She started the laptop back up while Sam rinsed out the bottles and brought back two fresh ones. He settled in the chair opposite the couch with the laptop across his knees, while Murphy flipped on the television behind him and started channel-surfing. It was oddly peaceful; if he didn’t look up at her it was easy to pretend it was Dean on the couch and they were in a nicer hotel room than most, working a case together like the old days. Sam did some more cursory searches - thankfully it looked like the cheesy TV show from the other alternate reality didn’t exist in this one - before settling down to look for more useful information.

There were a few results about Harry Dresden, mostly older articles in tabloids talking about "Chicago’s only professional wizard" and featuring grainy photos that might have been Dresden in action or might have been bad camera flare. There was also a video clip from a talk show segment titled “Witchcraft and Wizardry - Phony or Fabulous?”, featuring a much younger, unscarred Dresden alongside a psychic, a priest, and a research doctor. Sam watched it without the sound on; he didn’t want Murphy to know he was looking up Dresden. He didn’t really need the sound, anyway - the body language of the various guests spoke volumes. Dresden knew the psychic but they weren’t friends; he was polite to the priest but not familiar; and there was some kind of bad blood between him and the doctor. The segment was oddly edited, choppy and badly-lit, and at one point a shot panning across the stage from over the audience caught one of the onstage cameras blowing out. Sam remembered what Dresden had said about wizards not getting along well with technology.

There wasn’t a whole lot else about Dresden, especially not in the last few years, so Sam expanded his searches to the broader supernatural spectrum. This world had a lot of the same junk lore as his own reality, stuff about vampires and werewolves and demons ripped straight from classic horror novels rather than real life. There were some interesting things hidden in the chaff, though: Bizarre weather in Chicago several times in the last decade, mostly unnaturally cold and long winters that even climate change couldn’t quite explain. Sudden, highly localized destructive events around the world that the media speculated were freak tornados or earthquakes or satellite failures, but which looked to Sam’s hunter eyes like fights between powerful supernatural entities. A lot of chatter on occult message boards about a “night of bad dreams” that had happened about two and a half years ago, when millions of people who’d been asleep at the same time one night had all had terrible nightmares of dead children and a burning world. It had happened at the same time that almost the entirety of Central and South America suffered an abrupt and unexplained loss of major political and business figures that reminded Sam of the days immediately after Leviathan had gone down. And since then, crime rates around the world - in particular, missing or kidnapped persons reports - had skyrocketed in patterns that hunters in Sam’s reality would have been all over in an instant. Clearly, this reality wasn’t without its own supernatural troubles.

Sam was looking up some information on God and the archangels, trying to see whether Heaven had had a hand in any of it, when Lucifer wandered over to peer over his shoulder and scoff at the Wikipedia page. “Uriel was always one of my favorite little brothers,” Lucifer said, “and one of the most faithful, but an archangel?” He made a contemptuous noise. “And that’s a terrible picture of Michael.”
Sam ignored him, clicking through a link that he hoped would have information on the fallen angels Murphy had mentioned, but which only talked about the angelic hierarchy. Lucifer paced around to sit on the coffee table, rocking back and kicking out his legs. “Come on, Sam,” he whined. “This is boring. You should ask her more about those Swords; they sound interesting.”

Sam froze mid-click, then forced himself to keep acting like he wasn’t being pestered by the devil. Murphy seemed to be engrossed in the TV show she’d settled on, an old soap that looked like something Dean would watch, but Sam didn’t want to take any chances that she’d notice him behaving oddly. I thought you wanted to leave, he thought at Lucifer.

“I thought you didn’t,” Lucifer shot back.

I got enough information, Sam thought. And I don’t think we want to hang around people who’re friends with guys with holy lightsabers. It wasn’t only that, though. Lucifer’s interest in Murphy and the holy swords was unsettling; Sam didn’t want to know why Lucifer was curious and didn’t want to give him a chance to do anything.

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed, and Sam remembered with a flinch that Lucifer knew everything Sam thought, everything he felt, no matter how hard Sam tried to hide it. “We didn’t get holy swords,” Lucifer said petulantly. “No one else wanted to risk Dad’s wrath by admitting they thought I had a point, and I guess he didn’t think I was worth the effort all by my lonesome.”

Just think of it as a reminder that there’s another Lucifer running around this reality, Sam pointed out. He probably won’t be real happy to have his alternate-universe self showing up and messing with things.

“Ugh,” Lucifer said, rolling his eyes. “You are such a spoilsport, Sammy. Fine, if we’re going to leave, then let’s leave.” He stood up from the coffee table and took a few steps toward the door expectantly.

Sam fought the urge to roll his own eyes. Murphy doesn’t trust me. If I try to walk away, she’ll probably shoot me. We have to wait for her to fall asleep, and hope it’s before Dresden gets back.

Lucifer looked over to where Murphy sat watching TV. She looked sleepy, eyes heavy-lidded and body relaxed against the pillows. She was probably on painkillers for her injuries, and Sam knew from experience that the combination of painkillers and alcohol could knock a guy right out. Given that Murphy wasn’t even half Sam’s size, the effects would probably be even stronger on her; actually he was a little surprised she hadn’t fallen asleep already. But then, she had a giant, psychic, Apocalypse-starting freak in her living room. It was no wonder she was making herself stay awake.

“She’s pretty tough,” Lucifer said. “And this isn’t her first time experimenting with drug abuse.” He tsked. “Cops are such wonderful examples of upright, lawful behavior. I don’t think she’s gonna start sawing logs anytime soon.” He stalked back over to the coffee table, leaning over it to peer more closely at Murphy.

Sam realized abruptly that he’d been following Lucifer’s movements with his head, and made himself look back down at the laptop before Murphy noticed. We promised not to hurt her, he thought.

“You promised,” Lucifer corrected. “I didn’t. And anyway, I’m not going to hurt her.” He pursed his lips, looking at her half-finished beer bottle - her third of the night at least, by Sam’s count. “You could even say I’m fulfilling the terms of your promise. After all, it would be hurting her by inaction to let her stay awake and drinking. We don’t want our precious host’s liver to fail, now, do we?”
Sam gritted his teeth. He could feel Lucifer’s power stirring in his body, gentle and subtle, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Murphy’s eyes drifted closed and her breathing deepened. Lucifer stepped back, looking pleased with himself. But then the big grey cat jumped up on the couch, onto Murphy’s lap, its fur raised and its teeth bared as it hissed at Lucifer.

Lucifer scowled in annoyance and raised a hand, but Sam grabbed his wrist. *We also promised to behave as a guest. That means not killing her pet.*

Lucifer jerked his arm away from Sam’s hand, and blinding pain flared through Sam’s body - no, he realized dimly. Not his body, his *soul,* Lucifer’s fingers clawing bloody furrows in Sam’s core and leaving him breathless with agony. *“Never,”* Lucifer hissed, his voice low and furious and coming from way too close, “do that again, Sam.”

Through the haze of terror and pain, Sam realized that Lucifer was leaning over him, hands braced on the arms of the chair, close enough that their noses were almost touching. Sam’s stomach roiled, the beer threatening to come back up, and it took everything he had to not move, not puke, not scream. “I’m sorry,” he gasped, and only barely registered that the words had come out in Enochian, centuries of hard-learned lessons in the Cage making a comeback. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

But Lucifer lingered there, too close, the cold of his body making Sam’s gasping breaths puff out little clouds of steam in the not-enough-space between their mouths, until Sam thought he couldn’t take it any more, that he was going to scream even if it meant waking Murphy—

Relief came so abruptly that he almost choked on it, the sudden absence of pain leaving him limp and gasping. Lucifer was across the room again, near the door; the grey cat was nowhere to be seen. Sam didn’t dare ask what had happened to it. “Time to go, Sammy,” Lucifer said, his voice too bright and loud and cheerful. Sam winced, but he knew better than to disobey or even obey too slowly. He closed the laptop and set it on the coffee table, then staggered to his feet and followed Lucifer out the door into the chilly spring night.
Dean wouldn’t be a Winchester if he couldn’t be packed and out the door in less than ten minutes. The Impala purred as he eased her out of the garage and down the long tunnel to the street exit, and he tried not to think too hard about the empty passenger seat. A soft breeze filtered through the open windows as he turned her onto the road, ready to floor it for Maryland—

A car sat in front of the bunker’s entrance two hundred feet down the road, its red taillights glowing in the gathering twilight.

Dean froze, his foot on the brake. The car was a nondescript sedan; it could have belonged to the Steins or to a suburban investment banker. He had no idea what it was doing there - maybe he’d been wrong about Lucifer, maybe Sam really had been caught by the Steins, maybe this was just bad timing and the Steins had caught up to Dean independent of Sam. He reached for the gun tucked under his jacket.

Up ahead, the car’s lights flickered and it pulled away from the side of the road, gathering speed as it trundled away from Dean. A human shape stood silhouetted against its taillights, watching it go. Dean frowned and let the Impala roll forward until he got close enough to recognize…

“Charlie?” he demanded through the open window, incredulous.

She jumped about a mile and spun around to face him. “Dean!”

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, bringing the Impala to a stop beside her. “I thought you were in Kansas City.”

“I was,” she said. She glanced up the road again, her expression nervous, hunted. “But… well, let’s just say that if you hadn’t called when you did I’d probably be dead right now.”
Dean felt his eyebrows jump. “Come again?”

She fiddled with a strap on her backpack, talking too fast with fear. “I was in that bar, and when you called I went out back, into this alley, so I could hear you. After you hung up I stayed out there for a minute. Tried to call Sam, y’know? But then I heard people coming up the alley, and I hid behind a Dumpster. Reflex, I guess, after the Steins have been chasing me for so long.” She gave a forced little laugh. “Turns out they tracked me to the bar. Three of them. They were waiting outside the door. I guess they had partners who went in the front; they thought I was still inside and they’d spook me into running out the back door into their trap. I managed to sneak out under the fence at the back of the alley and run. I, uh. I was hoping I could hole up with you guys for a while.” She leaned in a little, squinting across him at the empty passenger seat. “You haven’t found Sam yet?”

“Dammit,” Dean muttered under his breath, then, to Charlie, “No. Not exactly. But I got a lead. That’s where I’m headed now.”

“Oh,” Charlie said. “Good. That’s good, right? I’ll come with you—”

“No!” Dean said. It came out more forcefully than he’d intended, enough that Charlie flinched back, and he forced himself to calm down. “No, Charlie, look, I’ll let you in and you can stay in there for a while, but Sam…” He shook his head, swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I think Sam’s tangled up in something big. Real big. It’s not safe.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. Moving deliberately, she tossed her backpack through the open window into the back seat, then circled the nose of the car and climbed into the passenger seat. “Then you’ll need backup,” she said.

“Charlie—”

She glared at him. “You and Sam are the only family I have left,” she said sharply. “If he’s in trouble, I’m going to help.”

Dean swallowed hard. He didn’t want to put her at risk again, didn’t think he could stand to lose her too. “Charlie, this is something real big. Worse than the Steins, worse than—”

“I,” Charlie interrupted levelly, “crossed the entirety of Eurasia carrying a cursed book and with Steins on my heels. I fought a war in Oz. I helped you take down Dick Roman. If Sam’s in over his head, then you’re going to need help getting him out. I’m going.”

Dean growled under his breath, but threw the Impala into gear and hit the gas - with more force than was strictly necessary. The tires squealed and the engine roared, and Charlie settled back into her seat, looking satisfied.

The satisfaction lasted for about five minutes, then Charlie’s fingers began tapping on the bottom of the open window. “So,” she said. “Something big, huh?”

Dean glanced at her. “You said a while back that someone put out more of those Supernatural books?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Why?”

“How much more?”

She started to answer, then hesitated, shooting him an uneasy glance. Dean smiled, though he didn’t think there was any real humor in it. “C’mon, kid. I lived it. Whatever’s in there ain’t gonna surprise me.”
Charlie sighed. “The last unpublished book ended with Sam dragging Lucifer and Michael into Hell, and you going to live in suburbia because of your promise.”

Despite his words, Dean couldn’t quite hide a wince at the memory, and Charlie gave him a sympathetic look. Before she could say anything, he said, “So you know the whole thing with Lucifer and Sam and, uh, vessels.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “What—” Then her eyes widened, one hand coming up to cover her mouth as she got it. “Oh, no,” she said. “You mean—”

“I don’t know for sure,” Dean said. It came out rough and she didn’t look like she believed him.
“But Sam’s been missing since yesterday, and two hours ago that convent in Maryland over the door to Lucifer’s Cage lit up with Revelations signs.”

“Great,” Charlie said. “The Book of the Damned turned out to be a bust, so Sam went straight to the source of the Mark.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. It came out a low growl, and Charlie didn’t answer. They drove in silence for a few minutes, until Dean burst out, “I don’t get why!” Charlie glanced at him, startled; he ground his teeth until he could say in a more normal voice, “Why would he do that? It’s not like—”

“Not like what?” Charlie said gently. “It’s not like he wants to save you? It’s not like he told me he can’t do…” She waved a hand vaguely to indicate the car, the road. “This, without you?”

“He said he wouldn’t,” Dean said. It hurt, thinking about that conversation, talking to Charlie about it, but he couldn’t stop. Needed to know what had been going through Sam’s head, needed to know how to reach him in case—

Just in case.

Charlie watched him for a moment. They were passing through Lebanon proper, and the streetlights strobed across her face, making her expression hard to read. Finally she said, “This is about… whatever it was Sam was talking about in the cabin the other day, isn’t it. He said he was ready to die to close the gates of Hell forever, but you saved him, and he wasn’t happy about it. And then, what, he said he wouldn’t save you?”

Dean tried to answer her, but the words caught in his throat. It took a few seconds before he managed to say, “Is that all he told you?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Charlie said. “What else is there?”

“Remember I promised I’d tell you how you died and came back?” Dean said. “Last year, right before you went to Oz?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “We, uh, kind of never got around to it, did we?”

Dean shook his head. “Sam wasn’t mad because I saved him. He was mad because I let an angel possess him to do it.” He told her about sitting in the hospital after the angels fell, about praying to whoever would listen, about “Ezekiel” showing up and offering to help. About how he’d tricked Sam into saying yes, about how he’d thought it would be okay until “Ezekiel” started getting more and more demanding, until he found out the real Ezekiel was dead. When he got to the part about Kevin he had to stop talking, the words and the guilt choking him until it was all he could do to keep the Impala pointed straight along the highway.

Charlie listened to it all in silence, her face pale in the darkness of the Midwestern night. When it
became clear that Dean wasn’t going to continue, she said, “So basically… you tricked him into getting possessed. Again.” Dean winced, but he couldn’t exactly deny it. Very, very quietly, Charlie continued, “Did you ever think maybe he didn’t mean he wouldn’t save you, but that he wouldn’t give your body to someone else to do it?”

Dean licked his lips. Then swung the wheel of the Impala hard to the right, brakes squealing and gravel grinding as the car skidded to a stop by the side of the road. Charlie jumped, staring at him with wide eyes. “Dean—”

He ripped the keys from the ignition, shoved open the door. “I’m not drunk enough to have this conversation,” he said. His voice was as rough as the gravel under his feet, and as painful in his throat. He stalked away from the car across the empty plain. The night was cold, prairie winds whipping through his jacket, his hair, but their chill had nothing on the cold knot at the pit of his stomach. He dug his flask out of his pocket as he walked, downed half of its contents in one long swallow. Clouds loomed in the sky, claustrophobically low, blocking out the stars. They were miles from any town, the only light a thin haze of moonlight that filtered through the clouds.

After a while he heard Charlie’s footsteps behind him. “Dean?” she said, tentative and worried. “Dean, I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t,” he said. He’d drunk enough of the flask by now to have a comfortable buzz going. It didn’t do anything to ease the pain of what he’d done to Sam (and Kevin, and Castiel, and everyone else who’d suffered or died because of Dean’s choices), or the fear of what they’d find in Maryland, but he was able to get enough words past the lump in his throat to say, “It ain’t your fault, Charlie.”

She didn’t answer, just moved closer, a small warm presence against his side. The Mark was whispering at the back of his mind again (you’ll get her killed too, you’re too weak, you can’t save anyone you care about), and he clenched his fist, ground his teeth until he could ignore it. Finally he said gruffly, “We should get going.” He turned without waiting for an answer, strode back to the Impala with Charlie trailing behind him. She didn’t say anything about the smell of alcohol on his breath, and he kept his eyes on the road and his hands steady on the wheel as the miles peeled away beneath them.
Go (Not) to the Elves for Counsel

Chapter Summary

In which Harry continues to be a drug dealer to tiny fairies, and a security consultant continues to consult on matters of security.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry

I’d called in my order to Pizza ‘Spress half an hour ago, so all I had to do was swap cash for boxes and I was on my way again. The pizza smelled absolutely delicious, the scent of gooey cheese and pepperoni filling the car and reminding me that I hadn’t eaten anything since my lunch of cold canned Spaghetti-Os, some seven or eight hours ago by now. But the pizza wasn’t for me, and I resisted the urge to steal a slice. Instead, I parked on the side of the road and carried the pizza into an alley that was less poorly-lit than most. I set the four boxes out along the top of a couple trash cans, glanced around to make sure no one was in earshot, then cupped my hands around my mouth and murmured a Name.

Names have power in the supernatural world. Speak a creature’s Name, and you’ve formed a connection with it, however tenuous. I infused the Name I spoke with my will, strengthening that connection, repeating the Name over and over again until cool blue light cut through the yellow of the streetlamps. I looked up to where a fairy hovered just above the pizza boxes, his body pulsing gently with a blue aura. He appeared to be a slim, extremely athletic youth, eighteen inches tall or so, with blue-violet hair that floated around his head like dandelion fluff. He wore armor built from bits of trash: a Coke can breastplate and shield, a serrated butter-knife sword stuck into a sheath made from a plastic toothbrush holder. Iridescent dragonfly wings buzzed at his back, holding him in the air.

The little fairy saluted smartly. “Major General Toot-Toot Minimus of the Sir Za Winter Lord Knight’s Guard reporting, sir! You called?”

“Hiya, Toot,” I said. “How’s things?”

“How are which things?” Toot-toot asked.

I bit back a smile. “It’s an expression.”

“Oh,” Toot said, then, hopefully, “Pizza things?”

I gave in to the smile. “Pizza things, yes. I have a job for you and the Guard, and another job for any part-timers you can round up.” I nodded toward the four boxes spread out along the alley. “That’s for the part-timers.”

Toot’s face fell, and he bobbed downward slightly in the air. “Oh,” he said. “Um, my lord—”

“Don’t worry, Toot,” I said. “The Guard’s getting pizza too. I just can’t carry that many boxes at
once.”

“Oh!” Toot said. He floated upward again, his aura brightening. “Okay then. What do you want us to do?”

“Do you remember Karrin Murphy?” I asked. “Blonde human woman, about yea tall—” I held my hand at my solar plexus— “came with us to the island last year?”

“Of course I remember her!” Toot trilled. “The warrior woman you kissed.”

I blinked. “You saw that?”

“Which time?” he asked innocently. Too innocently.

I stared at him for a few seconds. Then I wisely decided to let it go, because a smart wizard knows when he’s been bested by an eighteen-inch-tall pixie. “Okay, you know her. I want the Guard, uh, guarding her and her house until dawn. If anything tries to hurt her, protect her, and if I’m not there, come find me.”


“No, Mister doesn’t count,” I said, hiding another smile. “Although there is someone you should keep an eye on. Murphy has a guest right now, big guy, almost as tall as me, long hair. He’s… I’m not sure what he is, actually. Human, probably, but he’s got some weird abilities. He claims to be friendly, but…” I shook my head. “His story’s bizarre and I don’t know what to make of him. So keep a close watch on him, but make sure he doesn’t know you guys are there.”

“Aye aye!” Toot said, and saluted again, though his gaze slid over to the pizzas as he did.

“I’ve got a pizza delivery scheduled for the Guard at one AM, right before the pizza place closes, and then again in the morning as soon as they open,” I told him.

His eyes got huge. “Two pizza orders?” he demanded. “In one night?”

This time I couldn’t resist. “Well, if you think that’s too many—”

“NO!” Toot yelped, flitting in a little circle with anxiety. “No, no, that’s just right!”

“Great,” I said. “So that’s the first job. The second one is for anyone you can get to pitch in.” I described the demons from earlier to him, in as much detail as I could remember. “See if any more of them are hanging around anywhere in the city. Even just traces of a demon summoning, anything they can find that might tell me where those demons came from.”

“Yes, my liege!” Toot piped. His wings buzzed and he shot upward, his blue aura rapidly vanishing into the night. I slouched against the wall of the alley and tried not to smell the pizza.

Maybe fifteen minutes passed in the relative silence of Chicago settling down for the night. I’d forgotten how much I had missed it, the noises of the city, the feeling of thousands of other humans moving around each other. Living out on Demonreach, where I was the only person for miles around, had its own kind of peace, sure. I could lay on my back on top of the hill and count hundreds of stars. I could spend hours meditating in perfect silence, practicing my focus and concentration. But there was an energy here, a uniquely mortal power born of thousands of lives intersecting, that I loved. Chicago was my city, dammit. It was where I belonged, and no stupid demons were going to —
I had about a second of warning, a sound like a plague of locusts thrumming up through the traffic noise, and then the alley exploded in bright strobing light. I buried my face in the crook of my arm, shielding my eyes. The light was bright even past the black leather, and I kept my gaze averted until the strobing died down and I could open my eyes without giving myself a seizure.

Toot-toot hovered in front of me, waiting patiently and chewing on a fistful of pepperoni, his stomach bulging comically huge beneath his breastplate. Behind him, the last of the Little Folk were flitting away, loaded to the gills with pizza, their multicolored auras twinkling and gleaming in the dull light of the streetlamp. The four pizza boxes were empty, and the alley looked like something had been murdered there: glistening bits of red sauce and pale cheese were splattered on the walls, the ground, and the sides of the trash cans. It was more than a little gruesome.

Toot licked the last of the pizza sauce off his fingers, then saluted. I said, “Well, Major General?”

“We couldn’t find any demons,” he said, sounding disappointed. “We looked everywhere, my lord! We found ectoplasmic residue on a dock in the harbor, and signs of a portal to the Nevernever nearby, but nothing else.”

I blew out a sigh. I hadn’t expected much else, in all fairness. There are ways to cover up a demon summoning from casual observers, and that’s even without going into the Little Folk’s limitations - like being unable to cross thresholds, and thus enter homes, uninvited. Still, it at least meant there weren’t any demons rampaging around my city at this moment, which, given the way my life usually went on cases like this, was worth quite a bit.

Something of my annoyance must have shown on my face, though, because Toot looked uneasy. “I’m sorry, my liege,” he said. “We looked really hard—”

“I know you did, Major General,” I said, and smiled at him. “Good work. They probably went to ground specifically so you guys couldn’t find them.”

Toot nodded, perking up. “Even demons know better than to mess with us, my lord!”

“They sure do! Now, have you sent the Guard to Murphy’s place?”

“Yes, my lord!” he piped.

“Good,” I said. “You’d better get over there, too. Keep everyone on their toes and be ready when the first pizza order gets there.”

“Yes, my lord!” he said again. He saluted one last time, then blurred away in a flash of pale blue light.

I headed out of the alley and back to my car. I had one more appointment to keep, and I was starving.

*   *   *

McAnally’s is a small Irish pub in Chicago, which is a bit like saying it’s a pew in a church or a coffee shop on the West Coast. But it’s unique in one important way: it’s a haven for those with Talent. Its entrance is down a short flight of steps, and the ceiling is so low that I had to dodge the ceiling fans scattered randomly around the room. There were thirteen of them, as well as thirteen carved wooden pillars, thirteen tables, and thirteen stools at the uneven bar, all arranged in no particular pattern. The imbalance was deliberate, a way to scatter the random outbursts of magical energy generated by practitioners, which would otherwise have long since blown out the fans, the telephone, and the appliances behind the bar.
The most important piece of decor was a modest wooden sign that hung on the wall, with simple letters etched across it that read ACCORDERED NEUTRAL TERRITORY. It marked the pub as neutral ground, a place where any signatory of the Unseelie Accords was obligated to behave as a good guest, offer no harm or violence to any other signatory, and take all violence outside. The Accords themselves were a series of agreements that functioned a little like a supernatural Geneva Convention, providing structure and support for interactions between the various supernatural nations in a way meant to minimize conflict.

In other words, Mac’s was as safe a spot as I was going to find with an unknown enemy throwing demons, and possibly a psychic witch hunter from another reality, at me.

It was after eleven PM on a weekday, so there were only a few other patrons in the bar, scattered among the tables and bar stools. Mac himself, a spare man with a bald head and a gleaming white apron, stood behind the bar. I was a few minutes early for my appointment, so I took a seat at one of the tables near the bar and said, “Heya, Mac. Can I get a beer? And a steak sandwich?”

He nodded, and by the time I heard the door to the pub open and close again, I had a bottle of Mac’s heavenly brew and a plate full of steak sandwich in front of me. I scarfed down a few bites of the sandwich while the newcomer crossed the room to my table. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with steely grey hair and whip-lean muscles. A silver-white beard and a black eye patch gave him a distinctly roguish air, despite his finely-tailored European business suit. He nodded cordially to Mac before turning to me. I waved at him, swallowing my mouthful of steak, and said, “Thanks for coming to meet me on such short notice.”

Donar Vadderung, CEO of Monoc Securities and the public persona of the god Odin, inclined his head. “I’ll admit to a degree of curiosity about this mysterious problem of yours that you didn’t want to talk about over the phone,” he said. He pulled out the chair across from me and sat; a moment later Mac appeared and set a bottle of ale in front of him.

“It wasn’t so much ‘over the phone’ as ‘in the same house as this guy’,” I said. I told him about my evening, starting with finding Sam on the island, the demon attack on the docks, and finally Sam’s revelation about being from an alternate reality and his odd reaction to my suggestion of a soul gaze.

Vadderung’s single blue eye narrowed as he listened, but he didn’t speak until I’d finished. Then he said, “That’s quite the situation you’ve got yourself into, Dresden.”

I winced. “Tell me about it. I was hoping you’d be able to help me out here. You mentioned something about alternate realities when we were talking last year—”

“So I did,” Vadderung agreed. He took a slow sip of his ale. “Though I wasn’t expecting it to become relevant quite so soon.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “That implies you were expecting it to become relevant regardless of what’s going on with Sam.”

He grinned, his eye sparkling. “Let’s say instead that I like to make sure certain seeds have had time to grow.” Then his expression turned serious again, and he continued, “But the fact of the matter is, it’s relevant now.”

“Is there anything you can tell me?” I asked. “Is Sam telling the truth? Is he really from an alternate reality? How do I get him back? Should I be—”

Vadderung held up a hand, the motion so casually imperious that I fell silent without really meaning to. “I’ll tell you what I can,” he said, “though that may not be much. There are a number of things
beyond my control that limit my ability to involve myself here.”

I frowned, but nodded. Pretty much every supernatural heavyweight in the world operates under one or more sets of rules, be it the Unseelie Accords, the Seven Laws of Magic, the various rules that bind fairies, or others. Those rules are a large part of why the world hasn’t been reduced to a pile of molten (or frozen) slag as a result of fighting between the biggest players. But they’re also damned annoying when I was facing something I didn’t know how to fight and just wanted information or some backup.

“First, the alternate realities,” Vadderung said. “Yes, it’s possible that this Sam person is from another reality. It’s not… unheard of, for someone to cross the boundaries between realities, although it’s extremely rare.” He looked up at me, his icy blue eye knowing. “Your mother certainly knew enough about the Ways and the paths between here and there that I can believe she’d have set up something like what you describe.”

I touched my mother’s amulet where it hung around my neck. “Yeah.”

“However,” Vadderung continued, “to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever come here from quite so… far away.”

“It’s an alternate reality, how much further away can it get?”

He sighed. “Do you remember what I told you about how alternate realities are created?”

“Sure,” I said. “The grandfather paradox. I go back in time and kill my grandfather. Hypothetically,” I added, because Vadderung’s eye was twinkling and I suspected he was about to make a joke about me getting beaten senseless by a cranky old man. “The timeline splits, creating one reality where I exist and one where I don’t.”

“Correct,” Vadderung said. “Now consider the differences between those two realities, aside from the obvious lack of one Harry Dresden, Wizard.”

I thought about it for a minute. “Um… well, a lot of bad guys that I put down would still be running around causing havoc. Murphy would still have her job. Susan would never have been turned into a vampire. Molly wouldn’t have become the Winter Lady.” I had to stop for a minute, guilt threatening to choke me. I knew I wasn’t exactly a saint; I knew that at least as many bad things had happened because of me as had been stopped because of me. Maybe more. But spelling them out like that hurt. Vadderung, though, shook his head. “You’re thinking small, Dresden. Except perhaps for the eradication of the Red Court. Consider: had none of those things happened, the fundamental structures of reality as you know it would still exist. The White Council of Wizards. The vampire courts. The Winter and Summer fae, and all they entail - including the Unseelie Accords. Now consider what Sam told you about his reality.”

“No Laws of Magic,” I said thoughtfully. “No soulgazes. Wizards get their powers from demons and don’t disrupt technology. The whole ‘hunter’ thing.”

Vadderung nodded. “Now think how far back a split must have occurred for all these things to develop along such different paths.”

“Really far back,” I said. I took a bite of my steak sandwich and chewed, trying to remember what I knew of the history of our world. “Hundreds or thousands of years ago.”

“Possibly hundreds of thousands,” Vadderung corrected. “What this means is that you cannot assume anything about Sam. Not his powers, not his abilities, not his knowledge or understanding of how
things work in this reality. He won’t necessarily operate by the same rules as we do, whether abstract like the Laws of Magic, or concrete like a fairy’s inability to lie.”

I fought down a shiver. That was… not good. I’ve survived more than a few dicey situations because I knew how to use - or abuse - the rules of our reality. If Sam didn’t operate by those rules - like the one saying that if you broke an oath sworn on your power it would weaken you - then I had nothing I could fall back on to keep Sam from going wildly out of line. Nor would I be able to predict how he’d respond to any given situation, or what he could, or would, do when the fecal matter hit the air circulation device. And here’s the thing about wizards: We’re powerful, sure. We can bind the forces of creation to our will and throw down with things way above our weight class - but only if we know what we’re up against. If I couldn’t assume I knew anything about Sam, then it was only a matter of time before that big a blind spot got me killed.

Vadderung watched me in silence, sipping his ale. Finally I said, “I, uh, don’t suppose you can tell me what rules Sam operates by.” I looked pointedly at his eyepatch.

Vadderung smiled faintly. “While I’m honored by your faith in my abilities, I’m afraid all-knowing doesn’t mean perfectly omniscient. Much of what I know, I’ve learned the old-fashioned way, through long and thorough observation. Sam, and his reality, are far outside anything I’ve ever known. I’ve told you as much as I can.”

“Okay,” I said. “Then what about backup? I mean, you guys have to have some kind of protocol for dealing with incursions from alternate realities.”

“We do,” Vadderung agreed. “Why do you think I’ve told you all this?”

“I’m the protocol for dealing with incursions from alternate realities?” I said incredulously.

“You have proven yourself more than capable of dealing with unexpected and difficult situations,” Vadderung said, and damn him, he looked amused. “You also have considerably more freedom to move than I or any of my peers.”

“So I get to deal with the freaky guy from an alternate reality all by myself,” I said. “While also trying to figure out who sent demons after me and why — I don’t suppose you can help me out there, either?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Vadderung said. “All I can say on that subject is that it is not related to Sam or his appearance here.” He stood up, leaving his empty bottle on the table. “I told you last year to improve your understanding of your situation. Have you made any progress?”

I scowled. “I don’t even know what it is I’m supposed to understand. No one tells me anything. You people and your rules of interference. Why can’t someone just tell me what the hell is going on?”

His single blue eye met mine, cold and hard and grim. “There’s a difference between knowing something and understanding it, Harry Dresden. If someone simply told you everything, you might know, yes. But you need to understand.”

I averted my eyes before a soulgaze could begin. It would be a bad idea to put myself out of commission by soulgazing a Norse god. “What I need is a goddamned break,” I muttered. “Not some mumbo-jumbo about the journey being more important than the destination.”

“Then,” Vadderung said, “I suggest you develop that understanding quickly.” He nodded to me, then across the bar to Mac, then turned and strode out of the pub.

“Goddamn know-it-all security consultants,” I grumbled, glaring down at my plate. “Goddamn gods
of knowledge and wisdom. Would it really be all that bad to just give me some answers for once? I think they just think it’s funny to watch me fumble around in the dark.”

My half-eaten sandwich also declined to provide any answers. I stared mournfully at it for a few minutes, but my stomach was still grumbling and if I couldn’t load up on answers, I could at least load up on fuel. I finished the sandwich and my beer, mulling over Vadderung’s words. Aside from his own refusal to help me beyond giving me what little information he had, his words had tacitly implied that I wouldn’t be getting any help from Mab, either. I’d hoped she would be willing to give me some backup, considering that the entire purpose of the Winter Court was to protect our reality from the incursions of Outsiders, but apparently humans from alternate realities didn’t fall under her purview. And Mab had long since made clear that she expected her Knight to be able to handle himself under most circumstances. Telling her I didn’t think I could deal with Sam and the mystery demons without her holding my hand would be as good as signing my own death warrant.

Sometimes I really hate my life.

By the time I’d finished both my sandwich and my pondering, the bar was empty except for me and Mac, and the clock on the wall said it was well past midnight. I’d left Murphy alone with Sam for over three hours. Even with the Za Lord’s Guard on patrol, I didn’t like the thought of leaving them alone any longer than I had to - especially knowing what I knew now about Sam not necessarily being bound by an oath on his power.

Fine. Vadderung wouldn’t tell me anything, and I couldn’t make any assumptions about Sam based on the rules of my reality. But nothing was stopping me from just sitting Sam down and asking, point by point. That probably wasn’t what Vadderung had meant when he said I needed to understand, but hey, if he wasn’t going to tell me, then he could just deal with me figuring it out my own way. I dropped some money on the table to cover my tab, waved goodnight to Mac, and headed out the door.

It was time to start getting answers.

Chapter End Notes

This was an interesting chapter to write. We know from the "Mirror, Mirror" spoilers that incursions from alternate realities are possible in the Dresdenverse, but not anything else about them (including whether or not key players like Vadderung, Mab, or the White Council are aware of them). So I'm making quite a few assumptions here, based on not a whole lot of information.

I do, however, feel perfectly justified in Vadderung foisting this whole mess off on Harry, since in "Cold Days" he does basically the same thing with not much more explanation. (No wonder Harry's annoyed!)

Also, I got to see first-hand what a gang of flashing, darting Little Folk might have looked like, when I volunteered to hand out giant blinky glowsticks by the dozen at a party. My advice: don't look directly at a gang of flashing, darting Little Folk. Or a box full of giant blinking glowsticks.
In which Harry is baffled, Toot gets more pizza, and a fairy mangles Enochian.

I actually tried to figure out how to say "I'm sorry" in Enochian, but apparently there is no (known) word for "sorry" or "apologize". What Sam was saying was "Ol moooah", pronounced "ohl moh-oh-oh-ah", which means "I repent".

There was a Pizza ‘Spress delivery car sitting in Murphy’s driveway when I pulled up, and a kid who didn’t look old enough to drive it standing on her porch with a stack of pizza boxes balanced in one hand. With his other hand, he was knocking hard on the door, the kind of knock that said he’d been doing it for a while. He turned around at the sound of my car door, relief on his face.

“Hey,” he called. “You the guy who ordered four large pepperonis?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good,” he said, sounding relieved. “I was starting to think I had the wrong house.”

My stomach knotted even as I dug in my pocket for my wallet. Why hadn’t Murphy answered the door? The lights were still on in her living room, though the curtains were closed and I couldn’t see inside. I traded cash for boxes again, then, as the kid climbed back into his car and took off down the dark street, I went up to the door.

I heard the locks clicking over as I approached, then to my relief, Murphy opened the door. She blinked sleepily at me, then the pizza boxes in my hands, and I could see her struggling to wake up enough to remember why I was on her porch at one AM with way more pizza than two people could eat.

“Murph?” I said carefully.

“Yeah,” she said. “Sorry. I fell asleep—” A yawn interrupted her, but she backed up enough that I could slide past her into the house. Mister crashed against my knees as soon as I crossed the threshold, hard enough that I staggered and had to catch my balance against the doorframe. “Pizza on the table,” Murphy added, “as long as Toot’s crew can eat it without destroying my kitchen.”

“Toot?” I called. “You hear that?”

A buzzing of wings announced Toot’s arrival, though he stayed up close to the ceiling and well away from where Mister was winding around my legs. “Yes, my liege!” he said, and fluttered to a
stop over the pizza boxes as I set them on the table. He took a deep breath, then barked, “YOU HEARD THE ZA LORD! KEEP IT NEAT, GUARD!”

For the second time that night, I watched a swarm of flashing, multicolored lights appear from nowhere and descend on the boxes of pizza. This scene, at least, was considerably less frantic than the one in the alley; the Guard really were trying not to make a mess. Some sauce still got splattered on the walls and floor, and crumbs littered the table, but it wasn’t much worse than what you’d expect from a group of humans. Mister kept winding back and forth around my ankles, his purr as loud as the engine on Murphy’s Harley, and most of the Guard kept a wary eye on him. The Little Folk are terrified of cats, and with good reason - cats are one of the few creatures observant enough and fast enough to catch them.

While the Guard ate, I studied Murphy critically. She still looked half-asleep, propped up on her crutch in the door to the living room, but otherwise she seemed fine. One less thing to worry about, at least - Sam hadn’t hurt her.

Then I realized that I hadn’t seen Sam since I came in.

“Murph?” I said. “Where’s Sam?”

She blinked, then looked around. I could practically see her thought processes kicking back into gear as she forced herself to wake up. Unease hit me in the gut again - Murphy wasn’t usually that heavy of a sleeper, and she definitely wouldn’t have fallen asleep on babysitting duty under normal circumstances. Had Sam done something to her?

“I don’t know,” Murphy said slowly. “We were sitting in the living room - he was on the computer again. Then I guess I dozed off, because next thing I remember is the pizza guy banging on my door.” She yawned again. “Took me a while to wake up enough to even get up.”

It was probably too much to hope that Sam had also gotten tired and had returned to the guest bedroom to sleep. “Toot,” I said, and waited for him to extract himself from the pizza to salute me. “Did any of the Guard see where Sam - the tall guy who was here earlier - went?”

“Yeah!” Toot said. “He left a couple hours ago.”

“He just… left?” I asked. “Did you see where he went? Did you try to follow him?”

“We tried, my liege,” Toot said, folding his arms in a huff. “But he disappeared after he went out the door.”

“Disappeared?” I repeated. That was odd. The Little Folk, like most fairies, are generally pretty good at seeing through veils and illusions. And they’re better than most at tracking people who don’t want to be found.

Toot nodded. “He went out into the street and kind of stood there for a minute. Then poof!” He waved his arms. “Gone. I looked all over the block but couldn’t find him anywhere.”

“Did he do anything before he left?” I asked. “Anything strange, anything…” I stopped myself. The Winter Mantle was grumbling at the back of my mind, angry that Sam had slipped our grasp, even angrier at the possibility that he might have done something to Murphy to facilitate his escape.

“Umm…” Toot said. “Hang on. I was outside, but Kernel Redpetal was in here.” He turned and bellowed at the cloud of light swarming the table, “Kernel Redpetal! Get over here and tell the Za Winter Knight Lord what you saw!”
Redpetal turned out to be a tiny dewdrop fairy, maybe three or four inches tall with a pink aura and a cotton fluff of pink hair on her head. She wore a plastic breastplate made from one of those cupholder-sized mint containers, and strapped to her back was the orange plastic box cutter that marked her as a member of the Guard. She saluted by smacking herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand, her wings buzzing like a dragonfly’s as she hovered in front of me. “Sir Za Winter Knight Lord!” she barked in a tiny high voice.

“Colonel Redpetal,” I answered solemnly. “You saw Sam before he left the house?”

“Yes, my liege!” she said. “He was sitting over there—” she pointed at the chair opposite the couch in the living room—“looking at the computer. Then the lady warrior fell asleep, and the Dread Beast jumped up on her lap and started hissing.” She shivered.

“Hissing at Sam?” I said.

“No,” Redpetal said. “I thought he was hissing at me, so I hid in the bookshelf, but the Dread Beast kept hissing like there was someone else in the room. And then the cold man got… weird.”

“Weird?” I repeated. “Weird how?”

“Really weird,” she said. “He went like this—” Her body suddenly twisted, back arcing and hands curling into claws like she was having some kind of seizure, every muscle in her body straining in agony. She held the pose for a second or two, then untwisted and added, “He was making sounds, too. Weird ones.”

“Like?”

Redpetal shrugged. “Oh-oh-oh, mostly. I think maybe he was trying to say actual words, but it wasn’t working. But then he stopped, and then he put the computer down and left.”

“Just like that?” I said. “He went from seizing to just walking out the door?”

“Yes,” Redpetal said. “Weeeeeeird. Can I go back to the pizza?”

“I take it you have no idea what that was all about either?” Murphy asked dryly. She’d retrieved a couple cans of Coke from the fridge while I was talking to Redpetal, and now she handed one to me. “I can practically see the gears spinning in that thick skull of yours,” Murphy said dryly. She’d retrieved a couple cans of Coke from the fridge while I was talking to Redpetal, and now she handed one to me. “I take it you have no idea what that was all about either?”

“None,” I admitted. “We need to find Sam.”

“No kidding,” Murphy agreed. She took a swig from her own Coke, looking considerably more awake. “If he’s on foot, he can’t have gone too far.”

“If he’s on foot,” I echoed. I headed down the hall to the spare bedroom, Murphy crutching along behind me. “Vadderung said not to assume he plays by our rules. His little disappearing act might be
“What else did Vadderung say?” Murphy asked.

I gave her the rundown, and in turn she told me about Sam claiming to have started and stopped the Apocalypse. That was interesting, for sure. I’ve averted a minor apocalypse or two in my time - most notably last year when I kept a corrupted fairy queen from exploding a magic nuke over all the Midwest, and about ten years ago when I stopped Nicodemus and his crew of Denarians from releasing a plague to spread from Chicago’s transit hubs to the rest of the world. But the capital-A Apocalypse, complete with angels and demons fighting a war over humanity, was something else entirely. If Sam was kicking around in that weight class, I’d have to be even more careful when dealing with him.

But before I could deal with him, I had to find him. To find him I needed a tracking spell, and to do a tracking spell, you need some connection to the person you’re tracking. Hair’s a pretty common choice, and I was hoping that Sam had left a few behind on the bed or pillow. But the only strand of hair I found was short enough and light enough that I couldn’t be sure it wasn’t Murphy’s. Either I was unlucky, or Sam was savvy enough to have cleaned up after himself.

Then I spotted the crumpled white bandage in the little trash bin next to the bed. I pulled it out of the bin and unfolded it, revealing a still-gleaming patch of blood from the cut on Sam’s elbow. Bingo.

At least in our reality, anyone who knows anything about magic knows not to leave their blood lying around. Blood is a powerful connection to a person, and if a wizard has your blood there’s nothing he can’t do to you, nowhere you can hide. It has to be fresh, not dried, which makes it harder to use - but the bandage being crumpled meant that Sam’s blood hadn’t quite dried yet. It could have been a plant, I guess, deliberately left behind for me to find, but if Sam hadn’t known about soulgazes or the Laws of Magic, maybe he didn’t know about blood magic, either.

I pulled a piece of chalk from the pocket of my duster and knelt on the floor. Murphy perched on the edge of the bed, watching me as I began to set up the locating spell. It’s an easy spell, one I’ve done dozens or scores of times. I started by drawing a circle around myself with the chalk, then willing it closed with a touch of magic. I felt the shift in energies around me as the circle snapped in place, focusing the magic inside and blocking outside influences that might skew the spell. I pulled my mother’s amulet from my neck and smeared a little of the blood from the bandage onto the pentacle.

Then I gathered my will, the energy focused by the circle into an almost tangible presence around me, and whispered, “Interessari, interressarium.” I pushed the magic gently into the pentacle and the blood smeared across it. Finally, I broke the chalk circle with a brush of my fingers and a touch of will. I felt the magic rush out, and the amulet began pulling to one side, like it was being drawn by a magnet.

“Gotcha,” I whispered.

“Be careful,” Murphy said. She hauled herself up from the bed and followed me through the house to the front door. “We don’t know what happened or why he ran. He probably won’t be happy about you finding him.”

“You be careful, too,” I said. “Whatever it was that spooked Mister and maybe attacked Sam could come back. The Guard’s here, but if it’s a ghost—”

“I know,” Murphy said. “I’ll figure it out.” She reached up with her good hand, grabbed the lapel of my jacket, and pulled me down to her eye level. “Hurry up and fix this thing, Dresden. You promised me a weekend of bad TV and ice cream.”
“Never let it be said that Harry Dresden backs out of a promise,” I answered. My stomach fluttered again, but not from nerves this time. Karrin was very close; I could smell her shampoo, feel her breath against my lips...

She let go of me with a little shove toward the door. “Then get a move on,” she said, and gave me a wry smile.

I smiled back, suddenly glad that my duster had fallen closed in front. I’d really missed Karrin. “I’m going, I’m going,” I said.

And once again I headed out into the night, following my mother’s amulet with Sam’s blood on it to find the freaky psychic Apocalypse-starting guy from an alternate reality.
Pool Hall Sam

Chapter Summary

In which pool is hustled and Harry abuses *The Princess Bride* quotes.

Chapter Notes

If you've ever driven a Caprice, you'll understand Harry's pain.

**Harry**

With the tracking spell on my pentacle amulet guiding me, I spent the next hour and change driving around Chicago triangulating. I probably could’ve done it faster, but the Caprice was a lot bigger than my old, beloved, and thoroughly destroyed VW Beetle, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to hit something every time I so much as adjusted the steering wheel by half an inch. Finally, though, I managed to zero in on a small bar on the edge of town.

I parked in a ragged gravel lot across the street, locked the car, and headed inside, studying the bar as I walked. It was an odd place to find a runaway psychic: too seedy to be respectable, too respectable to be seedy - the kind of place middle managers went to feel like they were slumming it and rubbing elbows with a “dangerous” crowd. It was also surprisingly busy for being well past two AM on a weeknight. The small strip of parking in front of the bar was completely full and the lot where I’d parked was far from empty, too. When I pulled open the door, I was greeted with a haze of smoke-filled air, and loud music and louder voices laughing and cheering.

It didn’t take me long to spot the reason for the party-like atmosphere: a pool table at the back of the bar. Most of the patrons were gathered around it, drinks in hand, watching a match with, judging by the stack of bills on one corner of the table, three-figure stakes. One of the players was a short guy with a bald head, pacing back and forth along the side of the table with his cue stick and trading jokes with several of the spectators. He looked to be in a good mood, and when his opponent straightened up from missing an easy shot into a corner pocket, I could see why.

The second player was Sam Winchester, obviously wasted and just as obviously trying to hide it. His battered canvas jacket was missing, his plaid shirt partially unbuttoned to reveal his white undershirt. His hair was mussed and his eyes were a little too wide from trying to focus, making him look like an oversized puppy. He moved with slow, exaggerated care, shrugging and grinning ruefully when someone teased him about missing such an easy shot. Another guy clapped him on the shoulder and Sam staggered a little before catching himself and taking a swig from a bottle he held.

He didn’t appear to have noticed me yet, and I was more than a little curious why Sam had come here, of all places, after leaving Murphy’s. Besides, you can tell a lot about a person by how they act when they think you’re not watching, and Vadderung had warned me that I couldn’t assume anything about Sam. I might be able to get a better idea of what he was capable of if I could see what he got up to when he thought the scary wizard wasn’t around. I found a seat at the edge of the crowd...
where I wouldn’t be easily spotted, and settled in to watch.

Cueball - hey, don’t judge me, what else do you call a bald guy playing pool? - sank two stripes before missing a third, trickier shot. He gestured magnanimously at the table and Sam took his turn, only to miss another easy shot by a hair. Sam was behind by three balls, and Cueball didn’t waste time sinking his last stripe and then the eight ball. The crowd erupted into cheers - clearly Cueball was popular with the regulars. Sam just looked disappointed, fingering his wallet and accepting a glass of something rich and golden from one of the spectators.

His expression didn’t go unnoticed by Cueball. “Hey!” he called over the babble of the crowd to Sam. “Good playing, man.”

“Woulda been better if I’d’ve won,” Sam answered. He spoke carefully but his words were still a little blurry around the edges. “Don’t have much left to take home.”

Cueball’s eyes gleamed and his smile turned sharkish. “Well, if you’ve got some left, you can always play again. Whaddya say?” He held up the stack of bills he’d just won. “All in, one last round?”

Sam hesitated, his eyes fixed on the money. Several other guys called out encouragement, egging him to take the bet, and Cueball waved the cash around a little, apparently just to watch Sam’s eyes follow it. I debated interfering - it wouldn’t be right to just sit here while a third-rate pool shark fleeced the guy for everything he had - but before I could do anything, Sam nodded decisively, pulled a couple more twenties out of his wallet, and slapped them on the pool table.

The crowd erupted in whoops and cheers, clearly excited to watch their hero win another one-sided match. Cueball dropped his own cash on top of Sam’s bills, then set about racking the balls. He gestured for Sam to break with a big, generous smile; Sam did so, though he barely managed to separate the rack.

Cueball’s first shot sank a solid, but the bad break left him with no other clear shots, so he settled for giving himself an opening and ceding the table to Sam. He looked pleased with himself, probably buoyed by his friends’ support and Sam’s poor performance earlier. But as the game went on, I started to think that maybe he shouldn’t have been so confident.

See, I’m a private investigator by trade, even if lately I don’t have an office. And a big part of a PI’s job is to watch people. You learn to look for tells, for little mannerisms and expressions that give away what someone’s really thinking or planning. And the more I watched Sam, the more sure I got that Cueball wasn’t the only shark in the room.

Sam still looked, sounded, and acted drunk off his ass - yet somehow he stayed neck and neck with Cueball. He missed a lot of easy shots, and most of the ones he sank looked like total accidents. But almost every shot he made left the table in a terrible layout for Cueball, so that the guy had to sometimes spend an entire turn doing nothing but clearing himself a path, only for Sam to scatter the balls all over the place again with his next shot.

Twenty minutes later, the tension in the room was practically tangible. The spectators had settled into a breathless, watchful silence, broken only by the occasional murmurs of a drink order being placed or a bet being made or modified - more than a few, I thought, in favor of Sam. Cueball’s face had settled into a permanent scowl of concentration, while Sam swayed and leaned on the table, blinking rapidly in an apparent attempt to make himself focus. I think I was the only one who noticed the way his eyes darted around the table, gauging angles and layouts and shots.

Cueball finally managed to get one up on Sam, sinking his last solid and taking aim at the eight ball. But the positioning was bad and his attempt into a side pocket missed, and a quiet mutter went
around the room. All Sam had to do to win was sink his own last ball and then the eight. Sam paced slowly around the edge of the table, setting up a couple shots before changing his mind at the last minute and moving on. Finally he took a shot - only to slip and barely graze the cue ball. It drifted an inch or so, and the crowd was too busy gasping in dread or laughing in relief to notice that that tiny movement had been just enough to completely ruin Cueball’s only viable shot on the eight.

Cueball noticed, though, his beady eyes narrowing and his hands tightening on his stick. He circled the table, trying to find any possible angle for a shot before finally turning to glare at Sam. Sam, though, was taking a swig from his beer bottle, and didn’t appear to notice. Finally Cueball took a shot, but couldn’t get around Sam’s remaining stripe. Unfortunately for him, the missed shot set up nicely for Sam to pocket that stripe, which he did despite a wobble in his hands that nearly cost him the shot.

Which meant Sam had a chance to sink the eight.

The whole room fell silent as Sam leaned over the table. His hands still shook, and a couple big guys in cheap leather jackets stood a little too close behind him, hampering his movement as he tried to line up the shot. I saw a few people in the crowd start to protest, only to be hushed by others with a glance at Cueball. Interesting - the little shark had big friends, and wasn’t afraid to use them.

Sam ignored them all, narrowing his eyes. “Side pocket,” he announced into the quiet, tilting his head to indicate it. A murmur raced around the room - that wasn’t an easy shot by any means, and with the way Sam had been playing so far, it was pretty obvious no one thought he could make it. He took a deep breath and tossed his hair out of his eyes.

The shot was perfect, the cue ball clacking as it struck the eight and sent it ricocheting off the sides of the table, one-two, and neatly into the side pocket. The entire bar erupted in hoots and shouts of disbelief, joy, and anger. Sam threw his hands into the air in delight - and the two guys who’d been crowding him had to step back real quick or risk a pool cue in the eye. Grinning wide and delighted, Sam scooped the cash off the table, ignoring Cueball where he stood motionless in apparent shock.

But I could see the wheels turning under Cueball’s bald pate, saw his eyes narrow as he turned to look up at Sam again. I decided that was my cue - heh, heh - to intervene. Whether or not Sam had actually just hustled the guy, I didn’t feel like extracting him from a bar fight. I elbowed my way through the crowd to Sam’s side and draped an arm around his shoulders, all buddy-buddy. I felt the tension in his body when I first touched him, gone an instant later when he recognized me. He didn’t seem at all surprised by my sudden appearance in the bar. Either he’d spotted me earlier, or he was just that good at acting.

“There you are,” I said to him, my voice bright and cheerful. To the men standing around him, I added, “Thanks for babysitting my brother, but it’s way past his bedtime and I should get him home before he gets himself into trouble.”

“Hey!” Sam protested, still sounding drunk. “I won! That’s not trouble.”

“Sure it’s not,” I said. “Now—”

“You’re his brother?” Cueball interrupted, skepticism thick in his voice. His two big friends stood behind him with their arms folded like they were trying to win an award for America’s Top Minion. If they’d had goggles and overalls they could have been Stuart and Dave.

“Told you I had one,” Sam slurred. He reached for his jacket where it hung off the back of a chair, overbalanced, and bounced off my shoulder before finding his feet again. I kept half an eye on him as he pulled the jacket on. I’d been certain he was faking drunk, but that had been a pretty damn
convincing fall, and this close I could smell the beer on his breath.

Cueball still looked suspicious, though, so I had to keep up the act. “And I told you not to stay late at
the bar,” I said to Sam. “Let’s go.” I hustled him toward the door, ignoring Cueball’s glare. Most of
the crowd was distracted cashing in on bets or packing up to finally head home, and no one else tried
to stop us.

The chilly night air was a relief after the smoky, overheated haze of the bar, and I took a deep breath
as the door thumped closed behind us. As soon as it did, Sam pulled away from me, straightening
and shaking his shoulders like he was shrugging off the alcohol. Just like that, the drunk act was
gone, and he stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and gave me a sheepish look from under his
bangs. “Thanks,” he said. “They were about to get ugly.”

“Most of ‘em were already ugly,” I said. He blinked, then flashed a quick little smile. It was
endearing, more of that overgrown puppy thing he’d been doing in the bar. Still, now that I’d seen
how good an actor he was, I couldn’t help but wonder if that wasn’t just another act, if there was any
truth to any of his expressions.

At least he didn’t seem inclined to try to run off again, though even that was suspect. He’d run from
Murphy’s place, and I found it seriously difficult to believe that he’d just let me drag him back
without a fight.

“So, what,” I asked as we crossed the street to the lot where I’d left my car. “You sneak out of
Murphy’s place to hustle pool in a crummy wannabe biker bar?”

He shrugged, looked away. “I only had sixty bucks on me. Spell ingredients cost money. So do
hotels. And food.”

“Okay,” I said. “But you wouldn’t have needed to pay for any of those if you’d stayed with us.”

He darted a glance at me, his eyes dark in the shadows of the streetlights, and I could see his tongue
working behind his teeth for a minute before he said tiredly, “I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt
because of me.”

“Is this about—” I started.

The bar door slammed open behind us and a voice shouted, “Hey! Asshole!”

Cueball ignored me. “I knew it!” he shouted at Sam. “You cheated! You weren’t drunk at all. You
hustled me!”

Sam’s expression flattened into annoyance for a second before going neutral. We both turned
around. Cueball stormed toward us, his minions Stuart and Dave trailing behind him along with two
more skinny young guys in Hot Topic punk getups. They came to a stop in a semicircle facing Sam
and me, with Cueball in the middle.

“Sorry, fellas,” I drawled. “Our mom called, it’s time to go home.”

Cueball ignored me. “I knew it!” he shouted at Sam. “You cheated! You weren’t drunk at all. You
hustled me!”

Sam lifted his eyebrows, his face a picture of skepticism, the dark weariness of a moment before
vanished. “You made the bets,” he said calmly. “You challenged me.”

“You cheated!” Cueball shouted. “Nobody hustles in my bar!”

“Except you,” I said innocently. “Or was that regular ‘trying to swindle a drunk guy’ scamming?”
Cueball turned his glare on me, though I was more interested in how Sam shifted a little to put himself between me and Cueball when he did. A protective gesture, which probably would have been more effective if I wasn’t several inches taller than him. And, y’know, if I wasn’t also the Winter Knight and a Warden of the White Council, but no one else here knew those parts. Still, it said something about him that his first instinct was to shield me.

The movement was enough to draw Cueball’s attention back to Sam. In a voice that was trying for Harry Callahan but only managed Vizzini, he said, “You owe me six hundred bucks. Hand it over and we walk away friendly.”

“Or what?” I asked. “You’ll challenge us to a battle of wits? Sorry, I left my iocane powder at home.”

I couldn’t see Sam’s face very well from this angle, but I still caught his brief skyward glance, the exasperated press of his lips. Cueball and his minions just looked confused. Nobody appreciates my jokes, I swear.

Cueball recovered, though, and reached under his jacket to produce a—Hell’s bells, the guy actually drew a gun, a big ugly Glock. “Or we don’t walk away friendly,” he snarled. He leveled the gun at Sam’s chest.

“Whoa,” I said. “That’s a little extreme for six hundred bucks, don’t you think?” But even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t about the money. Until now, Cueball had been the biggest fish in this tiny little pond, had been playing at being a shark. But then Sam came along, not only showing all the other fish what a real shark looked like, but hustling Cueball himself. He needed this little display, needed Sam to run away scared so that he could go back to being the big fish.

Sam, though, didn’t look at all bothered by the gun pointed at his heart. In fact, he looked almost bored. I saw Hot Topics One and Two trade an uneasy glance over Cueball’s head; they were apparently smart enough to know that something was wrong. “I don’t owe you anything,” Sam said calmly. “You made the bet. Your choice.”

“You lied,” Cueball spat. “You cheated.” He stepped forward, the gun making him fearless, pushing it closer to Sam’s chest. “Hand over the money. Now.”

I raised both my hands, trying to appear nonthreatening, and took a careful step to the side, out from behind Sam. “Look, man, put the gun away. You don’t need—”

“Shut up!” Cueball snapped. “I don’t care about you, just your cheater brother here.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I didn’t cheat,” he said. “And I don’t owe you anything.” He still looked bored, but he’d shifted his weight again, the same way he’d done back on Demonreach when he’d thought I was about to attack him. Vadderung’s warning was still ringing in my mind, and I had no idea how Sam felt about killing vanilla mortals the way he’d killed the demons on the dock. From what Murphy had told me of their conversation, it sounded like he didn’t like seeing innocents die, but he might not consider a guy pointing a gun at him to be innocent.

I needed to get Cueball’s attention - and the gun - on me. I could put up a shield to stop a bullet if he decided to shoot, and it might keep Sam from feeling threatened enough to act in a way that would end with a dead body. I took another step to the side, away from Sam. “Look,” I said to Cueball. “Just put the gun away and let’s call it a night, okay?”

“I said shut up!” Cueball screamed. He pivoted, the gun swinging around toward me. “If you’re so damn worried about your kid brother, why don’t you pay—”
Sam took the gun away from him.

It was that fast, and that simple. Nothing superhuman about it - I’d seen Murphy do a similar move on the aikido training mat - but it did require an incredible amount of skill to pull off safely and cleanly. Sam had done it in the split second that the gun was pointed between him and me, when if it had gone off it was less likely to hit either of us.

Cueball stared at his hand, trying to figure out what had just happened. The two Hot Topic punks traded another nervous glance, realizing they might be outclassed. Stuart and Dave furrowed their brows in unison. Maybe they shared the same four brain cells, though that clearly wasn’t enough to understand how much danger they were in. Sam just waited patiently, then when Cueball finally looked up at him, he popped the clip from the gun and racked the slide twice with brisk efficiency to eject the chambered round.

“Hey!” Cueball yelped, then, “Hey!” as Sam tossed the clip into the ditch on the side of the parking lot, then pivoted and hurled the empty gun in the opposite direction. “That’s my gun, you asshole!”

“First rule of gun safety,” Sam said coolly. “Don’t point it at something you aren’t about to kill.” He turned, weariness in the set of his shoulders, and started to walk away.

Cueball went purple with rage from his collar to the top of his bald head. He pointed a stubby finger at Sam and howled to his minions, “GET HIM!”

O-kay, then.
Truth, Lies, and Consequences

Chapter Summary

In which Sam shows restraint, Cueball learns that there are consequences to picking on dangerous people, and Harry gets annoyed at the lack of inter-reality rule consistency.

Chapter Notes

Yikes! Sorry it's been so long since my last update - moving house and traveling to France don't leave much time for writing! But I should be back on schedule now.

On a side note, SPN 11.09 has certainly changed how I see a few things. I've got a few new ideas, as well as thoughts on how to modify some older ones. Fortunately, I said at the beginning that this story is AU for Supernatural after 10.18 "Book of the Damned", so I'm not too worried about perfectly matching everything that's happening in canon right now...}:

Harry

The thing about fights is, they happen fast. Movies like to draw out the fight scenes, but that’s so the audience can tell what’s going on. In real life, you’ve got a bunch of people all moving at once in a relatively small space, and you don’t have time to sit and think about what you’re going to do.

Stuart the minion came after me, big hands reaching out to grab my arms. He probably intended to just knock me down and sit on me while his buddies roughed Sam up. He wasn’t expecting me to grab his wrist, pivot my feet, and use my hip as a fulcrum to slam him face-first into the ground. I kept hold of his wrist, twisting his arm up and back in a way that meant he couldn’t get up without dislocating his own shoulder.

Murphy’s a good teacher.

Meanwhile, Dave and the Hot Topics had gone after Sam. He didn’t have any fancy martial arts moves to handle them, but he didn’t need any. Sam was apparently a straight-up brawler, and a good one at that, using his size and reach to his advantage. He bobbed around a punch from Dave, landed a punch of his own in Hot Topic One’s gut that folded the guy, then jumped backward to avoid a knife drawn by Hot Topic Two. A quick step, a crunch of bone, and then Hot Topic Two was on the ground screaming with a broken arm, and the knife was in Sam’s hand.

My heart skipped a beat, but if I let go of Stuart he might get up and try to rejoin the fight. So instead I gathered my will, preparing a spell in case Sam tried to use the knife on his remaining two attackers. I still had no real idea what he was capable of or whether he’d try to kill these idiots, and I didn’t want this little tussle to turn into a murder investigation.

Dave recovered from his missed punch and lunged at Sam from behind. He managed to wrap his
arms around him, pinning Sam’s arms - and the knife - to his sides. Hot Topic One pulled a knife of his own and slashed at Sam’s face - but Sam shoved backward, letting Dave’s grip on his chest support his weight long enough to plant both his feet in Hot Topic One’s chest and kick hard. The little guy went flying and landed on the pavement some fifteen feet away with a sharp crack. Dave, who hadn’t expected to suddenly be carrying Sam, staggered, which was enough for Sam to elbow free and topple him with a swift haymaker to the side of the head.

The whole thing had taken maybe six seconds.

Cueball stared at his minions sprawled groaning on the ground around him, then slowly lifted his gaze to where Sam stood, chest heaving from exertion, knife still in hand. Sam’s expression had gone cold and hard and deadly, and he stood with his feet spread, hands out to the sides, his fingers re-settling along the grip of the knife. He looked a lot bigger and a lot scarier than he had a minute ago. “We done?” he asked Cueball in a voice that was carefully level.

Cueball nod-nod-nodded. His eyes were huge and all the rage had drained from his face. He scurried back toward the bar, leaving his minions behind. I let go of Stuart, and he rolled warily away from me and pushed to his feet. He dragged a wobbling Dave upright, then they collected the Hot Topics and half-carried them after Cueball into the bar.

Sam watched them go, and I could almost see him pulling back, packing the cold deadly fighter away until finally he shook himself, his mouth settling into a thin tired line. Suddenly he was just Sam again, his expression sad, the set of his shoulders weary. He closed the knife he’d taken from the Hot Topic and tucked it neatly into a pocket. Something - a sound I hadn’t heard, maybe - made him look up past me toward the bar, though his gaze was focused on the middle distance. He flinched, then swallowed hard and turned away, digging his thumb into his palm and hunching his shoulders.

“Sam,” I called, quietly. He was clearly on edge, and I didn’t want to spook him.

He met my eyes, and again I saw exhaustion and despair in his gaze before I looked away. I was starting to think that he was right about it being a bad idea to soulgaze him. I hooked a thumb toward my car and said, “Let’s go.”

---

Sam

Sam stared at Dresden for a minute. Lucifer, standing a little to Dresden’s left, smirked, his expression clearly saying, go ahead, Sammy, do it. Go back with the wizard. What could possibly go wrong?

“No,” Sam said, and his voice came out tired. “I told you, people get hurt because of me.” He looked back toward the bar again, the memory of breaking the knife-wielding thug’s arm (of Lucifer leaning over Karrin Murphy) still fresh. He clenched his fists, trying not to feel the snap of bone against his palms (feel Grace whispering through his body).

“Those losers?” Dresden said incredulously. “Sam, they jumped you. You defended yourself. You could have hurt them a lot worse than you did.”

“He’s right,” Lucifer said. “You didn’t even kill any of them. You’re practically a saint, Sammy.”

Sam tore his gaze away from Lucifer, back to Dresden, whose eyes had narrowed slightly. Crap. Sam really needed to be more careful about interacting with Lucifer. Needed to be more careful
about everything. “I fucked up,” he said, and couldn’t quite stop the bitterness in his voice. “He shouldn’t have even realized I was hustling.”

(A memory of Dean’s voice, rough with pain from injections of blessed blood: “There ain’t much difference between what I turned into and what you already are.”)

Dresden’s turn to stare at Sam, his expression baffled. Finally he shook his head. “Look, man, you’re a damn good actor. You almost had me convinced. Cueball would’ve gone after you whether you were hustling or not.” It took Sam a second to realize who Dresden meant; his confusion must have shown on his face because Dresden said, “What? You can’t tell me you didn’t look at him and think ‘Cueball’.”

“Actually, he, uh, he goes by Scratch,” Sam said. The guy had introduced himself when Sam had first wandered over to the pool table, beer in hand and a faked drunken swagger in his step.

Dresden’s eyebrows shot up. “Scratch? Seriously?” He shook his head. “Come on, Cueball is way better than Scratch.”

It was almost enough to make Sam smile. Lucifer looked amused, too, hooking his thumbs into his jean pockets and leaning back a little to look all the way up at Dresden. “I like this one,” he announced. Which was chilling enough that the faint thread of humor died and Sam looked away, swallowing hard.

Apparently Dresden read that as more angst, because he said, “Sam. Nobody got hurt because of you. They got hurt because they take orders from a puffed-up idiot.”

Sam shook his head. Lucifer was still laughing quietly to himself, and Sam was so damn tired. “Fine,” he said. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Dresden eyed him for a minute, clearly trying to decide how to take that; finally he shrugged and waved Sam over to a battered old Caprice that had probably once been gold and now looked even worse than Castiel’s crapmobile. Sam climbed into the passenger seat and settled into a slouch against the door. Dean would have given him a hard time for sulking, but Dresden just stuck the key in the ignition and twisted until the engine’s unhappy cough changed to a putter and they rolled out of the parking lot.

It was after three AM, and the streets of the city were as quiet as they ever got. Dresden drove slowly, either because driving like a grandma was normal for him or because he wanted to delay their arrival at Murphy’s place. Sam wasn’t actually sure how far away they were; when he’d followed Lucifer out of Murphy’s house onto the street hours ago, Lucifer had turned around with a big grin and spread his hands.

So where to, Sammy? he’d asked, like Sam had been the one to propose a midnight jaunt through the city.

Still shaken and sick from Lucifer tearing furrows in his soul, Sam had gone with the default answer for a hunter with spare time on his hands: We need money, he thought to Lucifer. He hadn’t been sure he’d be able to speak out loud, not yet, not without screaming. A bar, maybe, or—

That had been enough for Lucifer. There’d been a flutter of wings and a rush of cold air, then Sam had found himself standing outside a run-down but bustling pub. Lucifer had held the door open for him: Let’s make a little mischief, shall we? and Sam hadn’t had the strength to refuse. Besides, Lucifer had seemed to enjoy watching Sam hustle, and the part of Sam that remembered the Cage remembered how important it was to keep Lucifer happy.

At least he didn’t seem to mind going back with Dresden, though Sam had the sinking feeling it was
because Lucifer was still interested in those holy knights and was hoping to find out more. Not that Sam had any idea why Lucifer cared, since it seemed unlikely that the devil would be able to get anywhere near a holy sword—

“So,” Dresden said, startling Sam out of his thoughts. “This little freakout about hurting people. It have anything to do with you seizing at Murphy’s earlier?”

Sam blinked, too surprised to come up with a smooth lie. “How’d you—”

“A little fairy told me,” Dresden deadpanned. Lucifer, sitting in the back where he could kick the back of Sam’s seat over and over, said *huh* in a tone that implied he’d just realized something.

But Sam couldn’t exactly ask him, not with Dresden right there, so he settled for raising an eyebrow at Dresden. Dresden raised his own eyebrow right back, his expression clearly conveying that that was all he planned to say on the matter. Sam sighed and looked away, out the window at the darkened streets. “Sort of,” he admitted. “It’s… It’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” Dresden repeated, his voice dry. “I don’t get it. You could lie like a rug back in that bar, but when you’re actually trying to hide something you couldn’t convince a tiger it has stripes. ‘Complicated’ is the best you can do?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’ve been hustling since I was a kid. That’s easy.” He caught Dresden’s sharp glance in the reflection in the window and added, “Hunting doesn’t exactly come with a salary. It’s pretty much that or credit card scams.”

“You’ve been hunting monsters since you were a kid?” Dresden asked.

“The family business,” Sam said, his voice bitter enough that Dresden actually winced.

“Sounds like a harsh life for a kid,” Dresden said quietly.

Sam shrugged one shoulder, keeping his gaze fixed firmly out the window, his jaw clenched so hard it was making his neck hurt. From the corner of his eye he could see Lucifer watching him with something almost gentle in his eyes. *Harsh* was one word for it, sure. One word out of many that added up to *freak, failure, monster*.

Dresden drew in a breath, about to speak. Sam cut him off, not caring about subtlety, not caring about much except not talking about the past anymore: “How’d you find me, anyway?”

“Wizard,” I said, and waggled my eyebrows pointedly. It was clear Sam was trying to change the subject, and I figured I’d let him. I’d touched a nerve, and while I’m all for verbally poking at my enemies until they snap, I didn’t think Sam was an enemy, exactly. But I still wasn’t sure he was a friend, either.

“How’d you find me, anyway?” Sam asked.

“I—What?” I said. “No, just a basic tracking spell. Thaumaturgy 101. It was easy - you left some blood in Murphy’s house.”

Sam’s brow furrowed and he turned from the window to squint at me. “What does blood have to do with it?”
“What does—” I frowned back at him, baffled. Vadderung’s warning, He won’t necessarily operate by the same rules as we do, rang again in my head. “Do you know what thaumaturgy is?”

“It’s another word for spellcasting,” Sam said. “From the Greek for ‘miracle working’.”

“Close,” I said. “Thaumaturgy is a particular branch of magic, one that’s all about connections. You’ve heard ‘as above, so below’?” Sam nodded, and I continued, my voice taking on the lecturing tone I used to use when teaching Molly, “Thaumaturgy is the art of creating magical links between objects or people. A practitioner uses something as a connection to the target of their spell. The more personal the connecting object, the more powerful the connection. Hair’s good, and common, but blood is best. A wizard gets your blood, he can do just about anything to you from just about any distance.”

“Huh,” Sam said. He seemed to consider that for a few seconds, then gave a little shrug. “I’ve never heard of blood being a big deal for witches. Usually they just use hex bags.”

“Hex what?”

“Hex bags,” Sam said, and made a vague gesture with one hand. “Witches target their victims by putting hex bags on or near them. Or you can make protective hex bags that shield you from demons or other witches.”

“Hell’s bells,” I grumbled. “How does magic even work in your reality? Next you’re going to tell me that Names don’t have any power.”

He was frowning at me again, and I had my mouth open to tell him that if that was true, I didn’t want to know, when a brilliant red light flashed directly in front of the windshield. I stomped on the brakes, and from the corner of my eye I saw Sam brace himself against the dashboard to avoid going headfirst through the windshield. I was already forming a shield in front of the car, Mab’s defensive training and my own experience kicking in, when I recognized the light. Toot had intercepted me once before like that, though this aura was too small to be him.

I scrabbled for the crank to roll down the window. The light darted inside the car as soon as there was a gap, moving almost too fast to follow, and came to a stop directly in front of my face. This close, I could just make out the tiny female figure inside the light: Colonel Redpetal, the little fairy who’d told me about Sam seizing back at Murphy’s place.

“Demons, my lord!” she cried, her voice high and terrified. “Demons lay siege to the lady warrior’s home!”
The Wizard and the Demons

Chapter Summary

In which some things explode, other things are stabbed, and still more things are set on fire.

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays! Have a chapter. Though it's not exactly nice and Christmasy, what with all the explosions. Then again, with Harry Dresden involved, even Christmas might end up involving explosions... ;)

Sam

Apparently, the reason Dresden had been driving so slowly was because he had no idea how to drive a car the size of the Caprice. He was trying frantically to race through the streets back to Murphy’s place, but kept having to brake and maneuver awkwardly to turn corners and dodge traffic. It was taking everything Sam had to not just shove over and take the wheel himself.

The fairy - because of course there were fairies in this reality, and of course Dresden was some kind of fairy lord - had darted away again. Dresden had told her to “tell Toot we’re on our way”, and she’d been gone almost before Sam had a chance to process what she was and what she’d said. Dresden’s face had settled into a stormy scowl and he hunched over the steering wheel as if that would make the car go faster, though Sam could hear a rattle in the engine that didn’t bode well for its continued functioning.

Sam desperately wanted to ask questions, but now was definitely not the time. What mattered was that Murphy was in danger. He’d failed to protect her from Lucifer, but maybe he could help protect her from demons (tried to ignore the voice in his head, the one that sounded like Azazel, like Ruby, like Dean’s demon-rough growl, that whispered, she wouldn’t be in danger at all if you’d stayed put like they told you to).

Lucifer, at least, wasn’t saying anything. Sam couldn’t turn around to look at him without opening himself up to a bunch of awkward questions from Dresden, but he could still feel Lucifer’s concentration in the back of his mind. He didn’t know whether Lucifer was planning on doing anything himself, or was just getting ready to ride along while Sam fought; was almost tempted to ask if he could just fly them there to spare them more of Dresden’s awkward-barge driving. Fortunately for all of them, it wasn’t much more than three or four minutes later that the Caprice turned onto Murphy’s street.

Just in time for an explosion to rattle the whole block.

Harry
I spat out a curse as smoke billowed out from Murphy’s yard. Through it, I could make out several long-limbed, silvery figures surrounding the house - more of the demons from earlier. Brilliant fairy lights darted and swarmed around them, but the demons seemed to be standing their ground. I couldn’t see the house itself, but from the size of the blast and the smoke, I guessed someone had chucked a grenade onto Murphy’s front porch.

My blood ran cold. Karrin was in there, alone except for the Guard. I had no idea if she’d had enough time - or, given her injuries, enough maneuverability - to take cover from the blast. Then I heard a burst of machine-gun fire from within the house, followed almost instantly by slower, deeper handgun shots. I thought the second gun might be Murphy’s SIG, but couldn’t tell for sure. Cold fury roared through me, that the demons dared attack my friend, dared bomb her house, and suddenly I didn’t care about holding back.

I swung the stupid huge car up into Murphy’s driveway at speed, and at the last minute wrapped a shield around its nose. We rammed straight into one of the silver-skinned demons, the shield sparking with blue energy as it hit the demon and sent it flying through the air. Sam had drawn his rune-etched knife and had his free hand on the door handle, and he leaped out before we’d even stopped moving.

One of the demons sprang at Sam, but he ducked under its attack and jammed the knife up beneath its ribs, into where its heart would have been if it was human. Apparently it was close enough, because gold light flashed inside the demon’s body and it collapsed into a heap. Part of my brain took note of the fact that his knife was apparently just as capable of killing demons as his psychic powers were, but the rest of me was focused on disentangling myself from my seatbelt, wrestling my staff from the back seat where I’d left it, and scrambling out of the car.

Maybe Sam’s reality had classes on how to look badass when leaping from your car to attack. Jerks.

Another demon leaped at me, but I bellowed, “Forzare!” and swept my staff in a horizontal line. Invisible force blasted from the end of my staff, slamming into the demon and knocking it out of the air to tumble head over heels across Murphy’s lawn. The smoke from the explosion had started to clear, and now I could see the situation.

There were at least ten of the demons still on their feet, scattered around the front and sides of the house. The Za Lord’s Guard had pinned down three of them, swarms of flashing lights with boxcutters that sliced and shredded the demons’ skin. They’d already taken down at least two more - I could see the bodies slowly dissolving into puddles of ectoplasm in the driveway. People underestimate the hell out of the Little Folk, and clearly the demons had done the same, at least at first. But there’s only about a hundred fairies in the Guard, which when split across three supernaturally-tough demons turns out to be not that many. They were wearing their targets down, to be sure, darting in and out and leaving behind shallow furrows in the demons’ skin, but the demons were fighting back with their own inhuman speed and the Guard wouldn’t be able to split their focus further.

Four of the remaining demons ran toward the gaping hole in the front of Murphy’s house in long leaps, intent on getting inside. The last three had surrounded Sam, who stood with legs braced and knife in hand, eyes darting as he watched his attackers for an opening. He spotted me looking at him and jerked his head toward the house. “Go!” he yelled. “I’ve got these!”

I didn’t doubt it. Between the demon-killing knife and his psychic powers - assuming he didn’t push himself to unconsciousness again - he was at least as capable of handling them as I was. I ran for the house, right behind the demons as they clambered through the busted front wall. For the first time, I noticed that the wall had been blown outward, as if the explosion had come from inside instead of outside.
Another burst of gunfire grabbed my attention and I called a shield around me, ducking low under the broken wall for cover. Peeking over it, I could see Murphy’s living room, the easy chair thrown to one side, the couch toppled over backward. The ceiling light had been blown out by the explosion, but a table lamp had somehow survived despite being knocked to the floor, and its light cast bizarre shadows around the room. A human man, wearing Kevlar tactical gear, crouched behind the overturned chair with a machine gun in hand. A second, identically-dressed man lay on the floor near the coffee table in a spreading pool of blood. Murphy’s gun poked over the couch cushions, and even as I watched she put two bullets through the skull of one of the demons as it leaped across the room toward her.

Intense relief flooded through me. Murphy was alive and fighting. But there were still three more demons to deal with, plus the human mercenary. I’d have to be very careful - the First Law of Magic is “Thou Shalt Not Kill”, and if I used my power to kill the human I’d be in big trouble.

Fortunately, the Laws don’t apply to non-humans.

I gathered my will and flung a hand toward the demons. “Infriga!” I roared, and arctic ice howled around the nearest one, freezing it solid. Another shout - “Forzare!” - and a hammer of invisible force smashed the frozen demon into grisly silver chunks while the other two leaped back in surprise and fear.

From the corner of my eye I saw the mercenary take aim at me with his machine gun. I snapped my shield back into place just in time to catch the hail of bullets, backing away along the side of the house. The man followed my movement, the gun spitting short controlled bursts at me every other second as he leaned out from behind the chair to keep his aim on me.

The moment his head came into view, Murphy put a bullet through it. He dropped like a rock with one last flailing burst of gunfire - but the surviving two demons used the distraction to jump at Murphy behind the couch. I heard her cry out, and the relief of a second before turned to cold fury. I vaulted the broken wall into the living room in time to see one of the demons haul Murphy up from where she’d been hunkered down behind the couch. She struggled in its grip, but it was holding her by her bad arm and her face was white with pain. The demon turned to grin at me, its needle teeth flashing in the lamplight.

I bared my own teeth back at it, Winter cold howling through me and out through my fingertips. “INFRIGA!” I roared again, and a lance of ice some three feet long and two inches wide drove straight into the demon’s chest. It had a second to look surprised, red eyes widening, then its grip on Murphy loosened and it collapsed to the ground.

Murphy managed to catch herself on the couch, but her breath still left her in a pained grunt when she hit. The last demon was moving again, leaping toward me with its claws extended. I snarled, “Forzare!” and slammed it into the ground hard enough to shatter bone. It let out a wheezing cry and writhed for a few seconds, then went still. I stood glaring at it for a few seconds, breathing hard, shoving the Winter mantle back down inside myself and packing it away until I could talk without snarling.

“Harry,” Murphy groaned from the couch. I hurried over to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and helping her ease into a sitting position. Her face was still pale, but she hadn’t let go of her gun. Somewhere in the distance, sirens wailed - someone must have heard the commotion and called the police. “We were supposed to watch bad TV,” Murphy griped, “not be in bad TV.”

I managed a smile. “You all right?”
She nodded. “Toot and his crew kept them stuck outside for a while, long enough for me to flip the couch and be ready when those guys broke down the door.” She motioned with her chin toward the dead mercenaries. “They had some kind of shaped charge to take out the wall. I killed the one but not before the other one managed to set it off.”

“Letting the demons in,” I said. “Smart. The humans could cross your threshold and then blow the wall for the demons.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I—”

A high-pitched scream erupted outside, an unholy sound that raised the hair on my arms and the back of my neck. I traded a quick glance with Murphy; she settled herself against the side of the couch and raised her gun. “Go,” she said. “I’m fine.”

I nodded and went, vaulting the coffee table (parkour!) and then the remains of the outer wall to land in Murphy’s tiny front yard. The Little Folk had vanished, the demons they’d been attacking dissolving into puddles of ectoplasm on the ground. Two more demons lay dead near my car, while Sam knelt over top of the last one, pinning it down with his legs and one arm. With his other hand he twisted that little rune knife in the demon’s shoulder. It screamed again, and this time I heard Sam’s voice, low and dangerous: “I said, why did you attack Karrin Murphy?”

I strode over to him; he acknowledged me with a quick glance but then went back to glaring at the demon, tossing his hair out of his eyes with a chilling carelessness. He’d embedded the knife in the demon’s shoulder near its collarbone, not a fatal blow but definitely a painful one. I could see reddish-yellow light sparking under its skin as he twisted the knife again. “Talk!” he ordered.

The demon keened, writhing under the knife, but Sam had it pinned and it couldn’t go anywhere. Then it spotted me, and lifted one of its trapped hands as much as it could. “Wiz… ar… ” it croaked out.

I planted my staff next to its head and leaned over it, meeting its eyes. Demons don’t have souls to gaze, and I had a message to impart. “You attacked my friend,” I said. My voice was very calm and very pleasant, and laced with Winter ice. The demon’s eyes widened and it flinched. Sam, too, glanced up at me again and something flickered across his face, gone too quickly to register. I bent a little closer to the demon. “If I were you, I’d tell him what he wants to know. Because he’ll just kill you.”

“Last chance,” Sam said flatly. “Why did you attack?”

The demon’s red eyes darted between us, and a pale tongue flickered behind its teeth. It rasped, “Orders.”

“Orders?” I repeated. “Whose?”

“Master’s,” it said. Sam leaned on the knife a little and the demon gasped. “Master’s!”

The distant wail of the sirens was getting closer. Crap. I said to the demon, “What, exactly, were your orders?”

It looked between us again, but Sam’s face was calm and cool, as if torturing demons was something he did every day. I didn’t want to know what my face looked like. I could feel Winter’s cold fury pulsing in time to my heartbeat, that these demons and their “Master” would dare attack me, would dare attack Murphy. The demon’s eyes narrowed suddenly. “Kidnap the woman,” it spat. “Kill the wizard.”
It bucked its whole body hard, throwing Sam off-balance, enough that the demon tore an arm free and shoved him aside. In an instant it had lunged upward, claws wrapping around my throat and bearing me down to the ground under its bulk. The fall knocked the wind from me and I lost my grip on the staff - but the demon hadn’t pinned my hands. I slapped my palm against its shoulder and hissed, past its grip on my throat, “FUEGO.”

Fire erupted from my hand to wrap around the demon’s torso, eating into its silvery skin. It howled in pain and reared back—straight onto Sam’s knife. Yellow light flashed through its body beneath the flames, then it went limp. Sam pulled the knife free and the corpse slumped burning to the ground, flames lapping hungrily at it until there was nothing left but a smear of charred ectoplasm.
From the Mouths of Dead Men

Chapter Summary

In which the cops arrive and find a clue.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone!

As far as I know, Harry hasn't interacted with the police since Changes, and while the Gatekeeper promised to make him legally alive again, that didn't include throwing a "welcome back" party. If I'm wrong, well, we'll just pretend, eh? ;)

Harry

I rolled to my feet, stepping warily back from the charcoaled demon. Judging by the sound of the sirens in the distance, the authorities would get here in two, maybe three minutes. Sam looked at me, a question in his eyes; I shook my head. "We stay," I said. "Just in case."

His brow furrowed. "They’re cops," he said. "You’re a witch - wizard," he corrected himself at the same time I said grumpily, "Wizard." Sam made a face back at me. "They’re going to ask questions —"

"It’s Murphy’s place," I interrupted. "They’ll have sent Special Investigations. Mostly good guys, and know enough about our side of the fence to handle it right."

Sam stared at me for a few seconds, then raised his eyebrows, the corners of his mouth curling in a thoughtful frown. "Huh."

"The cops in your reality aren’t clued in?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "I mean, there’s a couple we’ve worked with, but they got involved by accident and they still call us when things get really weird. We, uh, we mostly try to stay away from the cops."

"Right," I said. "All that pool hustling and credit card scamming."

He shot me a sideways look. "Also the grave desecration, B&E, murder…"

"Murder?"

He shrugged. "Unless you know what to look for, vamps and werewolves look pretty human when they’re dead. And we’ve been framed by shapeshifters a couple times."

That raised a whole new set of questions about what those creatures were like in his reality, but we
didn’t have time for them now. “Fair enough.” I raised my voice slightly. “Toot!”

The major general came zipping out of nowhere on his blurred wings and snapped into a salute in front of me. “Here, my lord!”

Ignoring Sam, who was staring at Toot with wide-eyed fascination, I said, “You and the Guard did good work tonight. Anybody injured?”

“A few,” Toot said. “Kernels Snapdragon, Frittillary, and Beelilly got hurt the worst, but they’ll be fine in a few days.”

“Okay, good. Tell them to rest up. Then put everyone who isn’t injured back on patrol, in case any more of these chuckleheads show up.”

“Yes, my liege!” Toot snapped off another salute and buzzed off in a blur of blue light.

Sam stared at me. “‘My liege’? So you’re a... fairy lord?” The corners of his eyes crinkled as he said it, like he was trying not to crack up.

“Za Lord,” I corrected haughtily. “Short for Pizza Lord. And they’re the Za Lord’s Guard. We have an arrangement - basically, they work for me and I pay them in pizza.”

“In pizza,” Sam echoed.

“The Little Folk love pizza,” I said. “It’s a good arrangement.”

“Right.” Sam turned away to squint up the street at the approaching emergency vehicles, looking like he was struggling not to laugh. I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than Sanya accusing me of being a drug dealer.

Well, neither of them had a fairy army. They were probably just jealous.

——

Sam

——

“Fairies,” Lucifer said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I thought there were an awful lot of them buzzing around the place earlier. Even for fairies.”

Is that common? Sam thought at him, curious. For fairies to hang around like that? It was hard not to turn and look at him, but while Dresden seemed distracted watching the police cars pull up and unload a flood of cops, he’d been awfully attentive earlier and Sam didn’t want to invite any difficult questions. Especially not after how cold Dresden had been when interrogating the last demon. Sam hadn’t been a fan of cold ever since escaping the Cage - and Lucifer - the first time, and Dresden had been radiating it, both metaphorically as icy fury, and literally, chilling the air around him. It had been more than a little scary, and Sam had seen enough of what good men could do with that kind of rage that he didn’t want to invoke it against himself.

He saw Lucifer shrug out of the corner of his eye. “In our reality fairies are like cockroaches,” he said dismissively. “Colorful, twinkling cockroaches. Obnoxious, turn up in the worst places, and hard to kill.”

Sam bit back a snort. He didn’t remember much of the time he’d spent soulless, but he did have a clear image of Dean saying in disbelief, It was a little, glowing, hot naked lady, and she hit me. Though after seeing the fairies tear apart the demons, maybe it wasn’t so ridiculous.
“You can still tease Dean about it,” Lucifer said, then grinned when Sam threw him a sharp glance. “Someone - probably Mister Witch Za Lord over there - actually trained these guys some, but normally they’re about as useless as confetti.”

Well, it’s good they’re trained, or the demons probably would have got Ms. Murphy, Sam thought. He still felt guilty about that, that he’d run off instead of staying to protect her, but it wasn’t like he’d known the demons would attack her house. And anyway, how could he protect her from both the demons and Lucifer? He wasn’t even sure which was the bigger danger, at this point. He sighed and shoved down the guilt, forcing himself to pay attention to the arriving cops instead.

The first couple cars looked like patrol units, with regular beat cops piling out and staring around Murphy’s destroyed yard with wide eyes. But right behind them was an unmarked car that carried two men in cheap suits: detectives, probably. One of them was a big guy with deep black skin and frosted-white hair and beard; the other was thinner and pale, with the kind of nondescript face and build that made blending with a crowd easy. They were both staring at Dresden, who grinned when he spotted them.

“Detectives,” he said.

“Dresden,” the big man answered. “Is Murphy all right?”

“She’s fine,” Dresden said. “Got bumped around a bit, but I think she enjoyed the chance to shoot some bad guys after being in traction for two months.”

“That’s good,” the big man said. “How ‘bout you? We thought you were dead.”

“Rumors, exaggerated, etcetera,” Dresden quipped. “Good to see you, Rawlins”—with a nod to the big man, and then another to the nondescript one—“Stallings.”

“Very exaggerated, apparently,” Stallings said. “We had a murder investigation. Bullet hole, bloody crime scene, everything.”

Dresden did the eyebrow-waggle thing again. “Wizard.”

“Interesting,” Lucifer commented, stroking his chin. “Maybe that explains the marks on his soul.”

Sam frowned at Lucifer, who shrugged. “He’s never been dead, but he’s got handprints all over him. I think I recognize the one set, and if he’s hanging around it might be a problem.”

That was definitely interesting, but Sam couldn’t follow up on it just yet. The detectives had finally turned to look at him, and Dresden was saying, “This is my friend—”

“Peter Gabriel,” Sam cut in smoothly, holding out a hand. He used a bit of the “friendly Fed” voice, even though he wasn’t planning on flashing a badge - too many ways for that to go wrong - and the detectives relaxed a little.

Rawlins shook his hand and said to Dresden, “A friend of yours, huh?”

“He’s not a wizard, if that’s what you’re asking,” Dresden answered.

Sam gave the detectives his best I’m-harmless smile. “I’m just a guy,” he said.

“A guy who knows his way around a supernatural throw-down,” Stallings said dryly, turning to look at the dissolving bodies of the demons sprawled around the yard.
“I’ve dealt with a few things,” Sam admitted. Lucifer, who was making faces at the detectives, snorted.

“So what things were you guys dealing with today?” Rawlins asked.

“Demons,” Dresden answered, sobering. “A bunch of ‘em attacked, uh, Peter and me down by the docks earlier tonight, during the rainstorm. Then this bunch went after Murphy.”

“Any idea what they want?”

“None,” Dresden said. “It’s not fair - I haven’t even pissed anyone off lately.”

The detectives both looked up at him with identical sure you didn’t expressions; Sam bit his lip to swallow a laugh. From the look of it, Dresden had approximately the same reputation for attracting disaster as the Winchesters. Dresden, for his part, spread his hands in a who, me gesture. “I haven’t!” he protested. “Or at least, nobody who would send a bunch of random demons after me. The last guy I pissed off would get his revenge up close and personal.”

“Right,” Rawlins said. He and Stallings traded a speaking look. “So,” he continued. “Why don’t you and me go talk to Murphy, and your friend can tell Detective Stallings what happened.”

Dresden glanced at Sam, very clearly uneasy with the thought of leaving him alone with the cops. Sam didn’t mind, though - he could lie his way through any tricky questions, and he was curious whether he could get Stallings to talk more about Dresden’s apparent murder. “Sure,” he said. Dresden pulled a face but didn’t object, and when Rawlins turned toward the house, Dresden followed.

Stallings, meanwhile, motioned for Sam to follow him, then took off toward the beat cops, who were staring in shocked confusion at the dissolving demon bodies. Sam debated internally with himself for a second - centuries in the Cage had taught him to never ask Lucifer for anything, but on the other hand, he didn’t think Lucifer would want to punish him in a way that would draw attention, so maybe the risk was worth it. He thought carefully to Lucifer, Would you consider listening in on Dresden and Murphy and the detective?

Lucifer actually looked surprised for a second before his expression smoothed over into lazy amusement. “Partners, Sammy?” he said. “Sure, why not. It’s been a while since we’ve played any good games, you and me.”

His possessive tone sent a shiver down Sam’s spine, and Lucifer licked his lips hungrily at the motion, his forked tongue darting like a snake’s. He held Sam’s gaze for a second longer, apparently just as a reminder that he owned every particle of Sam’s being, then sauntered off after Dresden and Rawlins.

“Mister Gabriel?” Stallings asked from behind Sam, and Sam swallowed hard and turned around. Stallings had apparently sent the beat cops to set up crime scene tape and check around for any lurking baddies, and now he produced a little notebook and pen from inside his jacket. “Let’s start from the beginning. What happened?”

Sam gave him a simplified version of the evening: he’d arrived in town earlier, he and Dresden had been jumped on the docks by the silver demons, they’d come back to Murphy’s to regroup, then Sam and Dresden had headed out on separate errands. Dresden had picked him up and they’d come back to find the attack in progress, so they intervened. It was more than a little bizarre to say things like we saw the demons attacking the house to a cop, but Dresden had said these guys knew about the supernatural and he’d apparently been right: Stallings took the entire thing in stride.
When Sam was done, Stallings nodded a few times and finished scribbling on the pad, then flipped it closed and looked up at Sam. “So how do you know Dresden?” he asked.

“Business acquaintance,” Sam said, making his voice dismissive. “I’m a research librarian. Dresden’s helped me out a time or two.” It wasn’t even a lie, exactly - Dresden had helped Sam a couple times just tonight - and Stallings nodded again. Sam added, his tone carefully light, “He never mentioned getting murdered, though.”

Stallings snorted. “Well, apparently he wasn’t. Scared the shit out of everyone, though.”

“What happened?” Sam asked.

“Couple years back, we had a particularly nasty Dresden week,” Stallings said, then clarified, “Bout once a year or so, things go all to hell in the weirdest ways and Dresden’s in the middle of it. So, ‘Dresden week.’” Sam grinned, and Stallings continued, “Anyway, really bad Dresden week, starting with his office building getting blown up downtown—”

“He has an office?” Sam interrupted, surprised.

“Yep,” Stallings said. “Chicago’s one and only professional wizard. So his office gets blown sky-high, then the FBI show up and take a swing at him, but something big and nasty tore up the police station and he ran off. We thought maybe that would be the end of it, things went quiet again after that, but the next day Murph calls and says she was supposed to pick him up but all that’s there is a big-ass bullet hole and a lot of blood. We looked for a body, but it happened on a boat so we figured the lake just took him.” He shrugged. “Glad he’s not dead, though. Since we thought he died, it’s been…” He hesitated, mouth twisting.

Sam thought about all the disappearances he’d read about earlier, when he’d been looking up information on Dresden and this reality. “Dark and getting darker,” he suggested quietly.

“Yeah,” Stallings agreed. “Dresden’s a weird one, sure, but Murphy trusts him, and even if things go all to hell when he gets involved, he usually manages to get everyone out the other side okay. So yeah, I’m glad he’s back.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. Stallings took a deep breath, then grimaced. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s head inside.”

He led the way to the blown-open front of Murphy’s house. Rawlins and Dresden stood in the living room, while Murphy sat on the overturned couch between them, her neck craned at what had to be a painful angle to look up at them. From the sound of it, they were going over the details of the attack as well. Lucifer crouched nearby, most of his attention on poking at the body of a human man in tactical gear sprawled on the floor. Sam blinked; he hadn’t realized there were vanilla humans involved. Though come to think of it, he remembered hearing gunshots - he’d just been too focused on fighting three of the silver demons at once to pay much attention.

Stallings, too, looked surprised by the bodies. He said, “What’s with these guys? I thought you said it was a demon attack.”

“They were there to get the demons access to Murphy’s house,” Dresden said. “Her threshold’s too strong for the demons to cross on their own, so the humans go in and blow out the wall to bypass—”

“Huh,” Rawlins said suddenly. He’d crouched down beside the body as well - Lucifer slithering out of the way - and was using the tip of his pen to turn the man’s head slightly. “Check this out.”

Dresden frowned and leaned in to look. Sam craned his neck, too, but couldn’t see anything in the
bizarre shadows. Dresden seemed to be having a hard time, as well, squinting and tilting his head - and then suddenly he jerked back, his eyes wide and his face pale.

“Harry?” Murphy said. “Harry, what is it?”

He straightened, taking a deep breath, and fixed her with a significant look. “His tongue’s been cut out.”
Devil Deals the Cards

Chapter Summary

In which Lucifer becomes a petty thief and geeks out.

Chapter Notes

I’m pretty sure the only interaction Thomas has ever had with the Denarians was in *Small Favor*, when he helped Harry fight Tessa and company to rescue Gard and Hendricks. Nicodemus doesn’t seem to know about him, and Harry wants to keep it that way.

Harry

“His tongue’s been cut out,” I said. The words made my blood run cold.

Murphy’s blue eyes widened. She’d been with me for most of the heist a couple months back, working side by side with Nicodemus’s cultists - whose initiation rites involved having their tongues removed. Ol’ Nick didn’t like his squires being able to chat about their working conditions, I guess.

“So?” Sam asked. He looked as baffled as the SI detectives. “Does that mean something?”

“Means I might know who sent the demons,” I said grimly. I threw Rawlins and Stallings a look.

“You guys should probably stay out of this,” I warned. “No offense, but if I’m right, this is way out of your league.”

Rawlins snorted. “You and your buddies have been way out of our league for years now,” he said dryly. “But we’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good,” I said. I took another breath, trying to calm my nerves. Just because the mercenary was missing his tongue didn’t necessarily mean he was currently working for Nicodemus. A whole bunch of the cultists had deserted after the newest Knight of the Cross sent Nicodemus running with his tail between his legs. I was pretty sure a lot of them had been picked up by Gentleman Johnny Marcone, and there were probably others who’d gone independent. Still, Nicodemus was the only guy I could think of who’d be mad enough at me to send demons after me like this, and he had reason to pick on Murphy as well. That it was nothing like his usual MO could be because he was trying to hide his involvement, or simply because he was short on resources after losing just about everything during the heist.

Stallings was scribbling in a notebook and Rawlins had gone to confirm that the other mercenary also didn’t have a tongue. Sam leaned over the body of the first one, and I noticed the sudden interested tilt of his head. I was about to ask him what he saw when his hand darted out and he slipped a cell phone from the belt of the dead mercenary. He tucked the phone into his jacket pocket and stood up. I frowned at him, trying to demand an explanation with just my eyes - I didn’t want to...
draw the detectives’ attention. He stared at me for a second like he didn’t understand why I was upset, then grimaced, his expression clearly saying, *what else do you want me to do? You just told the cops to stay out of it.*

I scowled, but he didn’t look particularly chastened. Maybe stealing evidence from crime scenes was common for hunters in his reality. I debated saying something, but he was right - this wasn’t something SI could help with. Or rather, *should* help with. They certainly had the technology to do… whatever CSI magic it was you did to a cell phone, but they weren’t equipped to take on demons.

Stallings flipped his notebook closed and tucked it in a pocket. “Well,” he said, “we have your statements, and our forensics team is on its way to look at these guys.” He jerked a thumb at the dead mercenaries, then looked over at Murphy. “You got someplace to stay?”

“Yeah,” I interrupted before Murphy could answer. She arched a brow at me, and I said, “We have a friend, Michael Carpenter. He’s a good man. She should be safe at his place until I can sort out this demon thing.” I gave Stallings Michael’s contact information so he could reach Murphy if he needed to.

“Good,” Rawlins said. He’d finished looking at the other body and came back to help Murphy to her feet. “We’ll put a guard on the house until you can get the wall patched,” he said to her.

“Thanks,” she said.

I looked over at Sam and jerked my head toward the car. “Let’s go.”

---

**Sam**

---

Ten minutes later, they were on the road. Dresden had summoned his little fairy general again and spoken to him in a low voice, while Sam helped Murphy into the front seat of Dresden’s Caprice. He didn’t mind letting her have it, partially because she needed the space for her crutches and casts, and partially because sitting in the back seat let him watch Lucifer without having to turn all the way around. As they drove, Lucifer relayed what Dresden and Rawlins had talked about, which, aside from Dresden telling the detective more or less the same story Sam had given Stallings, hadn’t been very interesting.

“I did pick you up a present, though, Sammy,” Lucifer purred. He held up one finger, and dangling from it was a pair of police handcuffs.

Sam fought to keep his expression neutral, though he knew Lucifer could sense the terror at the back of his mind. Where did you get those? he thought.

“It’s not like there was anyone around for the cops to arrest,” Lucifer said. “I figured they wouldn’t miss one measly little pair.” He leaned forward and, before Sam could react, slipped his hand inside Sam’s jacket; abruptly Sam felt the weight of the cuffs in the jacket’s inner pocket. He swallowed hard.

Lucifer smiled, slow and sensual, his forked tongue flicking out over his lips. Sam could feel Lucifer’s Grace curling gently deep inside his soul, almost a caress, and couldn’t stop himself from shuddering.

“Sam?” Dresden’s voice came suddenly from the front seat. “You okay?”
Sam swallowed again and took a deep breath, digging his thumb into his palm. Lucifer smirked but didn’t say anything, and Sam managed, “I’m fine. Just got a chill.”

Dresden eyed him in the rearview mirror for a second, then seemed to decide to let it go, saying only, “We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Sam nodded, trying not to feel the handcuffs click against his stomach as the car lumbered around a corner. Lucifer grinned again. “Aww, that’s sweet,” he said. “He’s worried about you. He thinks you might pass out again. Or have another… seizure.”

*You can read his mind?* Sam asked, then winced internally. Dumb question - Lucifer was an archangel; he could probably read the minds of everyone in a ten-mile radius without trying hard.

Lucifer, though, waggled a hand in a sort-of gesture. “I *ought* to be able to,” he said, “but this guy, he’s…” He paused, clearly searching for the right word. “Slippery.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, then caught himself and forced his expression back to neutrality. Dresden and Murphy had started talking in low voices in the front of the car, a minor argument about whether or not it was fair to the Carpenters for Murphy to come to them for protection “after what happened,” but Sam didn’t want either of them to notice him making faces at no one in the back seat. *Slippery because he’s a witch?* he thought to Lucifer.

“No,” Lucifer said. He eyed the back of Dresden’s head thoughtfully, his forked tongue flicking out like a snake’s, almost as though he was trying to taste Dresden’s soul. “It’s something else. He’s…” Lucifer paused, the humor fading from his expression until he looked as unsettlingly serious as he had back in Murphy’s guest room. “Remember I said this reality is contaminated?” he asked finally. Sam nodded, and Lucifer continued, “It’s related to that. The contamination is different here than in our reality, and the witch…” He frowned, then said something in Enochian that Sam only partially understood, something about protection and destiny and starborn, though Sam was pretty sure he wasn’t translating that last one correctly, because it didn’t make any sense.

“It’s really very fascinating,” Lucifer said, in English again. He leaned forward, tongue darting, an excited light in his eyes as he stared at the back of Dresden’s head. “Millennia in that cursed Cage, and now…!” He grinned at Sam, the creepy moment of sanity vanished like it had never happened. “This is almost as much fun as wiping out humanity in our reality.”

*I thought you wanted to get out of here ASAP,* Sam thought.

“I do,” Lucifer said. “But you clearly don’t.”

*Yes I do,* Sam protested.

“Do you? Looks to me like you’re starting a hunt, Sammy.” Lucifer showed his teeth in an expression that definitely wasn’t a smile, and Sam shuddered again. “That’s hardly making an effort to get back home.”

*We could use Dresden’s help,* Sam pointed out. *Or at least, we’ll get farther if he’s not chasing us down. But he’s not going to be able to help us much with those demons on his tail.*

“We help him, he helps us?” Lucifer said. “Careful, Sammy. That almost sounds like a good deed.” His eyes flashed. “And I don’t do good.”

*It’s an equal exchange of assistance,* Sam said, and fought the urge to press back against the door, to put as much space between himself and Lucifer as he could. *That’s all.*
Lucifer sneered. “Look at Mister Winchester, the lawyer.” Then, like a switch had flipped, he smiled and leaned back, cheerful again. “Sure. I want to be gone before the contamination notices us, but why not have a little fun in—”

He stopped abruptly, staring ahead out the windshield. Sam followed his gaze, but all he saw was a street full of mostly older houses, except for one in the middle that looked like it had been plucked straight from an advertisement for 50s Americana. It was big, with freshly painted white trim, a huge porch, a wide lawn that was a healthy green even in the predawn darkness, and even a white picket fence.

What’s wrong? Sam thought to Lucifer.

“We’re going there,” Lucifer said, and jerked his chin toward the gorgeous house. Sam frowned at him, and he said, annoyance in his voice, “Can’t you see them? —No, you’re human, of course not.” Deep in his chest Sam felt the cold pulse of Lucifer’s Grace - and at least two dozen humanoid figures suddenly appeared around the house and its lawn. They wore shining golden armor over brilliant white robes, and each of them held a sword against their shoulder in a sort of military parade rest. They were scattered around the most strategic guard points on the property - on the roof, at the corners of the lawn, on the broad porch - and they watched the street and the house with unwavering attention.

Lucifer whistled softly. “No wonder the witch thinks his bitch will be safe here,” he said. “That’s an entire platoon.”

Angels? Sam asked, surprised. Why would angels be guarding this guy’s house?

Lucifer focused on the back of Dresden’s head again. “Dresden thinks of the guy as a Righteous Man, the ‘Fist of God’.” He paused, then his eyes widened and he said excitedly, “Apparently he used to be the Knight of the Cross. The angels are some kind of… retirement package?” He sighed, pouting, and added, “But I don’t think they’ll appreciate little ol’ me waltzing around.”

You think they’ll attack?

“I don’t want to find out,” Lucifer said. “If I was at full strength they wouldn’t be a problem, but even then I wouldn’t want to attract the attention of the guy who put them there.”

Before Sam could ask what he meant, Dresden pulled the car to a stop along the curb in front of the big house. He got out and went around to the passenger door to help Murphy out - or rather, to stand there awkwardly while Murphy struggled out on her own after batting his hand away. “I’m fine, Dresden,” she growled, and hauled herself up on her good leg to start crutching toward the gate.

For a second Sam thought they might just forget he was in the car and leave him there, but then Dresden frowned and bent down to look in the rear window. “Sam? You coming?”

Sam shook his head and held up the cell phone he’d taken from the dead man. “You said you mess with technology, right? I want to take a look at this while you’re in there.” He gave Dresden a bit of what Dean called his puppy-dog eyes and what Sam thought of as polite persuasion. He was telling the truth, anyway: he’d taken the phone with the intent of looking through it to see if he could figure out who the demons’ “Master” was, and if he couldn’t do it when Dresden was around, then now was as good a time as any. And it wasn’t like he had time to come up with a better excuse not to go inside.

“Is that alternate-reality-speak for ‘gonna run off again’?” Dresden asked dryly.
“It didn’t get me very far last time,” Sam pointed out. “So I might as well stick around. But you can’t help me get back to my reality if you’re getting attacked by demons every few hours. And you’re going to need backup if you want to get rid of them—” Dresden’s eyebrows shot up in a oh-really expression and Sam raised both hands placatingly. “Look, I don’t know how things work here, but in my experience hunting demons with a partner is a lot better than trying to go it alone.”

Murphy, who had stopped to wait for Dresden, spoke up: “He’s right, Harry. But I can’t back you up like this and unless you want to call in Thomas or Butters, you don’t have a lot of other options.”

“Butters is at a conference on the East Coast somewhere,” Dresden said absently. “And Thomas…” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I don’t want him involved.”

“Look,” Sam said. “Either I help you, and you have someone to watch your back and deal with technology, or I sit and twiddle my thumbs in suburbia.” He let his voice go a little sharp at the end of the sentence; hopefully Dresden would fill in and run off again, distracting you from dealing with the demons.

Dresden eyed him skeptically for a few seconds, clearly not happy about the situation. But Dresden didn’t have any reason to suspect that Sam would know there was anything unusual about the house, and thus want to avoid going in, and Dean was right that very few people could resist the puppy-dog eyes. Dresden shrugged and said, “All right, fine. We shouldn’t be long. See what you can get off that thing.”

Sam nodded, and Dresden and Murphy headed up the walk toward the house. He watched them go, trying to ignore Lucifer, who’d slithered across the seat to breathe down Sam’s neck as he looked around the yard at the angels. They didn’t appear to have noticed Sam - or more specifically, Lucifer - instead watching Dresden and Murphy with a cool detachment until the door opened and they went inside.

“I’m not letting them see me,” Lucifer said, answering Sam’s thoughts and making him jump. The movement was enough that his shoulders bumped into Lucifer’s chest, and Sam scrabbled away on reflex, shoving the car door open and all but falling out onto the sidewalk. Lucifer followed, staying just a little too close, laughing, but it was easier to bear out here than in the closed confines of the car. Sam swallowed back the panic and the desire to run as far away as he could - not that running would do him any good anyway - and straightened. The sooner he helped Dresden stop the demons and their master, the sooner he could get back to his reality. Then Lucifer would take the Mark off Dean, and then…

And then nothing would matter any more.

Sam swallowed hard, climbed up to sit on the hood of the Caprice, pulled the dead man’s cell phone from his pocket, and got to work.
In which Murphy gets a place to stay, Sam gets a lead, and Lucifer gets way too excited.

Harry

I let Murphy go in front of me up the walk to the Carpenters’ front door. If she had asked, I’d have told her it was because I wanted to make sure that I could catch her if she fell on the stairs. It definitely wasn’t because it was past four in the morning, it was a weeknight, and there were at least five kids in the house who had to go to school in a few hours. Charity Carpenter, Michael’s wife and the main reason why the Carpenter household ran so smoothly, would not be happy to see us. But she liked Murphy a lot more than she liked me, plus I was hoping Murphy’s injuries would garner some sympathy points.

Murphy rang the doorbell, then leaned against the wall beside the door. She’d been putting on a brave face, but I’d known her for years, and I could tell that she was tired and hurting. The damage to her house had to have been a punch in the gut, as well - that house had been in the Murphy family for generations. Carefully, I put a hand on her good shoulder. “We’ll find the asshole behind all this, Murph,” I promised her quietly.

“I know you will,” she said, but her voice was tired. She leaned her head against my arm. I wanted, very badly, to pick her up and hold her close and keep her safe, but I couldn’t do that. Not only did Murphy hate being coddled, I also wouldn’t be able to protect her just by holding her. I could only protect her if I stopped the attacks at the source.

We stood that way for a minute or two in silence. Finally a light blinked on through the window next to the door, and the locks clicked over. I’d been expecting Michael or Charity to open the door, but it was Daniel, the Carpenters’ oldest son. He was a tall young man, with Michael’s dark hair and muscular build, and he was wearing a t-shirt and pajama pants and holding a baseball bat in one hand. He peered at us in surprise. “Harry? Ms. Murphy? What are you guys doing here in the middle of the night?”

“Long story,” I said. “The short version is that demons blew up Murph’s house and tried to kidnap her, and we were hoping she could stay with you guys for a while. Are your parents around?”

“Yeah,” Daniel said, his eyes wide as he stared at Murphy. “They’re, uh, they’re just both slow right now ‘cause of their legs.”

“Right.” I’d forgotten that Michael and Charity had both sustained leg wounds during the heist and its aftermath. “Can we come in?”

Daniel hesitated. “I’m not going to invite you,” he said carefully.

I nodded. It was a reasonable precaution, given the circumstances of our arrival. Daniel stepped back out of the doorway, lowering the baseball bat. I let Murphy crutch her way into the house first, then followed, feeling the sharp tug of the Carpenters’ threshold against my magic as I did. Michael
Carpenter was just coming down the stairs, wrapped in a bathrobe and holding his cane the way Daniel had been holding the bat. A hulking, shaggy grey beast stalked beside him - until it saw me, then my dog Mouse let out a happy little huff and loped across the floor to push his head under my hands. I bent down, scratching his ears obligingly, and got a face full of doggy kisses in return. “Ack!” I said. “Dog breath! Dog slobber! Ack!”

Michael stopped and stared at us. “Harry, Karrin,” he said. “What’s going on?”

I pulled away from Mouse, sobering. “Sorry to wake you all up,” I said. Daniel helped Murphy over to a chair as I explained what had happened with the demons. “So,” I finished, “I was hoping Karrin could stay with you until I get this demon thing settled.”

“Of course,” Michael said immediately, then frowned. “But if they have humans helping them…”

“Then your guardian angels can’t do anything, I know,” I finished for him. Angels were picky about free will, and refused to interfere with it. They could protect the Carpenters from supernatural threats, but wouldn’t do anything if a group of vanilla mortals attacked - even if the mortals were under the orders of someone else. It was a frustrating loophole that had very nearly gotten all of us - me, Michael, Charity, their kids, and our friend Waldo Butters - killed when Nicodemus’s heist went sour two months ago.

Which was why the Carpenters’ oldest daughter Molly, who had recently assumed the mantle of the Winter Lady and all the impressive resources that came with it, had set up a 24/7 Unseelie guard on her family’s house.

Problem was, Molly’s family didn’t know she was the Winter Lady, and it wasn’t my place to enlighten them. I couldn’t tell them about Molly’s guards without revealing that, though, which was why I’d planned ahead. I said, “I called in some fairy friends to help. They’ll be patrolling the neighborhood, and they’re fast enough that you should have plenty of time to call the cops and get to the panic room if anyone does try to attack.” I’d had Toot-toot transfer the Guard to the Carpenters’ house, and Murphy knew to make sure the pizza delivery ended up in the right place.

“You don’t think anything will attack, though,” Daniel said slowly, watching my face. I raised an eyebrow. The last time I’d seen the kid, he’d been cocksure and rash with the perceived invulnerability of the young. Cluing in to something like this might mean he was starting to grow out of that, which would be good for everyone.

“They’ve already attacked once tonight,” Murphy explained from her seat on the couch. “It’ll probably take some time for whoever’s calling the shots to realize that attack failed and to set up another one.”

“Which is why I’m heading right back out,” I said. “We’ve got a limited window to work before these guys try again, and I want to make the most of it.”

“You need backup?” Daniel asked. Michael shot him a sharp glance, but didn’t say anything.

My other eyebrow joined the first. I hadn’t even considered Daniel as a possibility when I was thinking about backup prospects - in my head, he was still a gangly, impatient teenager. If he was starting to learn patience and thoughtfulness, that might change. But for now, at least, I didn’t want to take the chance. Not that I wasn’t taking a chance on Sam, but at least I’d seen Sam handle himself level-headedly in two fights already, which was more than I could say for Daniel. And I didn’t want to have to babysit both of them. “Nah,” I said to Daniel. “I’ve got someone tagging along already.”

“Anyone we know?” Michael asked curiously.
I shook my head. “Karrin can tell you more about him. He’s a separate issue entirely.”

Michael accepted that with a nod. Daniel looked disappointed, but didn’t protest my decision - ironically, another point in his favor. Maybe eventually I could take him along - though Charity would probably murder me before letting yet another member of her family go running around with me.

I sighed and said, “I’d better get going. Sam’s working on a way to track down whoever’s pulling the demons’ strings - Nicodemus or otherwise - so we’ll see what comes from there. I’ll call later, when I have a better idea of what we’ll be doing.”

“Be careful,” Michael said.

“I always am,” I said. Murphy snorted. “I am!” I protested. Murphy rolled her eyes at Michael, who looked like he was trying very hard not to smile. I stuck my tongue out at both of them, because I am a mature and responsible adult. Then I gave Mouse one last scratch behind the ears and headed back out to my car.

Sam sprawled on the hood of the big Chevy, back resting against the windshield, one long leg stretched down the hood and the other bent at the knee so he could rest his hands on it. He was clearly working on something, though I couldn’t see what it was in the predawn dark except that it didn’t have the glow of an active cell phone. He looked up when I opened the Carpenters’ gate, and when he saw me, he dropped whatever he’d been holding into his jacket pocket and rolled off the hood. For the first time since I’d met him, he didn’t look exhausted and depressed. Instead, he looked animated - not exactly excited, but full of the kind of energy someone gets when they’re doing something they love.

“So get this,” he said as I approached. “The phone was just shut off, so it worked fine when I turned it back on—” He pulled the phone out of a different pocket as he spoke, holding it up so I could see the glowing screen.

I stopped dead in my tracks and backpedaled several feet. Sam’s brow furrowed. “Wizard,” I said. “You want that thing to keep working, don’t wave it around near me.”

He rolled his eyes, exasperation plain on his face. “That’s—Ugh. Witches get along fine with technology in my reality, why can’t they in yours?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “But you’re going to have to either shut that off, or tell me what you found from back there.”

Sam rolled his eyes again, but said, “Okay, fine. So I checked the phone’s call logs. It had two incoming calls, both from the same number. It’s a 610 area code, which is a suburb of Philadelphia called Gladwyne—”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

Sam stared at me for a second, then said, like the answer was obvious, “I Googled it. The phone has a data plan.”

“Oh,” I said. A little pang of jealousy hit me in the gut. Even the mercenaries for hire got cell phones with fancy internet capabilities, yet I, a wizard, Warden of the White Council, and the Winter Knight, for Pete’s sake, was stuck using land lines that barely worked at the best of times. “And we have to do our research the hard way,” I muttered under my breath. “Uphill in the snow both ways.”

“What?” Sam said.
I shook my head. “Nothing. So, Philadelphia?”

“Yeah.” He took a couple steps toward me, holding the phone out like he wanted to show me something on it, before catching himself and stopping. “There’s also three text messages from the same phone number - one with an address in the same Philadelphia suburb, one with Ms. Murphy’s address, and one with today’s date and ‘3AM’.”

“The attack instructions,” I said thoughtfully. “How much you wanna bet that Philadelphia address is where they were supposed to take Murphy?”

“No bet,” Sam said. “It’s an eleven-hour drive to Gladwyne—” He glanced between me and the big Chevy, then amended, “Maybe twelve or so. If we leave now and hurry, we should be able to get there during business hours.”

“Why during business hours?” I asked. I dug out my keys and circled the car to the driver’s side, giving Sam and the phone a wide berth.

He gave me that blank stare again, like I was missing something obvious. “We’ll want to talk to the cops, maybe some other locals. Easier to do that during the day.”

I lifted a brow at him. “I thought you said hunters avoid cops.”

“Hunters avoid cops,” Sam said, sliding into the passenger seat. He’d put the phone away, and now pulled out his fake FBI badge with a smirk. “But federal agents always get up in the local leos’ business.”

“Hah,” I said. “But I don’t have a fake badge.”

“There’s probably a Kinko’s between here and there,” Sam said. “I can have one for you in an hour or so.” My turn to stare at him, and he suddenly looked embarrassed. “We, uh, we kinda make them all the time,” he said.

“Right,” I said. “I guess you wouldn’t want to use the same—”

Light flashed up on the Carpenters’ porch as the door opened, and I stopped talking to squint past Sam to see what was going on. Michael stepped out, still wearing his bathrobe but with his feet stuffed into a pair of workboots. Leaning on his cane, he limped down the walk toward the car.

Sam had turned around to see what I was looking at, and out of nowhere I felt the cold half of his aura surge and roil. For a second it encompassed the entire interior of the car, and even with the resistance to cold the Winter Knight’s mantle gave me, I felt chilled to the bone. Then Sam flinched, hard, seeming to try to shrink down into the seat as he dug his thumb into his left palm.

“Sam?” I said, worried.

“I—” he said, then swallowed and tried again. “I’m fine. Sorry. I, uh, wasn’t expecting… that… to, uh…” He swallowed again, digging his thumb harder into his palm.

“Are you—” I started, but Michael was nearly to the car, and Sam turned away from me to roll down the window.

Michael ducked a little to peer through the window at me. “Glad I caught you,” he said. He gave Sam a curious look.

“Michael, this is Sam Winchester. He’s the backup I told you about,” I said. “Sam, Michael
Carpenter. He’s a good friend.”

“Uh, hi,” Sam said. He still looked pale and drawn in the dim moonlight, but he managed to nod at Michael.

“Hello,” Michael said politely, then turned back to me. “I promised Molly I’d give this to you the next time I saw you.” He held up a key on a little key ring, then tossed it across Sam to me. I caught it and peered at it. “Key to her apartment,” Michael said. “She said she’s already cleared you with the doorman, and that if you haven’t moved off that island by the end of the month, she’ll move you herself.”

I snorted. Since becoming the Winter Lady, Molly hadn’t had much use for the apartment she’d earned from the svartelves. She’d offered to let me use it while I got back on my feet, and at the time I’d told her I’d think about it. I hadn’t been sure I wanted to take her up on the offer, for a lot of reasons: she had been my apprentice; she had had - might still have, for all I knew - a bit of a crush on me; as well as the simple fact that I didn’t like taking charity from anyone. Apparently, though, I no longer had a choice. I knew the grasshopper - she would move me herself if she thought I was dawdling.

“I figured it might help for you to have a base of operations, anyway, while you work on this demon thing,” Michael said. “You’re welcome at our house any time, of course, but—”

“But the kids are still in school, and bringing Murphy to you for protection won’t do anyone any good if I bring more demons down on you,” I finished for him. “Makes sense. But we might not need it. Sam found something on the mercenary’s cell phone that points to Philadelphia. We’re going to go track that down.”

“Philadelphia?” Michael repeated, surprised. “That’s quite a ways away.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’s our only real lead, and hopefully it won’t take us more than a couple days to get there, deal with whatever we find, and get back.”

Michael nodded. “Be safe, Harry. Call when you get there.”

I made a face at him. “Charity mothering me is bad enough. I don’t need you Dad-ing me too.”

“Habit,” he said, and laughed. “Sorry.”

I grinned back and started the engine. “See you in a few days. And tell Molly thanks for me.”

He stepped back from the car and waved. I pulled away from the curb, and started the long drive to Philadelphia.

---

**Sam**

Sam focused on breathing: in, out, in, out. Lucifer was draped over the back of the front seat, his hands drumming an excited rhythm on Sam’s chest and stomach, his chin resting on Sam’s shoulder. He’d been so excited when Michael Carpenter had appeared that he’d very nearly surged into control of Sam’s body; had only stopped himself with a sharp glance up at the angels still guarding the house. Then he’d settled into his current position, his breath cold on Sam’s ear as he stared out the window at Carpenter.

“This is him,” he’d said, almost reverently. “He’s the Knight of the Cross. Dresden’s *Righteous Man*. 
He doesn’t look like much, though, does he, Sammy? Kinda pathetic, really, with that limp.” He’d kept talking, babbling observations into Sam’s ear, and Sam had been thoroughly grateful that neither Dresden nor Carpenter had spoken to him beyond the introduction, because Sam didn’t think he’d have been able to respond with Lucifer chattering constantly like that.

The archangel had twisted in his seat to watch Carpenter as they’d pulled away, though he hadn’t let go of Sam, until finally they’d rounded a corner. Then Lucifer had started the excited drumming on Sam’s stomach, humming under his breath, and it was taking everything Sam had not to start screaming.

“So,” Dresden said suddenly, and Sam almost jumped out of his skin. “What was that back there? Are you going to seize again?”

Lucifer laughed, patting Sam’s stomach one more time, then finally - finally! - let go and sat back against the rear seat. Sam shuddered, but managed to say, “No. I mean, I’m not going to seize again. It’s…” Breathe in, breathe out, and try to ignore Lucifer. “It’s, uh, kind of a side effect of being psychic. It just... happens sometimes. But I’m fine.” He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the edge of the still-open window, letting the chilly night air blow over his face. Please, he thought at Lucifer. Please, if you want to get out of here...

“Stop distracting you,” Lucifer said dismissively. “Yeah, yeah. Behave yourself—” His voice curled around Sam’s soul, a chilly reminder— “and there won’t be any more seizures.”

I’m sorry, Sam thought desperately. I will. He could feel the weight of Dresden’s eyes on him, but he kept his own gaze fixed firmly out the window.

After a minute Dresden said quietly, “Look, man, I don’t want to push, but if you’re going to have random psychic… attacks, or whatever those are, whenever you meet people—”

“It’s not random,” Sam said. “That guy, he, uh, he’s…” He swallowed. “Different.”

Dresden shot him a sharp glance. “Different how?”

Sam didn’t want to say anything about the Knights of the Cross, since he wasn’t supposed to have any way of knowing Carpenter was one. Instead he said, remembering Lucifer’s words, “He’s a Righteous Man.”

“He’s a good man,” Dresden corrected softly.

Sam looked over at him in surprise. Dean and Lucifer, at least, seemed to think those were synonymous, but Dresden’s tone implied otherwise. (Then again, Dean and Lucifer agreeing on something probably wasn’t a good sign to begin with, and in the back seat, Lucifer snorted.) Dresden met his eyes levelly for a second before turning back to the road.

Sam shrugged, not up for debating it, not really even up for thinking about it. Lucifer’s cold had settled deep into Sam’s bones, and the brief thrill of starting a hunt he’d felt while working on the cell phone had faded. He rolled the window back up and leaned his head against it. “It gonna bother you if I sleep?” he asked.

Dresden shot him another glance, but let it go. “Nah,” he said.

“Wake me up when you want to swap,” Sam said.

“Sure,” Dresden said.
It was almost a ritual when setting out on a hunt, Sam settling down to sleep against the window and telling Dean to wake him, Dean shrugging it off. It wasn’t quite the same with Dresden in Dean’s place, and the old Caprice’s coughing engine didn’t have the Impala’s deep, steady rumble, but it was close enough, and Sam fell asleep almost immediately.
In which Castiel finds a clue, Crowley works a spell, Charlie refuses to take shit from the King of Hell, and Dean wonders how he got stuck with three companions whose names all have seven letters and start with C.

Dean

It was a twenty-hour drive from Lebanon, Kansas, to Ilchester, Maryland. Dean and Charlie made it in a little under sixteen, the Impala’s wheels crunching as Dean parked her along the curb in front of the abandoned convent. He’d never actually seen it from the outside before - had needed Charlie to give him directions when they got close - and it certainly looked like someplace you’d expect to find a door to Lucifer’s Cage. It was a huge square building of dark stone, with pointy Gothic trim spiking up from the corners and a heavy wrought-iron fence enclosing the grounds. In the bright midday sun, the cracks along the walls and the broken stained-glass windows just looked sad, but in the dark of night, with grotesque gutter gargoyles casting outsized shadows along the ground, the place would be terrifying.

Charlie stretched as she climbed out of the car, her spine popping audibly. She’d spent most of the drive searching on her little tablet for any sign of where Lucifer might have gone, but - oddly, considering how pissed Dean had expected him to be - there was absolutely nothing. Even the usual background noise of demonic activity had quieted down, like everything that went bump in the night had noticed the biggest boogeyman of all had come back, and had hunkered down in the hope of not being noticed. It was more than a little creepy, and beyond that, it was worrisome. If Lucifer was loose, he ought to be making noise, same as he had when he’d first broken free - storms, natural disasters, catastrophes, the kinds of things that turned up in newscasts. And if he hadn’t broken free… Dean didn’t know what to think, because then what had happened to Sam?

He made himself stop thinking about it, focused instead on digging everything out of the trunk that he thought they might need. Not that that was a long list - except the jug of holy oil, they didn’t have much by way of anti-archangel weapons. Still, he loaded up on guns and knives, and made sure Charlie was equally well-armed - including a couple of makeshift holy-oil Molotovs for each of them, because even if it didn’t kill Lucifer it might buy them time (tried not to think about the fact that he’d more than likely be burning Sam, too).

Finally they turned toward the convent. The main gate was closed, with bright yellow police tape threaded through the bars in a way that didn’t actually tie them together. Dean spotted Castiel’s Continental parked a little ways further up the road, as well as another car closer by that probably belonged to the unlucky rent-a-cop who had to patrol the place. He nudged Charlie and jerked his chin at the second car. “Still got your FBI badge?” he asked softly.

She nodded, patting her jacket pocket. Dean checked his own pocket, then resettled the duffel bag on his shoulder and shoved open the gate. Its hinges squealed, and with Lucifer and the Apocalypse on his mind Dean couldn’t help but think of the screams of the damned. He shook himself, squaring his shoulders as he walked up the weed-crusted path to the main entrance.
The rent-a-cop appeared around a corner of the building just as Dean and Charlie reached the bottom of the stairs up to the front door. He was a little shorter than Dean, with the kind of thick arms and potbelly that said he spent a lot less time at the gym now than he once had; the nametag on his uniform read Brian. “Hey, ’scuse me—” he began, but they badged him in unison and he stopped short. “Oh. Jeez.” He looked back and forth between them, taking in their decidedly not-government-issue denim and flannel and leather before clearly electing not to comment. “Uh,” he said, his tone conveying distinct nervousness. “I thought the cops said it was just some kids playing with fireworks?”

“Probably was,” Dean agreed easily. “But you know the pencil-pushers at the top. Gotta dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s.”

“And that takes two Feds?”

“Look,” Dean said, “we’d rather be doing something more interesting, but we’re just grunts.”

“We go where they send us,” Charlie added. She’d gotten better at this since the last time. “Ask the routine questions. It’s all just paperwork, really.”

The rent-a-cop blew out a sigh of resignation. “Yeah, I hear you there. You got questions the cops haven’t already asked?”

“You were here last night—uh, Brian?” Dean asked. The guy nodded. “You see anyone go in or out?”

“Nope,” Brian said. “Like I told the police, I just walk the path around the place, cut through the building once or twice just in case. I was about to do another pass through when the whole place lit up.” He waved his hands to indicate a massive blast. “Couldn’t see or hear anything for a good five minutes after. By the time I could get inside to look, it was empty.”

Dean and Charlie traded a glance. That didn’t leave a lot of time for Sam to have cut a deal with Lucifer and escape, though it was possible that Lucifer’s wings hadn’t been torched by Metatron’s spell - in which case he could poof around just like old times. Dean licked his lips and swallowed; Charlie thanked the rent-a-cop and they turned back to the steps up to the front door.

The inside of the convent was much the same as the outside, foreboding Gothic architecture cracked and faded from years of neglect. It didn’t take long for Dean to find the hallway that still occasionally cropped up in his nightmares, the long arched passage leading to the heavy wooden doors of the convent’s chapel. It wasn’t any more pleasant in the light of day than it had been all those years ago, and Charlie stuck so close to Dean’s side that she almost stepped on him. Dean himself had to fight the urge to draw his gun as they approached the doors. Lucifer was almost certainly long gone, but even if he hadn’t been, a gun wouldn’t do any good.

The double doors stood half-open, and the chapel beyond was silent - but not empty. Dean’s hunting instincts, and possibly the sixth sense the Mark had given him, warned him that someone was inside. He motioned for Charlie to stay behind him, out of the way, then stepped around the door.

Castiel and Crowley stood facing each other a little to one side of the big room, tension crackling in the air between them. They were both inhumanly still, so much so that if Dean hadn’t known better he’d have thought they were well-dressed statues. He rolled his eyes and motioned Charlie forward. “Break it up, fellas,” he snapped. “This ain’t the time for a staring contest.”

Neither of them moved. Dean didn’t think they were even breathing. He sighed and stepped between them, shoving them apart. “Come on!”
Dean’s Mark-enhanced strength was enough to move Crowley, but even with his Grace as weak as it was, Castiel only shifted because he chose to, and he put up just enough resistance to make sure Dean knew it. He continued to glare at Crowley in silence while Crowley made a show of dusting his jacket and straightening his sleeves. “Despite what you think,” Crowley said haughtily, “this is not my fault. Dean, why don’t you have a go at disabusing your feathery boyfriend of the delusion that I am somehow responsible for this.”

“You’ve been behind most of the awful things that have happened for the last several years,” Castiel spat. “It’s perfectly—”

“Me?” Crowley demanded, putting his fingers on his chest in the picture of affront. “Excuse me, I seem to recall you letting the Leviathan loose because you couldn’t control them. And who helped Metatron push all the little chickies out of the nest?”

“You would have freed Leviathan if I hadn’t, and Metatron would never have gotten involved if you hadn’t pushed Sam and Dean—”

“I pushed? I was going about business as usual—”

“ENOUGH!” Dean roared. They fell into startled silence, and Dean glared at both of them. “It doesn’t matter who’s responsible,” he growled. “What matters is finding Sam and stuffing Lucifer back into that Cage. That’s it.”

“Dean—” Castiel started, but Dean silenced him with a snarl.

Castiel retreated a little, looking hurt. Dean couldn’t bring himself to care. This was his fault (Sam’s fault, little monster Sammy, your freak of a baby brother) his fault, and he clenched his right hand into a fist until his knuckles popped. “You guys find anything, or have you been glaring at each other since you got here?”

“Well,” Crowley drawled, “I found that the door to the Cage was never actually opened.”

Dean stared at him. “You said Lucifer wasn’t in the Cage anymore.”

“I did,” Crowley agreed. “And he’s not. Assuming it was Moose who freed him, he had some other way to get him out.”

“Well, that’s all kinds of not good,” Dean muttered.

“What other ways are there?” Charlie asked. “To get out of the Cage?”

Crowley blinked, seeming to notice her for the first time. “Who’s the cupcake?” he asked Dean.

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Charlie,” she said coolly. “And I’m not a cupcake.”

“Ooh,” Crowley said, still to Dean. “A spicy cupcake. Should’ve guessed.” He motioned at her hair.

She drew in a breath to retort, but Dean put a hand on her arm. “Easy,” he said. “He’s the King of Hell. Riling people up is kinda his job description.” He shot Castiel a look as he said it; Castiel at least had the grace to look chastened.

Crowley just smirked. “To answer your question,” he said to Charlie, “the only other way I know of opening the Cage is with the rings of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” He glanced at Dean. “You haven’t been cutting off any fingers lately, have you?”
Dean shook his head. “As far as I know, none of the rings have been dug up from where Bobby and I hid ‘em, except Death’s. And I don’t think he’d give that one away again if he knew Sa—someone was trying to open the Cage.”

Crowley nodded like that was a foregone conclusion. Castiel spoke up: “I found something, as well.” He held up a tattered, yellowing sheet of paper. “This was on the floor by the wall.” He nodded toward the far wall of the chapel, away from the destruction in the middle of the floor. “There’s footprints in the dust that might be Sam’s.”

“What’s it say?” Dean asked. Castiel tilted the paper so he could see, and Dean read the words silently to himself. “Who the hell is Maggie?” he muttered.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Castiel said.

“Rhetorical question, Cas,” Dean said. “What’s the Latin say?” His Latin was… well, rusty would be putting it kindly. He could still do an exorcism just fine, but rarely used the language otherwise and hadn’t bothered to stay fluent enough to read an unfamiliar phrase.

“Open the way between, the way beyond. Connect like to like, and open the way’,” Crowley said. “I think it’s some kind of stored spell. Set up by the original caster to trigger when the words were read aloud.”

“Open the way?” Dean repeated. “What the hell’s that mean?”

“Maybe a portal,” Charlie called. She’d gone over to the section of wall Castiel had indicated, and now crouched with one hand on the floor for balance. “Check this out.”

Dean joined her at the wall, Castiel and Crowley trailing behind him. Charlie pointed at the floor, and he followed her finger to see the footprints Castiel had mentioned imprinted in the thick dust and grime. They could be Sam’s all right - not a lot of people wore shoes that big. “So?” Dean said.

“So,” Charlie said patiently, “the footprints go over to the wall. Where do they go from there?”

Dean opened his mouth to answer, then stopped. She had a point: the footprints went up to the wall, but that was it. No prints leading away from the wall again. Like Sam had walked up to the wall and just vanished.

Dean swallowed hard. Vanishing like that was an angel’s trick. But the note didn’t fit with Lucifer breaking loose. Had Sam used the spell on the note? If so, where had he found it, and why? “None of this makes a damn bit of sense,” he grumbled.

“You’re telling me,” Crowley said. “I think I could re-create the spell on that note. We could see where this ‘way’ goes to.”

“You think Sam triggered the spell?” Castiel asked.

“Certainly looks that way, doesn’t it?” Crowley said. “We know Sam was here, and we know he walked up to that wall with this paper and vanished.”

“Do we know Sam was here?” Dean asked. “I mean, for sure? He’s been missing for two days, that doesn’t mean he was here.”

Crowley gave him an exasperated look. “You were the one who thought he came here in the first place. —But,” he added, holding up a hand to stop Dean’s retort, “I checked the neighborhood. That horrible old deathtrap he drives is parked two blocks from here.”
Dean swore under his breath. Crowley continued, “We also know that while the door wasn’t opened, Lucifer isn’t in the Cage anymore. And we know that someone, probably Sam, triggered a saved spell that may or may not have opened a portal.”

“A portal into the Cage?” Charlie asked.

“Possibly,” Crowley said. “Though that doesn’t seem to fit the ‘like to like’ bit.”

“You said you can re-create the spell?” Dean asked Crowley. The demon nodded, and Dean said, “Fine. Do it.”

“Dean, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Castiel said sharply. “If that spell opens a portal to the Cage —”

“—then we’ll have a better idea of what happened and where to look for our missing Moose,” Crowley interrupted.

Castiel growled audibly. Dean said, “It ain’t like we have any other leads. Something happened here, and whatever it was, it involved that spell, my idiot brother, and Lucifer. So we’re gonna do whatever it takes to figure it out.”

Crowley looked between them, waiting until it was clear that as much as Castiel obviously wanted to, he wasn’t going to protest. Then he said, “If you’ll excuse me, I have spell ingredients to collect,” and vanished with a snap of his fingers.

“I don’t like this,” Castiel muttered.

“Neither do I,” Dean admitted. “But we don’t know what happened. If Lucifer really got free, we should’ve heard from him by now. I’m pretty sure you and me aren’t real high on his Christmas card list.”

“Here’s a thought,” Charlie offered. She’d been reading the note while they talked, and now handed it back to Castiel. “Sam wanted to force Lucifer to take the Mark off Dean. So he finds this note with a spell that’s a portal to… somewhere, maybe he found it in the Bunker’s library with something that says where it goes. Then he finds a way to talk to Lucifer without opening the Cage. Maybe he tries to bargain with him. I don’t know. But something goes wrong, Lucifer tries to escape, and so Sam uses the spell to transport him somewhere where he can’t hurt anyone. Only Lucifer managed to drag Sam along with him.”

Dean considered that. It wasn’t a bad theory - Sam had always liked witchcraft a little too much for a hunter, and he always had his nose in one of the Men of Letters’ books. And he was certainly smart enough and cautious enough to have prepared a backup plan. “Possibly,” he said to Charlie.

Castiel frowned. “If she’s right, then if we re-create the spell and follow them, won’t we just end up in whatever prison Sam intended for Lucifer?”

“If Sam’s trapped somewhere with Lucifer,” Dean said flatly, “then we’re getting him out. End of story.”

“And if he’s not?”

Dean was spared having to answer that by Crowley’s return. The demon had a large black bag in one hand and a small jug in the other, which he immediately dropped into Castiel’s arms. “Be a dear and hold that for me, yeah?” he said. Without waiting for an answer, he went over to the bloodstained altar at the front of the chapel and set the bag on top of it. He pulled a piece of chalk
from a pocket and began drawing on the altar’s surface, murmuring what sounded like Latin under his breath.

Castiel stomped over to the altar as well, not quite slamming the jug onto it by Crowley’s elbow. Dean and Charlie followed. Crowley ignored them all, drawing a series of herb packets and increasingly odd trinkets from the bag and setting them in the center of the pentacle he’d drawn, still chanting in Latin. He opened the jug, poured a splash of its contents - some kind of oil, by the scent and consistency - over the little pile of ingredients, then lit the whole thing on fire. Nothing happened, but Crowley didn’t seem bothered by this. He started over from the beginning, drawing more herbs and trinkets from the bag and lighting them on fire.

Then he did it a third time, and a fourth, and when he’d started on the fifth Dean had had enough. He reached out, intending to grab Crowley’s arm and demand an explanation, but to his surprise Castiel stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Wait,” Castiel said softly. “I know it doesn’t look like anything’s happening, but it is working. This is a complicated spell. The layers are a part of that.”

Dean didn’t miss the flicker of surprise that went through Crowley’s eyes, nor the slight nod of thanks he gave Castiel, though he never actually stopped chanting. Dean gritted his teeth and checked his weapons, just to give himself something to do. Finally, after going through the ritual and the incantation nine freaking times, Crowley held out a hand for the paper Castiel still held. Castiel handed it over, and Crowley settled the paper on top of the ashes in the center of the pentacle. The ashes melted up into the paper like water into a sponge, and the Latin incantation glowed orange.

Crowley nodded to himself. He picked up the paper and held it out to Dean. “Do the honors, Squirrel?” Dean glared at him, but accepted the paper. “Everybody hold on,” Crowley added. “The spell was meant for one, not four.”

Charlie reached up to grab the back of Dean’s jacket nervously; after a moment Castiel likewise gripped Dean’s shoulder. Crowley wrapped a cold hand around Dean’s wrist and flashed a daredevil smile. Dean glared some more, but it didn’t do anything to change the situation. “This is one of the stupidest things we’ve ever done,” he muttered.

Then he took a deep breath and began to read the spell.
Somewhere Over the Portal

Chapter Summary

In which Dean and Castiel get an unexpected bath, and Crowley is still a crossroads demon.

Chapter Notes

It occurred to me when writing this chapter that I can't remember ever seeing Castiel swim. He's an angel, after all, and it's a bitch to get those wing feathers dry. ;) But I figure if he can drive a car, he can probably manage swimming.

I'm also deeply sad that no one's around to inform Dean that it's the Whatsup Dock. That seems like something he'd appreciate.

Dean

The first thing Dean was aware of was a cold breeze blowing across his face. He coughed, groaned, and managed to force his eyes open enough to see a bright blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds. His other senses came back online slowly: cold moist dirt under his hands and rocks digging into his spine; waves lapping against rock and wind rustling through trees; the scent of pine and water. Something heavy sprawled across his legs, and after a minute of disorienting effort Dean managed to lift his head enough to see Charlie.

He felt like he’d gone nine rounds with a Leviathan, but he forced himself up onto his elbows and reached for Charlie. She was breathing, which was good, and she stirred a little when he poked her in the arm. While she dragged herself back to consciousness, Dean looked around until he spotted Castiel and Crowley, sprawled on either side of him. They all lay on a grassy, windswept hilltop; Dean could see trees a little ways away. Crowley was already moving, blinking rapidly and trying to roll over. Dean wiggled his legs until Charlie shifted enough to let him move, then hauled himself on his elbows over to Castiel.

The angel was pale, his skin cold and clammy when Dean checked for a pulse. Would Castiel even have a pulse? “Cas?” he said. “Cas!”

Castiel twitched, then his blue eyes slitted groggily open and he made a noise that might have been an attempt to say Dean’s name. “Hey,” Dean said. “You okay?”

Castiel coughed, his eyes drifting closed again. Crowley’s voice came from behind Dean: “He’ll be a bit the worse for wear. He kept the cupcake from getting torn to mincemeat while we traveled. Just like the Mark protected you.”

“Oh,” Dean said. The Mark throbbed under his skin; it might have been his imagination but it felt… quieter, maybe, than it usually did. “Uh, good.”
“Why would we have been torn to mincemeat?” Charlie asked. She’d managed to sit up and had retrieved the note from where Dean had dropped it, brushing dirt off it and folding it neatly before adding it to her bag. “The note sounded like Maggie wanted Louisa to make the trip alive. Not kill her.”

“That spell was very old,” Crowley said. “Coming apart at the seams. There may have been protection woven into it at some point, but it was long gone by now.”

“Then why not put it back in when you re-created the spell?” Dean asked, irritated.

Crowley sighed, his expression clearly saying I’m surrounded by idiots. “Because,” he said patiently, “all I did was duplicate the spell’s effect. That’s a fairly simple working, albeit not an easy one. But it means that the spell would have gone off exactly as it had the first time.”

Unease twisted in Dean’s gut. “So… if Sam used that spell and didn’t have an angel to protect him…”

“He may well be itty-bitty particles of moose stuff floating in the ether,” Crowley confirmed cheerfully. “At least then you wouldn’t have to worry about Lucifer, I suppose.”

Dean growled, but Crowley didn’t seem bothered by the thought. Charlie looked between them and said quickly, “So where are we, anyway?”

It took effort for Dean to rein in the urge to punch Crowley across the mouth, but he managed it long enough to say, “No idea.”

“Lake Michigan, if I’m not mistaken,” Crowley said. He shoved himself to his feet and squinted into the distance. “Near Chicago.”

“Chicago?” Dean repeated. “Why the hell did that spell take us to Chicago?”

“I’ve no idea,” Crowley said. “It’s your brother we’re following. I don’t pretend to understand what Moose thinks is a good idea anymore.”

Dean and Charlie traded a glance, then Charlie held out a hand to Dean and they pulled each other to standing. Dean turned a slow circle, studying the place. Water all around, so an island. Behind him stood the ruins of an old lighthouse, with a small cobblestone cottage built up against one side. Dean walked up to the cottage carefully, one hand on his gun. He couldn’t see anyone except Charlie, Castiel, and Crowley, but he couldn’t shake the intense feeling of being watched. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at full attention, and unease crawled up and down his spine. He braced himself and pushed the weather-beaten door open.

The cottage was empty, but had signs of recent habitation: fresh ashes under a coffeepot in the fireplace, a military-surplus cot against one wall, a folding table stacked with critter-resistant supply boxes. Another box held worn but clean jeans and t-shirts, and a big, sturdy equipment case stood propped up in the far corner. The Mark throbbed, sudden and hot, when Dean looked at the case, and he had to stop for a moment to dig his thumb into his forearm. When he had it back under control, he crossed the room carefully to the case.

As he approached it, the foreboding feeling increased a hundredfold. The Mark throbbed again, more painfully this time, and Dean doubled over, breathing hard, gripping the Mark and trying not to drown in its thunder.

“Dean?” Crowley’s voice came from behind him and he jumped. “You all right?”
“I, uh.” Dean swallowed hard. He forced himself to stand up straight and turn around to face Crowley, who’d wandered into the cabin and stood looking around with wide eyes. “I’m fine.”

“I hope you weren’t planning to store the feather pillow here until he wakes up,” Crowley said. His gaze lingered on the case in the corner for a moment. “It’s… not exactly the most welcoming of places.”

“I hear you,” Dean muttered. He edged past Crowley, out of the cabin and back to the open air of the hilltop. The Mark’s throbbing pulse eased and he managed to unclench his teeth before going back to where Charlie knelt beside Castiel.

“I think he’s coming around,” she reported.

“Good,” Dean said. “Stay with him until he’s on his feet. I’m gonna take a look around.” Charlie nodded, and Dean picked up his bag from where it had landed, slung it over his shoulder, and took off along the narrow dirt path that led down from the hilltop.

There wasn’t much to see further down. Old-growth forest everywhere, dense brush and thick roots grabbing at his legs and trying to trip him even on the nominal path. Steps had been cut into the hillside, but they were so uneven and battered that they were almost more of a hindrance than a help. And Dean couldn’t shake the feeling that something big, nasty, and very, very powerful was watching him. By the time he’d reached the bottom of the path, his skin was crawling and it was everything he could do to not draw his gun.

The trees opened up onto a flat shoreline covered in what looked like an old Western ghost town. More trees jutted out of the battered remains of abandoned buildings, and weeds grew everywhere. But just like the little cottage at the top of the hill, the town had signs of recent use: bullet holes that couldn’t have been more than a year or two old, places where the broken edges of the walls didn’t have the same ancient weathering as the rest, scuffs and furrows in the ground that hadn’t yet been smoothed away by wind and rain. The most obvious sign was the somewhat haphazard dock cobbled together from wooden planks and old tires floating just off the beach.

A man sat at the end of the dock, his legs drawn up to his chest and his shoulders hunched miserably as he stared out over the water.

Dean froze. The man didn’t seem to have noticed him, and Dean took a few seconds to study him. The guy wore an expensive-looking windbreaker and slacks, but they and his hundred-dollar haircut hung damp and forlorn against his body. He had low-cut white socks on his feet but no shoes, and the soles of the socks were stained with dirt, like he’d been walking around the woods in his stocking feet. He certainly didn’t look like someone who’d been living rough in the cabin at the top of the hill. Past him, maybe a hundred yards out in the water, Dean could see a small motorboat sitting immobile against the waves that slapped its sides. The waves receded, revealing a peak of jagged stone that jutted up into the boat. Stranded, then.

“Hey!” Dean called, and the guy jumped about a mile. He scrambled to his feet, turning to face Dean, his eyes wide and terrified. Dean held up both hands, making sure his jacket still covered his gun. “Whoa,” he said. “Hey.”

“Uh, hi,” the man answered. He had golden-brown hair, grey eyes, and the kind of chiseled bone structure Dean associated with advertisements for lawyers or doctors. “Who are you?”

“Dean Winchester,” Dean said. He’d reached the edge of the beach, and now stepped cautiously out onto the dock. As soon as his feet left the island’s surface, the sense of being watched, the horrible feeling of foreboding, vanished, and Dean blinked several times.
“You feel it too, don’t you?” the man asked. “This island… there’s something wrong with it.” He shuddered. His eyes looked red and puffy, and Dean didn’t think it was from staring out into the water. The man swallowed hard, then straightened his shoulders and held out a hand. “Doctor Terry Patterson.”

Dean shook. Dr. Patterson’s hand was cold and clammy, but his grip was firm and businesslike. “Er…” Patterson continued, “Where did you come from? I thought the island was empty.”

Dean nodded out at the stranded boat. “You ain’t the only one who ran aground,” he said, the lie coming easily. “My buddies and me got stuck on the other side of the island.”

“...oh,” Patterson said, and his shoulders slumped. “I guess it was too much to hope that you could help me get back to the city.”

“Depends,” Dean said. “Our boat’s shot, but we might be able to get yours unstuck.”

“You think so?” Patterson said.

“Can’t hurt to try,” Dean answered. “Let me go grab the others, we’ll see what we can do.” Patterson nodded rapidly, and Dean turned back to the island. It was almost physically painful to step off the dock back onto the shore, the pressure of go away an almost solid thing against his skin, but Dean made himself keep moving forward.

He’d almost reached the bottom of the path back up the hill when he heard Charlie’s voice. “Dean?”

“Down here!” he called. A minute later, Charlie, Castiel, and Crowley emerged from the trees. Castiel looked pale and sickly, but he was walking under his own power, and Dean felt something in his chest unknot. “I thought I told you to stay put,” he said to Charlie as they approached.

“You said to stay with him,” she answered calmly, jerking her head at Castiel. “He wanted to find you.”

“This island is dangerous,” Castiel rasped. He sounded awful, and he swayed unsteadily as he walked. “We should leave as soon as possible.”

“Working on it,” Dean said. He told them about Patterson and his stranded boat. “Think either of you can do anything about that?” he asked Castiel and Crowley.

“If it’ll get us off this island,” Castiel said, “then yes.”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Cas—”

Castiel looked up, blue eyes fixing on Dean’s. “This place… this is like Lucifer's Cage,” he said. “If we stay here, I shudder to think what might happen to us.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “There’s another Cage?”

Castiel frowned, like the question didn’t make any sense. “No,” he said. “This island, it’s this reality’s version of the Cage.”

All three of them stared at him. “What,” Dean said, his voice flat.

“You didn’t realize?” Cas asked, then looked at Crowley. “You didn’t realize?”

“Pardon me for not being quite as attuned to the vagaries of reality as an angel,” Crowley said, though there was no heat to it. Dean didn’t think he’d ever seen the King of Hell look quite so
“Wait,” Charlie said. “This is… another reality?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “That spell seems to have used the metaphysical resonance of Lucifer’s Cage to connect with the metaphysical resonance of whatever prison exists within this island, in order to create a path between realities.”

“Like to like,” Charlie breathed, and Castiel nodded.

“Great,” Dean said. His head was starting to hurt from the number of things that didn’t make sense and he just wanted to find Sam and go home. “Fantastic. Just like old times. Is there at least magic in this reality?”

“Yes,” Crowley answered immediately. “That cottage up there - this whole island, really - is utterly lousy with it.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Dean said. He didn’t want to think about what would have happened if Castiel had lost his angel mojo again, like the angel who’d hunted Dean and Sam to the alternate universe Balthazar had sent them to years ago. Or what would happen if Crowley got turned mortal. “If this is an alternate reality, then maybe that explains why we didn’t see any signs of Lucifer before.”

“Because he’s here,” Charlie said. She still sounded shocked. “In an alternate reality.”

“Presumably,” Crowley agreed. “We’d best hurry up and find him, then.”

“Right,” Dean said. “Let’s get that boat fixed.”

Dr. Patterson stared at them as they approached. Dean couldn’t blame him - they didn’t exactly look like a group of people who’d have gone on a boating expedition in Lake Michigan together. Dean gave him a tight smile and pointed at the others in turn. “Cas. Charlie. Crowley.”

“Hello,” Patterson said, and smiled nervously.

Crowley’s eyes fixed on Patterson with unnerving intensity, and Dean was pretty sure he saw them flash red for just an instant. He glared at Crowley, but the demon gave him a lazy smile. “So,” Crowley said to Patterson. “You’ve got yourself in quite the pickle, haven’t you?”

Patterson nodded miserably. “Can you guys really help me?”

“We’re gonna try,” Dean said. He climbed up on the dock and motioned for the others to join him. Castiel looked immensely relieved the moment he was off the island proper, and even Crowley breathed out a little sigh. Dean began removing his weapons, stuffing them into his bag before handing it to Charlie, and ignoring Patterson’s wide-eyed stare. When he had nothing left but an old knife that could take a little water damage, he kicked off his shoes and jacket. “Cas,” he said. “Think you’re up to this?”

“I’ll have to be, I suppose,” Cas answered. He shucked his trenchcoat, suit coat, and shoes, jumped into the water, and started swimming with long clean strokes out to the boat.

Dean followed, and the moment he hit the water he regretted not asking Crowley to just teleport them out to the boat. He hadn’t wanted to do anything too overtly supernatural in front of Patterson - that would get really messy really quickly - but the lake was fucking freezing. He forced his arms and legs to move, and for once was glad for the Mark’s energy burning warm under his skin.
It felt like forever before he reached the reef where the boat was stranded, but hauling himself up out of the freezing water into the cool spring breeze was worse than jumping into the water in the first place. Dean’s teeth chattered uncontrollably as he carefully climbed over the rocks to where Castiel already stood by the boat, his head tilted birdlike to one side as he studied it.

“How bad?” Dean asked.

“Not as bad as I expected,” Castiel said. He reached out with one hand and lifted the little boat’s nose up off the rocks like it weighed nothing. Dean could see a series of nasty scratches and furrows along its bow, but it looked more like the boat had scraped along the top of the reef and gotten stuck rather than being impaled on the rock. There was a single narrow tear in the side of the hull, but Castiel reached down and ran a hand across it. Warm light flowed from his palm, and though Castiel swayed precariously, the tear vanished.

“Awesome,” Dean said. Castiel looked up at him, startled; Dean grinned back. He stepped around Cas, balancing carefully on the wet rocks, and started pushing the boat back out into the water.

“Come on, it’s gonna need some bailing but I think we’re good.”

Castiel held the boat steady while Dean climbed inside. There was a small bucket tucked under one of the bench seats, probably for exactly this sort of thing, and he used it to scoop out most of the water in the bottom of the boat. When it was reasonably empty, he leaned over the edge to hold the boat away from the rock while Castiel climbed in. Then he revved the engine to life and carefully steered it over to the dock.

Dr. Patterson stared at them as they approached. “It’s still—” he said in surprise. “I thought I tore it open on the rock.”

“Nah,” Dean said. “Just some scrapes. She’s fine.” He tossed the boat’s mooring line up to Crowley, who caught it and held it while Patterson and Charlie climbed in, then tossed it back down. An instant later Crowley stood in the boat beside Dean. Fortunately, Dr. Patterson had been focused on digging an expensive-looking pair of white tennis shoes - soggy and stained now from having been in the bottom of the waterlogged boat - from under a bench, and didn’t notice Crowley’s teleportation trick.

Dean glanced around the boat, counting heads. Charlie still had both her bag and his, as well as their coats and shoes. Castiel had sunk down onto the bench seat behind Patterson, looking exhausted and barely conscious, and Crowley claimed the seat next to him - probably out of sheer spite. Five adults was pushing the boat’s max capacity, but they weren’t riding too low to the water yet, and the waves were fairly gentle.

“All right, people,” Dean said, and revved the engine. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”
With Great Power

Chapter Summary

In which Sam wants to geek out about angels but can’t, and Harry proves he does, occasionally, listen when Michael talks.

Chapter Notes

Talky chapters are hard to write...

Sam

When Sam woke up, slouched against the window of Dresden’s old Caprice, he was surprised to see the sun hanging bright overhead. Yawning, he checked the clock on the dashboard: almost ten AM.

“Sleep well?” Dresden asked from the driver’s seat.

“Uh,” Sam said. “Yeah, actually.” He felt surprisingly rested, more so than he had in weeks. He’d expected to have nightmares, but if he’d dreamed at all, he didn’t remember it. Lucifer was nowhere to be seen, though Sam could still feel his Grace as a slow cold pulse just beneath Sam’s breastbone.

“We’re in eastern Ohio,” Dresden said. “Maybe six more hours to go.”

Sam nodded, then shifted until he could lean over the back of the bench seat and pop his spine. “You still okay to drive?”

“For now,” Dresden said. “Maybe we can switch off at the next gas stop.”

“Sounds good,” Sam agreed.

Dresden glanced at him. “You sound surprised.”

Sam shrugged. “Dean - my brother - hates anyone but him driving.”

“He get carsick or something?”

“Nah.” Sam smiled a little at the thought. “He’s just possessive of his car.” Dresden snorted, and they fell into a companionable silence for a few minutes. Sam took mental inventory: he felt rested, and only a little stiff from sleeping slumped against the window. Lucifer still hadn’t made an appearance, and Sam wondered if he was resting. Angels didn’t need to sleep, but Lucifer had said something about recovering his power, which might amount to the same thing.

Either way, it was nice to be alone in his own head again. Without the constant nagging of a fallen angel, Sam could sift back through the night’s events: the fight at the bar with Scratch and his buddies, the demon attack on Ms. Murphy’s house, the police showing up. Which reminded him of a
question he’d meant to ask, before Lucifer had distracted him.

“So, uh, you said back at Ms. Murphy’s that you think you know who sent the demons,” Sam said. “You wanna elaborate?”

Dresden blew out a breath. “Right,” he said. “I guess you wouldn’t know. Murph said she told you about the Denarians?”

“The fallen angels,” Sam said, and nodded.

“Their leader, more or less, is a guy called Nicodemus Archleone,” Dresden said.

Sam swallowed a chuckle. “Pretentious.”

Dresden shot him a grin, surprised but appreciative. “Just a little, yeah. So Nicky has this… cult, I guess. Humans who don’t have a coin of their own, but who follow him anyway. He calls them squires. Part of their initiation is to have their tongues cut out.” Dresden shuddered, and it wasn’t hard to guess that he’d witnessed it firsthand.

“What do coins have to do with it?” Sam asked. “Ms. Murphy mentioned coins as well, but…”

“Oh,” Dresden said. “The Denarians are called that because the thirty Fallen are bound to the thirty coins that Judas Iscariot took in exchange for betraying Jesus. Whoever touches one of those coins gets a fallen angel lurking in their head trying to seduce them. If the human agrees, they get access to the Fallen’s knowledge and power. Some of the Fallen even let the human think they’re in control at first, and act as an advisor or partner. Others just take over from the start.”

Sam blinked a few times. Dresden noticed, and said, “What?”

“Nothing,” Sam said. “Just… not how I’m used to it working.” Dresden quirked an eyebrow at him, inviting him to continue, so Sam explained, “In our reality, angels take vessels based on bloodlines. Certain human families are, uh, compatible, I guess, with different angels. The human has to give permission, but once it’s done, the angel takes over the body, and, uh. That’s kinda it for the human, unless the angel chooses to leave.” He ran his tongue over his teeth, swallowing hard as old memories threatened for a moment to choke him.


“Not after they’ve said yes.” Sam fought the urge to rub at his chest where Lucifer’s Grace curled languid beneath his bones, fought the memory of Gadreel, of what it had taken to get Gadreel out.

“Damn,” Dresden said quietly. “And you don’t have the Knights of the Cross?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard of,” Sam said. “Ms. Murphy said the Knights are supposed to help the humans?”

“Yeah,” Dresden said. “Their primary goal is to give the humans a chance to say no, to reject the Fallen and choose the Light Side of the Force. If they do, willingly, the Fallen gets kicked back to its coin. The Church has been working for centuries to try to capture all the coins, to keep the Fallen from finding new humans to corrupt.”

“What about other angels?” Sam asked. “Regular ones, who haven’t fallen?”

“They mostly don’t get involved with humans,” Dresden said. “I’ve seen the archangel Uriel a few times, and I saw an angel of death once, but that’s pretty much it.”
Sam blinked. “Uriel’s an archangel in this reality?”

Dresden shot him a surprised glance. “He’s not in yours?”

“He was a regular angel. A soldier in the same garrison as Cas - our angel friend Castiel.” Sam focused on the road gliding past the window, trying not to remember the contempt in Uriel’s eyes, the sick stinging shame of knowing that the angels he’d believed in all his life, that he’d prayed to for help, considered him an abomination.

“Was?” Dresden asked. “Past tense?”

“He, um,” Sam said. “He was actually a Lucifer sympathizer. He was supposed to be working with Castiel to stop the Apocalypse, but in reality he was trying to start it. Anna - another angel - killed him when he started killing angels who wouldn’t convert to his side.”

“That’s… unsettling,” Dresden said. “I, uh, I hope ours doesn’t turn out to be a Lucifer sympathizer. That… would be bad.”

Sam felt a corner of his mouth twitch in a smile at the understatement. “Yeah.”

“What about the bloodlines thing?” Dresden asked. “How does that work?”

Sam shrugged. “Castiel could take a guy named Jimmy Novak as his vessel, or Jimmy’s daughter Claire. But he couldn’t take Jimmy’s wife, even though she offered, because she wasn’t the right bloodline. If he had, it probably would have killed her on the spot.”

“Huh,” Dresden said thoughtfully. “Yeah, here it’s just anyone who touches one of the Denarian coins gets a fallen angel.” His left hand flexed against the steering wheel, seemingly of its own accord; Sam wondered suddenly if he was talking from personal experience. “And as far as I know, regular non-fallen angels don’t need to take human vessels at all.”

Sam shrugged again. Under any other circumstance he would have been grilling Dresden about angels and possession in this reality for hours, but right now, with Lucifer’s Grace cold under his ribs, he didn’t want to stay on the subject of angelic possession any longer than strictly necessary. He said, “Okay, so the guys without tongues came from this Archleone guy’s cult?”

“Maybe,” Dresden said, then shook his head. “But Butters kicked ol’ Nicky’s ass a couple of months ago in front of a couple dozen squires, and from what I’ve heard, a lot of them deserted.” He paused. “I’ve also heard that at least some of the deserters got picked up by Chicago’s resident Godfather, Gentleman Johnny Marcone, but Marcone isn’t stupid enough to send demons at me and Murph like that.”

“And Archleone is?”

“Nick’s desperate, scared, and pissed,” Dresden said. “A few months ago I’d’ve said he’s one of the smartest and deadliest bad guys I’ve encountered, but honestly I have no idea what he might do now.”

Sam scrubbed a hand over his mouth, thinking. “You know this is probably a trap, right?” he said finally.

Dresden glanced at him. “You think so?”

“Well, yeah,” Sam said. “It wasn’t exactly hard to find the address on that phone, and—”
Dresden blew out an exaggerated sigh. “I’m a wizard,” he said patiently. “Anyone who’d want me dead would know that. Meaning they wouldn’t expect me to be able to get the information from the cell phone.”

Sam frowned at him. “Ms. Murphy could have pulled it.”

“Not if they’d managed to kidnap her like they planned,” Dresden pointed out. “And while I know the guys in SI, they aren’t exactly high priority in the forensics lab. It could have been days before they looked at the phone.”

“Okay, fine,” Sam said, throwing his hands up. “What about after they kidnapped her? You tracked me down, I bet you could have tracked her. End result’s the same - you at the address in that phone.”

Dresden’s jaw set, but it was a grim expression rather than one of argument. After a moment he said, “Yeah, you’re probably right it’s a trap. But we’re halfway there already, might as well spring it.”

“As long as we know that’s what we’re doing going in,” Sam agreed. “We’ll check in with the local cops, see if there’s anything sketchy about the address, then go from there.”

“Sounds good,” Dresden said. He rolled his shoulders, checked the mirrors, and pulled over to the side of the road. “Won’t need gas for another couple hours, at least, and if we’re going to be up to our ears in trouble from the start, I’d like to get some sleep. I’m too old to work a case for forty-eight hours straight anymore.”

They swapped places, though Dresden crawled into the back seat of the car instead of the front passenger side, and stretched out along the bench while Sam got settled in the driver’s seat. The Caprice had enough in common with the Impala for the wheel, gearshift, and dashboard to feel familiar, and Sam pulled back out onto the highway before glancing at Dresden in the rearview.

“You gonna be okay back there?”

“Yep,” Dresden said, and smiled fondly. “When I was a kid, I’d sleep in the back of my dad’s station wagon all the time.”

“Me too,” Sam said. “Except we have an Impala. Wizards travel a lot?”

“Dad wasn’t a wizard,” Dresden said. “He was a stage magician. All sleight-of-hand and illusion. He used to travel around to children’s hospitals and orphanages, putting on shows for the kids. I was too young to actually help or anything, but he’d let me hold the props sometimes.”

“What about your mom?”

Dresden’s expression turned pensive and a little melancholy. “She was a wizard, yeah. A good one. She died when I was born. Entropy curse, cast by the king of the White Court of vampires.” He shifted along the seat, trying to get comfortable. “What about you? Your parents?”

“A demon killed my mom when I was six months old,” Sam said quietly. “Dad didn’t know anything about demons or ghosts or all that back then. But he saw enough to know her death wasn’t natural. He spent the rest of his life hunting the demon that killed her.”

“Did he get it?” Dresden’s voice was cautious, like he didn’t want to push too far into a sensitive subject.

Sam shook his head. “The same demon almost killed my brother, about ten, eleven years ago. Dad traded his life for Dean’s. But his ghost came back long enough to help us kill the son of a bitch.”
“And you kept hunting, even after that?”

“Didn’t have much choice,” Sam said, and didn’t try to hide the bitterness in his voice. “The demon set a lot of things in motion that didn’t stop just because he was dead. And we were wanted by the FBI, anyway. I couldn’t have gone back to college even if I’d wanted to.”

“Back?” Dresden asked. “You went at all?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, and swallowed past a sudden ache in his chest. “I’d just taken the LSAT when…” When Jess died. “When Dean came to get me.”

Dresden was watching him in the rearview, dark eyes knowing. “You lost someone,” he said, very quietly.

It took Sam a second to get the words out. “My girlfriend. Jessica. Azazel had her killed. He thought I was getting too soft at college.”

“I’m sorry,” Dresden said gently. Then, “The woman I loved got half-turned by vampires. She, um.” He paused, swallowing hard. “She died, a few years ago. She was ready for it, her death would wipe out the Red Court. But…”

Sam thought about Madison, about Amy, about how he’d felt about killing Ruby even after her betrayal. “But it still hurts.”

“Yeah,” Dresden agreed. They were quiet for a minute or two, then Dresden snorted and said, with forced jocularity, “Well, that took a depressing turn. Sorry.”

Sam felt a corner of his mouth curl up. “I, uh. I guess it comes with the territory.”

“Hah. They should warn you on the recruitment posters.”

“If they did,” Sam pointed out, “no one would sign up for this.”

“True.” Dresden blew out an exaggerated sigh. “And where would the world be if no one wanted to be heroes?”

“Better off, probably,” Sam said. The words were bitter on his tongue.

Dresden raised an eyebrow. “You think so?”

“Maybe it’s different here,” Sam said, his voice rougher than he’d meant. “But in my reality, being heroic hasn’t ever ended well.” He shook his head. “Heroes are just the ones who get other people killed.”

“Maybe,” Dresden said. “Maybe not.” He met Sam’s gaze in the rearview mirror for a dangerous second, dark eyes calm and serious. “Sure, we don’t always make the right choices, or good ones. And, hell, sometimes it feels like there are no good choices. But that doesn’t mean it’s better to just sit there and do nothing. Ostriching won’t solve anything. You make a choice, and maybe it’s the right one and things turn out okay, or maybe it’s the wrong one and they don’t. But either way, you make the choice, and you learn from it and you move on and you make sure you do it better next time.”

Lucifer’s Grace pulsed cold in Sam’s chest. “Yeah,” he whispered.

There wasn’t much to say after that. Dresden settled against the seat, his gaze distant and thoughtful.
until his eyes drifted closed and his breathing evened out into sleep. Sam fixed his eyes on the road and clenched his teeth hard, until the pain in his jaw hurt more than the ache in his heart.
Mess With the Best

Chapter Summary

In which Dean doesn't kill anyone, Crowley smells profit, and Charlie pulls her weight.

Chapter Notes

I'm always a little disappointed that we never get to see the Paranet side of things in the Dresdenverse. I mean, a network of minor talents and dabblers who can use technology have to be making extensive use of the Internet and everything it has to offer.

Dean

By the time their little motorboat chugged its way back to the public Chicago docks, Dean’s clothes were mostly dry and he was only a little frozen from the chilly spring breeze. The ride had been largely silent; Dr. Patterson was clearly on edge, which was no surprise given the situation, while Castiel had dozed the whole time and even Crowley was unusually subdued. Charlie had made a few attempts to talk to Patterson, but after the third monosyllabic answer had given up.

Patterson did at least start talking when they approached the docks, pointing to a little public slip filled with battered old motorboats just like theirs. “There,” he said. “It’s a rental. We can drop it off there.”

Dean grunted acknowledgement, swinging the boat up alongside a low pier as a gangly teenager came out to meet them. She wore a windbreaker with the rental agency’s logo on the back, and popped her gum lazily as she tied off the rope Dean tossed up to her. “Be careful when climbing out of the boat,” she said in a bored voice. Then she blinked a few times, seeming to snap out of her retail-worker trance and focusing on Patterson. “Didn’t you go out alone?”

“I, uh, yes,” Patterson stammered. “Yes, I did. But they were stranded, so—”

“He gave us a lift,” Dean filled in, and flashed the girl a smile. She was too young for him to actually flirt with (could practically hear Sam’s voice scolding him), so he didn’t push it any further, but she still ducked her head and blushed.

Dean stayed in the boat, steadying it against the dock, until everyone else had climbed out. Castiel was still wobbly and exhausted, but Dean only had to half-lift him out, so he figured it couldn’t be too bad. (Besides, if he can't carry his weight then he gets left behind, the Mark crooned in Dean’s ear.) Once they were all out of the boat and it was safely tied up, Patterson handed the girl a fifty.

Her eyes widened at the size of the tip and she hurried back to the little shack at the other end of the dock, probably afraid he’d decide it was a mistake and take it back.

Once she was gone, Patterson said, “Thanks for helping me. I, uh, I think I’m going to avoid marine hobbies for a while.” He gave a tight little smile and an awkward wave, and hurried away toward the
parking lot just visible across the pier.

There was a minute or two of silence, then Dean said, “Anyone think him being on that island was a coincidence?”

More silence. Crowley snorted, and said, “He’s in a load of trouble, that one. Desperate for something.”

“That your professional opinion?” Dean sniped.

Crowley rolled his eyes. “I was King of the Crossroads, if you’ll recall, before I became King of Hell,” he said. “I can smell a man willing to sell his soul from a mile away.”

“Well that’s creepy,” Charlie said, with fake cheer. “So what now?”

“Now we figure out what the hell’s going on,” Dean said. He’d been thinking about this on the boat, so the instructions came out drill-sergeant fast. “Charlie, find someplace with Internet access and park yourself. See what you can dig up about Doctor Terry Patterson, figure out why he was on that freaky island. If he’s involved in whatever the hell’s going on, we need to know. And see what you can find out about the island itself. And whether there’ve been any Lucifer signs in the past twenty-four hours, or any sign of Sam.” She nodded. “The rest of us will scout the city, see if we can find Sam,” Dean continued, then pointed at Crowley. “Me and Cas’ll take the north half of the city, you go south. We check in with Charlie once an hour. You got your phone?”

“Yes,” Crowley said, “but it’s unlikely to work here. My special royalty-rate calling plan isn’t set up in this reality.”

“He’s right,” Charlie said. She’d pulled out her own phone while Dean was talking, and was frowning at it. “Our phones won’t work here.”

Dean swore under his breath in frustration. “Okay, so we go grab some burner phones. Then we all check in with Charlie at least once an hour. We don’t know what we’ll find in this reality, especially if Lucifer’s running around and has a hard-on for killing us.”

“Graphic,” Crowley said. “But accurate.”

“Any objections?” Dean said. He could hear his father in his voice, all steel and determination and the tone that meant no one had better have any objections.

Charlie swallowed, but didn’t say anything. Castiel was likewise silent, and Crowley just looked bored. Dean nodded sharply. “Let’s move.”

* * *

Two hours later, they all had shiny new prepaid phones and Charlie had set up shop in a Starbucks near the Sears Tower. Dean had boosted a car for him and Castiel to drive around in, a silver Honda Accord that was the most boring car in the world, but also one of the most common and therefore the least likely to be noticed driving around the city he’d stolen it in. Crowley had simply vanished; driving was apparently too plebian for him. Dean didn’t care, as long as he didn’t draw unnecessary attention and they ultimately found Sam.

But that was a hell of a lot easier said than done. Chicago was a huge city, and Sam could have been anywhere - or not in the city at all. They were following a trail so faint it was mostly guesswork, and even Charlie calling fifteen minutes after they’d left her at the cafe to tell them that there had been a massive, unexpected, and unexplained thunderstorm last night wasn’t enough to convince Dean they
were doing the right thing. It was spring in the Midwest; sudden huge thunderstorms weren’t uncommon.

But it was something, and he held onto it with gritted teeth and white knuckles and eyes that ached from straining to make out every face of every person they drove past. Castiel dozed in the passenger seat, looking even more beat up and exhausted than usual. Protecting Charlie and then fixing the motorboat had obviously cost him most of what little Grace he’d managed to recover from Metatron. Part of Dean wanted to wrap him in a blanket and sit him in the bunker’s kitchen with a mug of coffee.

The other part wanted to put a bullet through Cas’s brain and dump him by the roadside before he became an even bigger burden.

Dean dug a thumb into the Mark on his arm, and when that wasn’t enough to chase away the desire to see Cas bloody and lifeless like so much rotten meat, he jabbed at the Accord’s radio until he found a station playing Metallica, and cranked the volume until his ears hurt. The music didn’t do jack shit either, but at least Castiel woke up, and he looked a lot less (killable) vulnerable when he was awake and squinting grumpily at Dean.

Dean ignored him, glaring out at the sidewalks full of people, and finally Cas took the hint and started looking as well. But as hours passed and they continued to not find Sam, Dean finally growled and swung the car back toward the Sears Tower.

Charlie was in the Starbucks where they’d left her, hunched over her little tablet computer, eyes bright and four empty coffee cups at her elbow. She glanced up when Dean and Castiel sat down at the table with her, clearly surprised. “Did you find him?”

“No,” Dean grumbled, and rubbed at his aching eyes. “This ain’t working. The city’s too damn big. We need info, Charlie.”

“Well then, you’re in luck,” she said, and grinned. “I think I have a lead.” She laid the tablet flat so they could see. “I started with our mystery doctor Terry Patterson. Turns out he’s a renowned plastic surgeon, people come from all over the country to get work done.”

“What the hell’s a plastic surgeon doing on a freaky magic island in the middle of Lake Michigan?” Dean asked.

“Good question,” Charlie said. “I dug up some posts he made on a forum for a group called the Paranet, which as far as I can tell is some sort of online organization of minor supernatural talents. Mostly low-power witches and psychics. Patterson used a fake name, but I matched the IP address of the handle to Patterson’s house.”

“He’s a witch?” Castiel asked in surprise.

Dean snorted. “A witch doctor!”

That got him the squinty eyes from Cas, but Charlie grinned. “Pretty much,” she said. “He’s been active on the forums for a while. Early on it was fairly common, harmless witch stuff, ‘what kind of candles are best for good-luck charms’, stuff like that. But about three years ago he made a really panicked-sounding post asking about something called the ‘Wardens’ and what to do if you got contacted by one. Most of the answers were along the lines of ‘as long as you haven’t broken any Laws of Magic, you’re fine’, and—”

“Wait,” Dean interrupted. “What the hell are Laws of Magic?”
“So there’s no hunters in this reality, as far as I can tell,” Charlie said. “Instead, what keeps witches and other nasties from running rampant over regular humans is this group of witches called the Wardens. They enforce seven laws: don’t kill with magic, don’t change the shape of others, don’t poke around inside people’s brains, don’t enslave people with magic, no necromancy, no time-travel, and don’t seek ‘beyond the Outer Gates’, whatever the hell that means.”

“Patterson broke one of these Laws?” Castiel asked.

Charlie shook her head. “He wouldn’t be alive if he had. According to the Paranet’s FAQs, the Wardens kill anyone who breaks the Laws.”

Dean whistled softly. “Man, I wish the witches in our reality self-policed like that. Make our lives a lot easier.”

“No kidding,” Charlie agreed. “From what Patterson posted on the forums, he’d never heard of the Laws, but got a visit from a Warden warning him about them. So after that, he was pretty quiet, except to pass on information here and there when something big was going down in the supernatural world. But then about two weeks ago, he made a post under a new username, fishing for information about demon-summoning. Most of the replies warned him off it, but there were a few that actually gave advice. He hasn’t posted since.”

“Demon-summoning?” Castiel said. “That can’t be good.”

“Nope,” Charlie said. “I haven’t been able to find much else beyond that—”

“That ain’t much of a lead, Charlie,” Dean said tiredly.

“I wasn’t done,” she said mildly, and when he looked up at her, smirked. “Patterson dead-ended, but the Paranet forums didn’t. Now, I had looked for that island earlier, but it’s not in any official records. It’s like, as far as the Illinois and Michigan governments are concerned, there’s nothing in that patch of lake except water. But!” She held up a finger. “If you read between the lines of some of the forum postings, you can find references to it. Apparently it’s been the location of a bunch of major events in the witching world over the last five or six years. I’ll spare you the details, but I managed to trace these mentions of it back to a handful of usernames which, if you cut back through all the attempts to hide their source, all posted from the same set of IP addresses. And here’s where things get really weird.”

“Because they’re not weird enough already?” Dean muttered.

Charlie made a face at him. “You don’t know the half of it. So these IP addresses belong to an organization called the ‘Brighter Future Society’, also known as the Chicago Alliance. It was set up a few years ago, via shim companies and other fronts, by this Chicago’s resident crime lord, a guy called Gentleman Johnny Marcone. Apparently Marcone, aside from being a modern-day Godfather, is also well-known in supernatural circles. He’s referred to as ‘Baron’ and is some kind of supernatural freeholding lord.”

Dean yawned. “So?”

“So,” Charlie said, “the Chicago Alliance headquarters was built at the former home address of Chicago’s resident witch, a guy named Harry Dresden.” She held up a hand to stop Dean from interrupting. “And when I dug through the Alliance’s files - the ones I could get to, at least, they actually have halfway decent security and I’m still working on cracking their top-secret server without tipping them off—”
“Charlie!” Dean snapped.

“Right, right.” She turned the tablet around and tapped on it. A picture, obviously taken from a security camera, filled the screen: a tall man in a black duster, with shaggy dark hair and dark eyes, carrying a long stick in one hand. “This is Harry Dresden. According to the Alliance’s files, he’s been living on that island for the last year or so, and has some kind of bond with it. His mother’s name was Margaret LeFay; she often went by Maggie and was known for her ability to navigate magical paths.”

“The note,” Castiel said. “It was written by someone named Maggie, who was powerful enough to open a pathway between realities.”

“Yes,” Charlie said. “Also, Dresden’s a Warden.”

“The witch law enforcement that our witch doctor was worried about,” Dean said.

“Yes,” Charlie said again. “Annnd…” She drew the word out like a drumroll. “I think Sam might be with him, at least as of last night.”

“What?” Dean demanded.

Charlie spun the tablet back around, fingers skimming over the screen. “The Alliance’s file on Dresden listed several known associates, including a retired Chicago PD sergeant named Karrin Murphy. The police responded to a call at Ms. Murphy’s house around three AM this morning. There’s not a lot of details available yet, but apparently they interviewed Dresden on the scene, as well as someone going by the name ‘Peter Gabriel’ who said he was a research librarian from out of town.”

Dean drew in a breath. That was one of Sam’s go-to aliases. The key word there being Sam - Lucifer had no reason to use an alias, or for that matter to give witness statements to the cops.

Charlie gave him a knowing look. “It’s not for sure,” she warned. “It’s not exactly a common name, but it’s not unheard-of, either.”

“But it’s a lead,” Dean said, his voice more gruff than he’d meant. “So this Dresden guy is smack in the middle of everything.”

“Yes. And because I’m awesome,” Charlie continued, “I already have information for you on where to start looking.” She pushed over a sheet of paper torn from the notebook she kept in her bag; it had a name and address written on it. “The police report says that Ms. Murphy is reachable via another associate of Dresden’s, a guy named Michael Carpenter. One of them will probably know where Dresden is.”

“And Dresden might know where Sam is,” Dean finished. He looked over at Castiel, who nodded, determination in his blue eyes. To Charlie, Dean said, “Thanks, darlin’. You’re awesome.”

“I know,” she agreed with an impish grin.

Dean leaned across the table and kissed her cheek. “Keep digging on this Dresden guy, and Patterson, too. Whatever he’s up to, we don’t want him crashing the party.”


“You too,” Dean said. “Call us if you find anything else.”
Charlie nodded, and Dean and Castiel headed back out into the city to find the man that might lead them to Sam.
Chapter Summary

In which Lucifer gets bored and Harry gets suspicious.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the unexpected hiatus! Real life got kinda crazy there for a few weeks, plus I ran into a knotty plot hole that I needed to work out before I could get any further. Hopefully we're back on track now, though.

Sam

Reading, Pennsylvania, was about an hour away from Gladwyne, and a big enough city that Sam had had no trouble finding a print shop where he could make a fake badge for Dresden. He was heading to the self-service printers to pick up the printout of the FBI badge image and Dresden’s photo - hastily snapped on his cell in front of a building with approximately the right shade of grey wall - when he rounded a display rack of picture frames and ran full-body into Lucifer. The devil was standing in the corner by the printers, his arms folded in lazy indifference, and running into him was like hitting a brick wall. His face twisted into a smirk as Sam stumbled backward, heart racing, dropping his phone and nearly knocking over the display rack.

“Sammy,” Lucifer purred. “I’m sure you’re having fun and all - playing witches and hunters all across the continent, talking about feelings and responsibilities with that freak - but I’m getting bored.” He slouched back against one of the printers, studying his fingernails like they were the most fascinating thing in the world. “Shouldn’t we be headed home by now?”

His tone was mild, but there was an ugly edge to it that chilled Sam’s bones and froze him in place where he’d bent down to pick up his phone. Breathe, he told himself. Breathe. Just breathe. “I’m trying,” he said out loud. At two-thirty in the afternoon the print shop was nearly empty; the cashier was up front helping another customer with a print order, but neither of them would be able to hear Sam back here in the self-print corner. He made himself scoop up the phone and straighten. “We need Dresden’s help to get out of here, and Dresden can’t help us until the demons are dealt with.”

Dresden himself wasn’t there; he’d dropped Sam off at the print shop and gone in search of a Burger King. Sam was suddenly, intensely grateful for that - if Dresden had been there when Lucifer had made his appearance, the jig would’ve been up. As it was, Sam took a minute to get his breathing and heart rate mostly under control. Then he said, doing his best to keep his voice neutral, “Are you - I mean, have you recovered your power yet?”

Lucifer’s expression darkened and Sam flinched. But the devil just said, “I’m getting there. I have to be careful - little brother Uriel’s not so little in this reality, and he’s just dying for me to make enough of a move that he can justify interfering.”
That… probably wouldn’t be good; Sam remembered Dresden saying that this reality’s Uriel was an archangel. But if he wanted to interfere, why wasn’t he just—

“Because there’s rules,” Lucifer said, answering Sam’s thoughts. “Apparently Daddy isn’t so disappeared in this reality, and he’s all about balance. An eye for an eye and all.”

Sam nodded slowly, getting it. “It’s a cold war. If Uriel acts, you get to retaliate—”

“Me,” Lucifer interrupted, “or more to the point - because the rules are stupid and didn’t account for reality hopping - this reality’s version of me.”

Gulp. The last thing they needed was a second, presumably fully-powered Lucifer getting involved. “So,” Sam said, “Uriel won’t make a move because he doesn’t want to give either you or alternate-you a reason to act, but you don’t want to give him a reason, either.”

“Good boy,” Lucifer said, his voice approving in a way that brought back a sudden flood of Cage memories. Sam’s gut twisted as he remembered cold fingers sliding through his hair, stroking down his back, curling around his wrists. His hands clenched helplessly and he gritted his teeth, forcing the memories away. Lucifer watched him, pale eyes unsettlingly intent, his forked tongue flicking out over his lips.

“So we keep our heads down,” Sam managed finally. “And we get out of here before we give Uriel a reason to act.” Or rather, before Lucifer got bored enough to give Uriel a reason to act, consequences be damned. Sam started to reach for the printout, to get back to work making the badge - but Lucifer was still leaning on the printer. Which meant that Sam had to reach past him to pick up the paper. He swallowed hard, braced himself, and stepped closer.

Lucifer waited until Sam had stretched his arm out as far as he could, leaning a little, trying to reach around the devil without actually touching him. Then he grabbed Sam by the hips and yanked him forward, pressing their bodies together and oh God oh God oh God, Sam couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, Lucifer’s hands freezing cold even through the fabric of his jeans, his body a pillar of ice from Sam’s chest to his thighs. Lucifer’s face was maybe two inches from Sam’s, his blue eyes flat and empty. “Better get this pretty ass in gear, then, eh, Sammy?” he purred, his voice low and throaty and horribly intimate.

Sam couldn’t move, every part of him locked up in terrified panic, his breath coming way too fast. Lucifer made him wait, maybe ten or fifteen seconds that each felt like a century. Then he pushed Sam away, hard. Sam staggered, crashing into the display rack, shelf edges cracking bruises into his spine. He managed to catch the rack before it tipped over, though, and clung to it for a few minutes, until the panic faded enough that he could move (could breathe, could see) again. Lucifer just watched, faint amusement at the corners of his eyes, and Sam hoped that maybe it was enough to keep him entertained until they could finish this case with Dresden and get back home.

Finally he managed to push himself upright - and then realized, sick horror curling in his stomach, that he’d never actually managed to get the paper from the printer. He couldn’t make himself move any closer to Lucifer, couldn’t make himself move at all, and he stood frozen, shaking, until Lucifer laughed. The devil’s voice was soft and silken, winding under Sam’s skin, and he reached behind himself to pull the paper from the printer tray. “Need this, Sammy?” he asked, holding it out.

Sam almost couldn’t make himself reach for it, sure that Lucifer would jerk it away at the last second, would toy with him like a cat with string. But they weren’t going to get home unless Sam and Dresden solved the demon case, and they couldn’t do that without the badge. So Sam swallowed, gritted his teeth, and reached for the paper.
Lucifer’s pale eyes sparkled - literally sparkled, cold white light flashing through them - but he let Sam take the printout. Caught off guard, Sam just stood there for a second with the paper in hand, staring at him. Lucifer smirked. “It’s too easy if you’re expecting it, Sammy.” He nodded to the printout. “Better get to work. Places to go, federal agents to impersonate…”

“Yeah,” Sam whispered. He closed his eyes for a second. Breathe in, breathe out. When he spoke again, his voice was almost normal. “Make the badge. Find whoever sent the demons. Get home.”

“And no more dawdling,” Lucifer said. His voice was light, almost gentle; it sent chills up Sam’s spine.

“And no more dawdling,” Sam echoed.

“Easy as pie,” Lucifer murmured. He stepped closer, stretching up one hand to cup Sam’s jaw and lift his head, forcing Sam to look him in the eyes. “You promised me the world, Sammy. Don’t let me down.”

Sam nodded jerkily, and Lucifer let his hand fall away with the motion. Then his pale eyes flicked past Sam’s shoulder, and he stepped back, fading into shadows that hadn’t been there a moment ago. Sam turned around, and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Harry Dresden standing just past the display rack, hands full of Burger King bags.

“Hey,” Dresden said brightly. “I got the salad you asked for. Felt like the world’s biggest hipster doing it, though. Seriously, man, who gets salads at Burger King?” He pushed one of the bags into Sam’s free hand, using the motion to step around the display rack into the printer corner. Sam could see his dark eyes flicking around, and winced. How much had Dresden seen?

Confirming his fears, Dresden said, “Who were you talking to?”

“No one,” Sam said, and it was everything he could do to keep his voice steady. “I mean…” He forced a shrug, though he had no idea if it looked as casual as he was hoping. “Just talking to myself.”

Dresden grunted noncommittally. “And the sheet of paper hovering in midair?”

Oops. Sam hadn’t had a chance to wonder what Lucifer’s actions looked like to outside observers, but now he knew. He was suddenly almost glad Lucifer had been getting handsy a minute ago; if he hadn’t already been sick with panic he might have reacted more visibly to Dresden’s words. As it was, though, he was pretty sure his face didn’t betray more than mild surprise. “I, uh,” he said, and fought to keep the lie sounding smooth. “I, uh,” he said, and fought to keep the lie sounding smooth. “I told you I’m psychic.”

“You said psychics in your reality did things like talking to spirits and sensing thoughts,” Dresden said, his tone mild. “Telekinesis is a whole ‘nother story.”

Oops. Sam hadn’t had a chance to wonder what Lucifer’s actions looked like to outside observers, but now he knew. He was suddenly almost glad Lucifer had been getting handsy a minute ago; if he hadn’t already been sick with panic he might have reacted more visibly to Dresden’s words. As it was, though, he was pretty sure his face didn’t betray more than mild surprise. “I, uh,” he said, and fought to keep the lie sounding smooth. “I told you I’m psychic.”

“You said psychics in your reality did things like talking to spirits and sensing thoughts,” Dresden said, his tone mild. “Telekinesis is a whole ‘nother story.”

“So is killing demons with my brain,” Sam pointed out. Maybe for once the alternate reality thing would work in his favor. “It’s… well, it’s not common in my reality, but I’m not the only one who can do it.”

“And, what,” Dresden drawled. “You just felt like showing off in the middle of a store?”

Sam looked pointedly toward the display racks that mostly hid this corner from the rest of the store, then turned back to Dresden, letting his expression go exasperated. “I don’t do it much. I’m out of practice.”

Dresden snorted. “Fine,” he said, and then to Sam’s eternal relief, let the subject drop. “You almost
“Yeah,” Sam said. “Ten, maybe fifteen more minutes.” He handed the Burger King bag back to Dresden. “Go ahead and eat, I’ll be out as soon as I’m done.”

“Sure,” Dresden said. He left, shifting the bags into the crook of his arm so he could dig out a handful of French fries and munch on them as he walked. Sam waited, but Lucifer didn’t reappear, and finally Sam sucked in a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and got back to work.

Harry

Sam was hiding something.

I mean, I’d been pretty sure he was hiding something ever since he refused to do a soulgaze, but now I was certain that he was, and that whatever it was, it was big. I hadn’t intended to spy on him, but, well, I’m a private investigator and a wizard. When I realized he hadn’t heard me come up behind him, it had been an easy choice to wait and see what I found out.

Of course, Sam was both smart and a good liar - I’d seen just how good back in the bar last night. His explanation was mostly plausible, too. I might even have bought it, if it hadn’t been so painfully obvious that he’d been scared shitless of something. But his face had been white as a sheet, and while the effort of telekinesis could certainly make your hands shake, there was a difference between that and the kind of whole-body, terrified trembling Sam had been doing.

And then there’d been his words, what he’d said before he realized I was there. He’d sounded like he was making a promise to someone, not just reminding himself what he needed to do. But there hadn’t been anyone else in the printer alcove with him that I could see, and my arcane senses hadn’t picked up anything except Sam’s own cold bloody aura. The cold half had flared up again, enough that I’d almost expected to see my breath misting in the air when I spoke, but that seemed to be the norm when he was using his psychic powers.

Which didn’t mean it was completely normal or innocent. For all I knew, Sam could’ve been using those psychic powers to communicate with someone. Or something. Although I had no idea who that might be. Vadderung had said Sam had nothing to do with the demons, that he really was a lost visitor from an alternate reality, and and Vadderung had no reason to lie. But that meant that Sam shouldn’t have anyone in this reality to talk to, psychically or otherwise, except for the people he’d met while he was with me.

Possession, maybe? It would certainly explain why he’d dodged the soulgaze. But my admittedly limited experience with demonic possession suggested otherwise. It had been over a decade since I’d thought about the girl who’d nearly killed me while possessed by a demon, but it hadn’t exactly been a subtle thing. Her eyes had filled with blood, she’d been able to lift me like I was a rag doll, and her voice had been wholly unnatural. And besides all those obvious signs, she would have been putting off one hell of a corrupt aura. I hadn’t felt it at the time due to a combination of inexperience, exhaustion, and the aftereffects of the same demon having taken a great big bite out of my power, but I’d learned a lot since then. If Sam was possessed by a demon, I’d have sensed it by now.

But that didn’t leave a whole lot of other options. Denarians apparently weren’t a thing in his reality, and while I supposed he could have been lying about that, my gut said his curiosity and lack of knowledge about them had been genuine. And if it was something else entirely, something not comparable to anything in my reality, well… there wasn’t a whole lot I could do about that, except keep an eye on him and hope nothing went spectacularly wrong. A few years ago I might have
thought otherwise, might have tried to confront him, but the last few years had taught me a lot about patience and playing smart. If Sam’s secret was dangerous, it might be something he’d be willing to fight - or kill - for. Based on what I’d seen so far, I could almost certainly take him in a straight fight - but without knowing his secret, it wouldn’t be a straight fight. No, provoking a fight would be way too risky until I had a better idea of what he was hiding.

Dammit. I was starting to regret not throwing Sam into the prison under Demonreach while I’d had the chance. Or at least, not leaving him behind and taking someone I trusted. Even if Sam wasn’t involved with whoever had sent the demons after me and Murph, I didn’t like that he was hiding things from me. Granted, I hadn’t been completely honest with him, either - I hadn’t mentioned that I was either a Warden of the White Council or the Winter Knight, and both of those things had the potential to be very bad for Sam, if things went south. So it wasn’t exactly fair to be mad that he wasn’t telling me everything. But if whatever Sam was hiding could scare him - a guy who’d gone toe to toe with demons and come out on top - that badly, it was probably more dangerous than either Warden or Knight.

I sighed, juggling the bags of delicious fast-food goodness plus one bowl of rabbit food until I could get my car keys out and the Caprice’s door open. Sliding behind the wheel, I dropped the bags onto the seat beside me, retrieved my burger, and dug in. I couldn’t force Sam to tell me all his secrets. I’d just have to hope that whatever they were, they wouldn’t get anybody killed.
Chapter Summary

In which Dean gets more questions than answers, and Mouse doesn’t chew anyone’s face off.

Dean

It was late afternoon, the sun just low enough to tint the sky pink, when Dean parked the stolen Accord across the street from Michael Carpenter’s home. He sat there for a minute, studying the house. Everything about it screamed of a nuclear family, husband, wife, two point five kids, homey porch furniture, bright curtains in the windows, children’s toys scattered around the yard - the kind of life Dean hadn’t had since he was four years old. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to find at the home of an associate of a powerful witch-cop, but a postcard of suburbia wasn’t it.

“What do you think?” he asked Castiel without turning around. “Charlie got the wrong address, maybe?”

“I don’t think so,” Castiel answered, and something in his voice made Dean turn to look at him. The angel was leaning forward in his seat, squinting through the windshield with his head tilted to one side. After a moment, he blinked and focused on Dean. “That house is guarded by an entire platoon of angels.”

Dean stared at him. “Angels?” he repeated. “Why the hell would angels be guarding some dude’s house?”

“Good question,” Castiel said. “I’ll ask them.”

“Cas—” Dean started, but Castiel was already opening the Accord’s door and climbing out. Grumbling under his breath, Dean followed, checking as he went that his gun was safely hidden under his jacket. “Cas!” he called. “Wait up!”

Castiel paused at the little gate in the white picket fence at the front of the lawn, though his eyes were focused on something in the yard that Dean couldn’t see. “They’re guardians,” he said as Dean approached. “They won’t attack us as long as we don’t attack anyone in the house.”

“Great,” Dean muttered. “How reassuring.” He pushed past Castiel and opened the gate, stepping through warily. No angels appeared to smite him, which was good. A few steps in, he realized Cas hadn’t moved from his spot on the sidewalk; Dean backtracked irritably and grabbed him by the arm, dragging him through the gate. Castiel didn’t resist, exactly, but it was obvious his attention was far away, and his skin hummed with the faint, frighteningly (pathetically, crooned the Mark) weak energy of his Grace. His eyes tracked something moving across the lawn, something that seemed to stop a few feet away from him, and he planted his feet. He wasn’t nearly as strong as he had once been, but it was still enough to prevent Dean from moving him any further.

Dean sighed and left him. Hopefully no one would notice the scruffy guy in the ill-fitting suit and trenchcoat standing in the middle of Michael Carpenter’s lawn and staring fixedly into space. And
maybe he’d even get some useful information out of the angels.

Yeah, right - as if a useless idiot like him could be good for anything, Dean thought, then blinked, not sure if that had been his own thought or the Mark’s. Careful, he warned himself. He’d only made it this far by doing everything he could to ignore the Mark’s whispers, its gentle tugs on his mind, and if he let it in, gave it any foothold on his thoughts, he’d—

A freaking bear loped around the side of the house.

Dean went for his gun on sheer reflex, but the creature - not a bear, he realized belatedly, but some kind of hellishly massive, shaggy grey dog - stopped short, planted its feet, and began to growl in a low dangerous rumble Dean could feel in his bones. He froze, his heart pounding against his ribs. Castiel’s warning echoed in his mind: they won’t attack us as long as we don’t attack anyone in the house. Did this count as in the house? Did it count if the dog started it? Dean really didn’t want to find out.

The - he could not think of that thing as a dog, it was damn near as big as Crowley’s hellhound and looked just as mean - the creature kept staring at him, growling low. Abruptly Dean realized that someone was standing behind it: a little girl. She wore a puffy pink jacket and had long dark hair and dark eyes that were, at the moment, the size of dinner plates as she stared over the beast’s shoulders at him.

A kid. Dammit.

The beast stood tense, its upper lip curled, sharp teeth as long as Dean’s fingers glinting underneath. Dean had never been a fan of dogs even before hellhounds had ripped him to agonizing shreds, and the Mark was screaming at him to attack, to destroy the beast for daring to threaten him and the girl for simply being there. It was several long horrible seconds before Dean managed to get his breathing under control and shove the Mark down enough to think, to do anything that didn’t involve drawing his knife and going to town.

Moving as slowly as he could, Dean spread his hands out to the sides, praying that the dog-beast wouldn’t take the movement as a threat. The little girl didn’t move, her eyes darting between Dean and the house like she was gauging whether she could run inside before he reached her. She probably lived there; she looked about the right age for the toys scattered around the lawn, maybe nine or ten years old. She also looked terrified. Not of him, exactly - he’d seen enough traumatized kids in his life that he could recognize that disproportionate fear. When he had himself under control, more or less, he crouched down so he wasn’t looming quite so much, and tried a careful smile.

“Hey,” he said to the girl.

She kept staring at him, unmoving, but the dog-beast relaxed slightly, its growls fading and its stance easing. He could see now that she had one hand buried almost to the elbow in the creature’s thick mane; maybe she’d signaled it. Keeping his voice as gentle as he could, Dean said, “I need to talk to your dad. Is he here?”

It took so long for her to respond that he almost thought she wasn’t going to at all, but finally she said, so quietly he could barely hear, “My dad or their dad?”

“Oh,” Dean said. Maybe she didn’t live in the house after all, and was just a close neighbor.

“Whichever one’s named Michael Carpenter.”

She nodded, though he wasn’t sure if she was acknowledging his clarification or answering his question. He said carefully, “Could you go get him?”
She nodded again and started toward the house. The huge dog moved with her, though its eyes stayed fixed on Dean and it kept its body between Dean and the girl. Only after they’d disappeared through the front door did Dean heave out a sigh of relief and straighten. His legs ached from staying half-crouched, and so did his lower back. Dammit, he was getting too old for this bullshit.

A glance over his shoulder told him that Castiel hadn’t moved from where Dean had left him, though he’d turned and was watching Dean nervously. Dean was about to make a snide comment at him when a shrill ringing erupted from his pocket. Still tense with adrenaline from the confrontation with the dog, Dean yelped before he could stop himself, then felt his ears go red when Castiel smiled and turned back to his conversation with the invisible angel. This was why he always replaced the damn ringtone on his phones - he didn’t need a heart attack when he was chasing some fugly or another.

He fumbled the burner phone from his pocket and glared at it. The name on the screen said Charlie, and he hesitated for a second so that his voice would come out in the right octave. He was reaching for the answer button when the Carpenters’ front door opened.

Sorry, Charlie, Dean thought. He hit decline instead and switched the ringer to silent, then dropped the phone back in his pocket. He’d call her back as soon as he was done here.

A woman came out onto the porch, one arm and one leg wrapped in casts, a single crutch tucked under her good arm. She was tiny, with shaggy blond hair and a cute button nose, and looked like she belonged in a Sarah McLachlan ad as she crutched her way across the porch. Half of Dean wanted to run forward and help her down the porch steps, but the other half wanted to put a bullet between her eyes to get rid of a broken waste of space. He gritted his teeth and fought the urge to dig his fingers into the Mark.

Finally the woman reached Dean where he stood on the walkway up to the house, stopping just out of arm’s reach. “Michael’s got his hands full at the moment,” she said. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. He dug into his pocket for his FBI badge, noting how the woman’s eyes tracked the motion, and flashed the badge at her. “Special Agent Allman.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Castiel. “That’s my partner, Agent Page. You’ll have to excuse him, he pulled an all-nighter last night and he’s been spacy all day.”

“FBI, huh?” the woman said. “What can I do for you, Agent?”

“We’re looking for someone,” Dean said. “Guy named Harry Dresden. You seen him recently?”

“Sure,” she said. “This morning. What does the FBI want with Dresden?”

Dean gave her the flat Fed smile. “He may have information related to a case we’re working.”

“A case,” the woman said. “Wow, you do almost sound like a Fed.”

“I am a Fed,” Dean shot back, letting irritation into his voice.

“Really?” she asked, her tone bright and mock-innocent. “You look an awful lot like a Winchester to me.”

Caught off-guard, Dean froze - this was an alternate reality, how the hell could she have recognized him? The woman smiled coolly, and he belatedly recognized it as a cop’s expression. She said, “Your brother keeps a photo of you in his wallet.”

Dean felt his mouth drop open; he sputtered for a second but couldn’t manage any coherent words past the combination of shock, reflexive fear of being recognized by the police, and a flash of
sudden, almost painful hope. Sammy. “You, uh,” he said, and struggled to gather his wits. “You’ve seen my brother? Sam?”

“Yep,” she said, and held out her good hand. “Name’s Murphy. Sam talked about you, but didn’t tell us your name.”

“Dean,” he answered, and shook her hand, though his heart was pounding with excitement. He recognized the name as that of the woman at whose house “Peter Gabriel” had been interviewed, a friend of Harry Dresden’s. She’d seen Sam, and more importantly, it sounded like Sam was still himself - no Lucifer. That didn’t explain where Lucifer was or what had happened back at that Maryland convent, but maybe it meant the world wasn’t about to end again.

“So where’s Sam?” he asked Murphy. “Is he here?”

“No,” Murphy said. “He went to Pennsylvania with Dresden—”

“Pennsylvania?” Dean frowned. “Why the hell’d they go to Pennsylvania?”

“Following a lead,” Murphy said. “Dresden’s got a bad case of demons and your brother’s helping him out.” She paused, narrowing her eyes. “We got the impression that Sam didn’t have anyone with him.”

“Right,” Dean said, and then hesitated; he had no idea whether Sam had realized he was in an alternate reality - probably, the kid was smart enough - or whether he’d told Dresden and Murphy. “We, uh, aren’t exactly from around here.”

“Sam claimed he was from an alternate reality,” Murphy said. Her voice was neutral, not exactly skeptical but not implying she believed it, either.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “We found the spell he used to get here and followed him.”

“We?” Murphy glanced over at Castiel. “Your friend over there?” Her brow furrowed. “What’s he doing?”

“He, uh.” Dean hesitated. “Apparently there’s, uh, angels. Guarding this house. He’s talking to them.”

Murphy’s eyebrows went up. “Really,” she said, and he recognized a cop’s please-tell-me-more voice.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “He’s, uh. Special.” He flashed her a bright grin, but it failed to put a dent in her expression. He held the grin anyway, waiting for her to realize he wasn’t going to say anything else on the subject. If she didn’t know about the angels guarding Carpenter’s house, then better to keep her in the dark about Castiel’s true nature.

Finally she blew out a breath, acknowledging his win. “Fine. You said you followed Sam here from your reality? Does that mean you know how he made the jump?”

“Sort of,” Dean hedged. “We have the spell, at least, and we can probably figure out how to reverse it.”

“Probably,” Murphy repeated. “That’s reassuring.”

Dean scowled. “Look, he ran off on his own and we’re just trying to get him back before he gets in trouble. Any more trouble,” he amended. “Can you call your friend, tell them to come back?”
“No,” Murphy said. “Dresden’s not one for cell phones.”

Dean stared at her for a second. She returned the stare calmly. “They should be back from Pennsylvania in a couple days, depending on what they find there,” she said. “You guys got someplace to stay in the meantime? I can call you if I hear from them or when they get back.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. He dug in his pocket, found one of Special Agent Allman’s business cards and a pen. He had to pull his burner phone out to check the number, then scribbled it on the card and handed it to Murphy. “Call me as soon as you hear from them.”

“Sure,” Murphy said. She studied the card, one eyebrow raising at the FBI print, then tucked it into a pocket. “Don’t go getting yourself in trouble, either. It’s just a few days.”

“Right.” Dean stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and headed for the stolen Accord, pausing only to collect Castiel on the way out. The angel looked annoyed at the interruption, but followed Dean with only one curious glance back at Murphy.

Once they were safely back in the car, Dean relayed what he’d learned. When he’d finished, Castiel said, “That correlates with what Ramel told me. He saw Sam early this morning, along with the witch Dresden.”

“Sam looked okay?” Dean demanded. “They notice anything weird about him?”

Castiel bobbed his head in that birdlike shrug he was fond of. “Ramel said that Sam never entered the Carpenters’ property, nor did he seem of particular interest, so they paid him little heed. But I think if Lucifer had possessed him, they would have noticed.”

“Dammit,” Dean muttered, then, “Dammit,” and slammed a fist against the steering wheel. Sammy, what the hell are you doing?

“We’ll find him, Dean,” Cas said gently. He put a hand on Dean’s arm and drew it down to his side. “They said Sam will be back in a few days, and it doesn’t sound like Lucifer is with him. We just have to be patient.”

“Sure,” Dean said. Even to his own ears he didn’t sound convinced. Castiel didn’t answer, and Dean shrugged his hand free and reached under the steering column. A few seconds later, the Accord’s engine sparked to life, and Dean peeled away from the curb into the gathering darkness of a Chicago night.
Crowley should never have come along on this stupid mission. That idiot Moose being in trouble was in no way Crowley’s problem, and as for Lucifer… Crowley’d swiped the redheaded cupcake’s holy oil bottles when they’d left her at the coffee shop, just in case, but the further he could stay from that winged disaster, the better. If Dean honestly thought Crowley was going to look for either of them, he was crazy. Well, crazier than he already was.

No, Crowley had a better idea. His attempt several years ago to gain control of all the souls in Purgatory had ended less than perfectly, and if anything good had come of it, it had been that Castiel had suffered the consequences rather than Crowley. Consequences that had been unpleasant enough that Crowley had given up on the idea of stealing souls from other realms.

Until now.

The problem with the Purgatory souls had been that they were monster souls, inherently unstable; also none of them had anticipated the strength Leviathan’s unique nature had granted it. But this reality was positively teeming with souls. Human souls. Seven billion human souls, just wandering around waiting for an enterprising businessman to come along. Crowley had plans for these souls.

First, though, he needed to test the concept. The spell to cross between realities was beyond complex, certainly not something he could do seven billion times. But he didn’t know if the souls could cross on their own, or even whether his hellhounds could make the trip to do the collecting in the first place. Fortunately, he knew exactly where to look for a test subject.

Doctor Terry Patterson sat dejectedly at the bar in an upscale club in a ritzy part of Chicago. In the two and a half hours since he’d left Crowley and the others on the docks, he’d managed to get cleaned up and also thoroughly tipsy. Crowley sat down at the bar beside him and ordered a drink for himself, then another for the doctor. One of the handy things about being a crossroads demon in general, and the King of Hell in particular, was that you got an immediate and thorough understanding of your customers - not just identity and location, but things like their deepest desires, their greatest fears, and a sense of just how desperate they were.

Patterson was very, very desperate.
He glanced at Crowley curiously when the bartender poured him the new glass, then did a double-take, his mouth falling open. Crowley flashed him a grin. “Hello again,” he said. “Feeling less soggy?”

“I, uh…” Patterson stammered. “What are you doing here? Did you follow me?”

“Oh, dear me, no,” Crowley said cheerfully. “I was in the neighborhood and happened to see you. Small world, eh?”

“…yeah,” Patterson agreed.

“Quite a felicitous coincidence, actually.” Crowley continued. “You seem like a man with a problem, and I’m in the business of solving problems.”

Patterson frowned. “Who are you?” he asked sharply.

“The name’s Crowley,” Crowley answered, and held out a hand. Patterson shook, his grip firm despite the alcohol and the desperation. Crowley could feel the man’s aura thrum against his palm, surprisingly strong but uncontrolled, untrained.

Patterson blinked as he took his hand back. “You’re a practitioner?” he asked.

*Interesting*, Crowley thought. The man had sensed Crowley’s own aura in return. Out loud, he said, “I dabble.”

“Just dabble, huh?” Patterson said, and Crowley didn’t miss the disappointment that flashed across his face. “Sorry, you probably won’t be able to help me then.”

“Why not?”

Patterson took a deep breath, looking for a second like he was going to refuse to talk, then abruptly his shoulders sagged and he slumped against the bar. “Fuck it,” he muttered under his breath, then to Crowley, “Because I’m an idiot and I’ll be dead by tomorrow is why.”

Crowley let his surprise show in his expression. “Really.”

“It’s a long and stupid story,” Patterson said, and waved a hand tiredly. “Go sell your problem-solving to someone else. I’m going to have one more drink and then see if I can find instructions to make a binding circle.”

“What do you need a binding circle for?” Crowley asked, in his best I’m-not-leaving-until-you-talk voice.

“Because if I’m lucky, I might be able to die in a few days on a sunny beach in Cuba instead,” Patterson said, his voice bitter.

Crowley leaned his elbows on the bar. “What are you trying to bind?”

Patterson hesitated; Crowley waited patiently, and finally the doctor said, “A demon.” Patterson dropped his head into his hands. “A freaking demon, okay?”

“Ah,” Crowley said. “Maybe I can help you, then.”

“You know binding circles?”

“A few,” Crowley said dismissively.
Hope flickered in Patterson’s eyes. “What’s the strongest one?” he demanded.

This was going to be too easy. Crowley wouldn’t even have to lie, strictly speaking. “Well, there’s one that can bind an archangel,” he said. “And it’s simple, too.”

“An archangel?” Patterson repeated, hope fading to incredulity. “Do those even exist?”

“Unfortunately.”

Patterson swirled his glass, clearly thinking about it. Finally he said, “You said it’s simple?”

“Sure,” Crowley said. “Pour out a circle of holy oil, get them inside, set it alight, and Bob’s your uncle.”

“That’s it?” Patterson said, surprised. “That’s enough to bind something that powerful?”

“Sometimes simple is best,” Crowley said. He summoned one of Charlie’s Molotovs to his hand and set it in front of Patterson. “Here. Holy oil. On the house.”

Patterson eyed it. “Are you sure?”

“You need it more than me, mate.” Crowley signaled the bartender for another Mai Tai. “If you feel like paying me for it, perhaps you could tell me how you got yourself into this mess.”

Patterson hesitated for a long minute. The bartender set Crowley’s drink in front of him, then at another signal from Crowley, filled Patterson’s glass again before heading away to serve an obnoxiously affectionate couple at the other end of the bar. Patterson swirled his glass again, sighed, and then downed the contents in one long swallow. Crowley winced internally at the abuse of good liquor, but kept his outward expression polite and open, and finally Patterson nodded. “Okay,” he said, his voice rough from emotion, or maybe just the drink. “I’ll tell you.”

* * *

One hour later, and after enough top-shelf bourbon to make Crowley glad he had no intention of paying his bill, he had Patterson’s story. It was the kind of tragically stupid situation that crossroads demons just loved, and Crowley was itching to close the deal.

“...so if I don’t give the box to Chaxuneudahl by midnight tonight,” Patterson finished, his voice thick with fear and grief, “he kills me. And I can’t set foot on that island to get the box. I’m just hoping that I can bind him in the circle long enough to get away and see Cuba before I die.” He dropped his head into his hands, though not in time to hide the tears of despair in his eyes.

“Tough deal, mate,” Crowley agreed. He waited for that to sink in, for Patterson’s shoulders to sag under the weight of his impending death. Then he said, “I might be able to offer you a better one.”

Patterson’s head jerked up and he blinked red-rimmed eyes at him. “What?”

“Like I said, I’m in the business of solving problems. I’ve got a little problem of my own right now, and if you help me solve it, then I can give you a way out of your deal.”

“How?” Patterson demanded. “I’ll do anything—anything—!”

Music to a crossroads demon’s ears, and Crowley had to fight to keep the grin off his face. “I saw that box when I was on the island,” he said. “I can get it for you before midnight. In exchange, you get ten years. When the time’s up - or if something ends it sooner - I send one of my agents to collect
“My soul?!” Patterson broke in, sounding horrified, but he’d latched on to the right part. Better to fuss about his soul than that unconventional little clause in the middle.

Crowley held up a hand. “Now hang on a minute. Let me finish before jumping to conclusions.” He didn’t wait for Patterson to respond, but continued, “That problem I mentioned? It’s that I don’t know whether or not my agent will be able to reach you at all, or bring your soul to me once he does. So there’s a very good chance that the agent won’t reach you, or be able to bring your soul back. If that’s the case, then nothing happens. You get off scot-free. No Chaxuneudahl trying to kill you, no soul deal. You’re free as a bird.”

“But if it does work,” Patterson said, his voice wavering, “then you get my… my soul? What the hell are you?”

Crowley smiled and let his eyes flash red for a second. “Like I said. A businessman.”

“No,” Patterson said. He shoved off the bar stool and backed away unsteadily. “No way. I was dumb enough to make one deal with a monster, I’m not gonna do it again.”

“Are you sure about that?” Crowley asked. He didn’t turn his head to follow Patterson’s movements, didn’t leave his place at the bar, just kept speaking in a calm steady voice. “Think about it: you die tonight, or in a day or two if you’re lucky. Or you help me, and you get up to ten more years - and might not have to give up anything at all.”

Silence. Patterson stayed frozen, a rabbit hoping to go unnoticed by the raptor. Crowley waited.

Three, two, one...

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” Patterson asked in a small scared voice. A moment later he sat back down on the bar stool, though everything in his posture suggested he was trying to be as far away from Crowley as possible without actually leaving.

“Because,” Crowley answered, still without looking at him, “I’m a businessman. Reneging on deals is bad for business.” Now he did turn, meeting Patterson’s eyes. “What do you say, Doctor? Certain death before the week is out, or up to ten years and the possibility of many more?”

Patterson couldn’t hold his gaze, his eyes dropping to where his hands had tangled themselves into a tight knot on the bar. His shoulders shook, and a quiet, desperate sob escaped him.

Crowley waited some more.

Patterson whispered, “Deal.”

Charlie

Charlie glared at the phone in her hand, listening to the tinny voice from the speaker say for the third time, We’re sorry, this user has not set up voicemail. Please try your call again later. “Dean, where the hell are you?” she muttered. “This is big!”

Dropping the phone on the table beside her fifth (or was it sixth?) hazelnut mocha, she stared again at the image on her computer screen. Mystery doctor Terry Patterson had bought a one-way, first-class ticket to Cuba two days ago, on a redeye flight leaving in four hours, and Charlie knew why. Or at
least, she was pretty sure she did. The circumstantial evidence was damning, and she’d been hoping Dean could go to Patterson’s house to confirm it.

Well, fine. If Dean wasn’t answering his phone, then Charlie would just go herself. It wasn’t like they needed her here anymore; she’d found everything there was to find on the witch cop Harry Dresden without breaking into the heavily-secured data vaults of the Brighter Future Society. Not that she wasn’t still working on that, but hacking herself enough computing power on Amazon’s cloud servers and then setting up her cracking programs to run on them had only taken her an hour. Then, depending on how good BFS’s security was, the programs would need several hours to a day or more to crack it, and she hardly needed to babysit them while they worked.

Besides, Charlie was just as much a hunter as Dean and Sam, even if she hadn’t been trained practically from birth like they had. She’d helped them stop Leviathan, she’d fought beside Dorothy in Oz. She could handle a single witch.

She tore a page from her notebook and scribbled a message for Dean and Castiel on it, in case they came back to the coffee shop before she returned. The barista she’d been flirting with for the last few hours was more than willing to do her a favor and pass the note along, and then Charlie packed her bag and headed out.

She’d written a hack six months ago for the Uber app that tricked it into thinking she had a valid credit card on file, and it had been easy enough to apply to her burner phone. Ride summoned, she muted the phone - breaking and entering 101 said you didn’t leave your devices in a state that could make noise - and tucked it into her bag. The Uber driver dropped her off two blocks from Terry Patterson’s tastefully wealthy Lincoln Park address, and she headed down the sidewalk in the gathering dusk. Elegant old brick houses and townhomes lined the street, and there were enough other pedestrians that Charlie didn’t draw attention.

The doctor’s house was dark and quiet when she approached, and she walked up to the front door like she lived there. She’d learned lockpicking years ago at a cybersecurity conference in Las Vegas, and while she’d originally kept up her skill just for fun and a challenge, it came in handy in situations like these. A minute later she pushed the door open and slipped into the dark foyer.

The house was quiet in the way of empty buildings, though Charlie could hear a distant steady chirping, and no lights shone in any of the adjacent rooms. Tasteful but bland furniture lined the walls and an oddly musty, damp smell permeated the air. Charlie glanced around for potential hiding places but otherwise paid little heed to the decor. Instead she headed upstairs, toward the chirping. The second floor consisted of a comfortable living room and a bedroom that had been converted into an office, complete with a sleek computer that probably had enough horsepower to run a Crysis game and which Patterson probably used to play Solitaire and check email. Charlie rolled her eyes and continued to the third floor.

The chirping was louder up here, and she glanced into the master bedroom before passing it toward the last bedroom at the far end of the floor. The door was closed but not locked, and when Charlie pushed it open, the musty smell and a wash of humidity practically knocked her off her feet. Holding her breath, she stepped into the room and turned on the light.

The single lonely chirp suddenly exploded into a cacophony of nearly half a dozen different chirps, croaks, and cries. Terrariums lined the room’s back wall, set up hastily on card tables and halfheartedly stuffed with rocks, plants, and water. Each held a different type of frog or toad, and each of the creatures was pressed up against the glass, jumping wildly and croaking at the top of their lungs.

_Gotcha_, Charlie thought. Out loud she said, “Shh, quiet down, I’m here to help.”
To her annoyance, they didn’t quiet down - in fact she thought they got louder. “Come on, shush!” she pleaded. “You don’t want—”

“Don’t want what?” a male voice asked from behind her.

Charlie whirled. Doctor Terry Patterson stood in the door, his eyes red-rimmed and his cheeks flushed. He looked drawn and exhausted as he raised a hand toward her. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish I didn’t have to do this.”

“What?” Charlie demanded, and her voice only shook a little. “You don’t have to do anything, we can help you, just—”

He shook his head. “I’ve had all the help I need. I really am sorry, but you shouldn’t have meddled.”

Charlie scabbred at her bag, trying to dig out the long knife she kept in there, but even as her hand closed around its grip Patterson gestured sharply with his outstretched hand.

She didn’t even get a chance to scream.
And I’m So Far From My Home

Chapter Summary

In which Castiel makes connections and the Mark of Cain makes its voice heard.

Chapter Notes

This chapter’s a bit tonally dissonant after this week’s worried-Dean episode of *Supernatural*, but this story's set near the end of Season 10, when Dean did want Sam dead. (I'll have to write a proper worried-Dean story at some point...)

Dean

After leaving the Carpenters’ house, Dean drove aimlessly for a while, his head buzzing with the Mark’s impatience and his own frustration at this mess. He knew he should call Charlie back, or better yet head to the cafe to pick her up, but the voice in his head that sounded like Sam warned him that he needed to cool off first - and not by going on a killing rampage like the Mark wanted.

Castiel didn’t say anything for the first ten minutes or so, but finally spoke up. “Dean,” he said, gravelly voice gentle. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Dean snapped. Cas watched him with steady blue eyes, and finally he sighed. “I just wish I knew what the hell was going on, y’know? Sam’s off playing hooky with a wizard cop and Lucifer’s in the wind somewhere in our reality or this one, or who the fuck knows, maybe some other reality entirely. None of it makes any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Castiel agreed quietly. He turned to stare out the windshield instead. “But that’s not what I was asking about.”

Dean scowled at him. “I’m fine, Cas.”

“You almost attacked that little girl,” Castiel said implacably.

“Not the girl,” Dean corrected. “That damn freaky dog.”

Castiel looked at him again.

“Dammit, Cas,” Dean growled. “That dog almost attacked me! It was some kind of—”

“It was a Foo dog,” Castiel said. “They guard homes, and I believe it could sense the Mark of Cain. But you didn’t see how the angels reacted, Dean.”

“The ones guarding the house?”

“Three of them surrounded you,” Castiel said, and now Dean could hear the worry in his voice.
“They held their swords to your throat.”

Dean blinked at him. “They what?”

“If you had done anything other than what you did...” Castiel shook his head. “I’m glad you were able to restrain the Mark, Dean. But—”

“There is no but, Cas,” Dean said, irritated. The thought that he’d had three angels about to kill him and he hadn’t known made the skin on the back of his neck crawl. “I have it under control.”

He could feel Cas’s eyes on him, but he gritted his teeth and didn’t say anything, and after a while Castiel got the hint. They drove for another few minutes in silence, except for Dean’s muttered cursing at the rapidly growing rush-hour congestion.

Then Castiel said, “I think I may know how Lucifer escaped the Cage.”

Dean shot him a sharp glance. “Yeah?”

“You remember I told you that an angel retains a connection with its vessel, even if they’ve stopped occupying it?”

Dean remembered a dark-skinned man sitting in a wheelchair, wide empty eyes staring at nothing despite Cas growling threats in his ear. “Yeah.”

“It’s because angels leave behind a portion of their Grace,” Castiel explained. “In Sam’s case - possibly due to the, ah, violent and unconsenting nature of both his body and his soul’s separation from Lucifer - he retained considerably more of Lucifer’s Grace than usual.”

“Sam was carrying around Lucifer’s Grace?” Dean demanded.

Castiel nodded. “I believe that it’s what fueled Sam’s visions of the Devil shortly after you restored his soul,” he said quietly. “When you and I went to Sam in the mental institution and I took his madness into myself, I absorbed much of Lucifer’s Grace along with it.”

“Huh,” Dean said, though his stomach churned at the thought of bits of the Devil living inside his brother and his best friend.

“I remember little of the time between then and our arrival in Purgatory,” Castiel continued. “But I believe being in Purgatory weakened the connection between that portion of Lucifer’s Grace and Lucifer himself. Enough that I thought it was severed completely, and by the time Naomi retrieved me from Purgatory, I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Okay,” Dean said. “But what does this have to do with Lucifer escaping?”

“Because the connection was weakened,” Castiel said patiently. “Not gone. And when I came back, when next I saw Sam...”

“You think Lucifer’s Grace, what, went all Pupper Masters and jumped from you back to Sam?”

“Sam is Lucifer’s true vessel,” Castiel said. “And Lucifer is an archangel. While you were, ah, speaking with Cain last year, Sam and I tried to track Gadreel by extracting the Grace he’d left behind when he possessed Sam—”

“Hold on,” Dean interrupted. “Extracting?”

Castiel nodded. “It’s a difficult and painful endeavor. I wasn’t able to extract enough of Gadreel’s
Grace to make the spell work, not without killing Sam, and at the time I thought it was solely due to Sam’s fragile physical state. But now…” He shook his head, blue eyes pensive and worried. “I think that the fragment of Lucifer’s Grace may have been strong enough in its own right to cling to Sam’s soul, so that any attempt to extract it - and it would have been drawn along with Gadreel’s Grace - would hurt or kill Sam.”

“Christ on a stick,” Dean muttered. “So Sam’s had a piece of Lucifer in him this whole time.”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “And Lucifer may have been able to use that connection to draw Sam to that convent and pull himself free of the Cage.”

“Whether or not Sam said yes,” Dean said, then slammed a hand against the steering wheel in a sudden surge of anger. “Dammit!”

“Dean—” Castiel started, but then a thought occurred to Dean past the frustration and he held up a hand.

“Waitasec,” he said. “You said you can use Grace to track an angel? So if Sam’s still got some of Lucifer’s Grace in him, we can use it to find Lucifer?”

“Well,” Cas said cautiously, “it didn’t work last time - extracting enough Grace to perform the tracking spell would have killed Sam.”

So let him die, the Mark murmured in Dean’s ear. He’s the one who let Lucifer out in the first place. Out loud Dean said, “Look, it’s Sam’s fault Lucifer got free, okay? I think he can take one for the team.”

Castiel stared at him. “What?” Dean demanded. Little brother Sammy’s fault, it’s all his fault. The monster, the freak, you should’ve killed him when Daddy told you to. “It is. I mean, hell, Sam is pretty much single-handedly responsible for every shitty thing that’s happened in the last, oh, decade, and you and me have had to clean up his messes.” Isn’t it about time Sam pulled his own weight?

Castiel kept staring at him, his face set in what Dean had learned was his the-Mark-is-making-you-do-bad-things-again expression. Dean returned the glare in between throwing glances at traffic, though rush-hour gridlock had turned the streets into little more than parking lots, and it wasn’t like he needed to pay attention. Even if they got in a crash, it wasn’t like they were going fast enough to kill anybody, and he wasn’t even driving the Impala so who cared if he ruined some stupid human’s day, they were just humans, petty mortal monkeys—

Gulp.

Dean dug his thumb into the Mark on his arm, feeling his pulse pound beneath his skin. Somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears he heard Castiel shouting his name, and instinct made him slam on the brakes and twist the wheel to the right with his free hand. Cas’s hands grabbed the wheel beside his and steered the car to a shaky halt against the curb, and for a minute or two Dean just sat there, trying to force back the Mark. Shit shit shit shit shit. He hadn’t even realized it that time, hadn’t caught the Mark’s little nudges in time, and he’d almost—he had thought…

The pounding faded, the Mark’s seductive purr quieting, and Dean closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wheel. “Damn it,” he said quietly. “Cas…”

Castiel didn’t answer for a long time. When he finally spoke, all he said was, “You know that’s not true, right? About Sam?”

He’s wrong, it’s true, it’s all true, little monster freak Sammy’s not worth the—
Dean gritted his teeth and swallowed back the bile rising at the back of his throat. The Mark fell silent again and he sagged against his seatbelt, suddenly exhausted to the bone. “Yeah,” he said, and it came out little more than a whisper. “I know.”

Castiel put a hand on his shoulder, awkward but remarkably comforting, and for just a second Dean let himself lean into the touch. Cas couldn’t do anything about the Mark, not really, but Dean could at least imagine that it grew weaker under the angel’s touch.

Finally Dean heaved a sigh, forcing himself to open his eyes. “We should head back,” he said, his voice rougher than he’d meant. “Get Charlie, let her know what’s going on. We can keep the Grace-tracking thing as a plan B, if Sam agrees to it and it doesn’t hurt him.”

“...Right,” Castiel agreed. There was a worried softness to his voice, to the way he looked at Dean. Dean forced himself to ignore it. The last thing he needed right now was pity - he could handle this, he could, he just had to be more careful.

Setting his jaw, Dean turned the Accord back onto the street, easing into the flow of traffic. If he focused hard enough on steering through the Chicago gridlock, he could ignore the Mark’s influence.

He hoped.
I Put a Spell On You

Chapter Summary

In which Dean and Castiel find Charlie, Crowley steals a sword, and Doctor Patternson really needs to learn impulse control.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean

It was almost dark by the time Dean and Castiel got back to the Starbucks where they’d left Charlie, and Dean was even more irritated than he’d been before he tried taking a calming drive. Chicago rush-hour traffic was a complete disaster, and he was dying to put his fist through someone’s skull.

He very nearly did put his fist through the skull of the pretty blond girl behind the counter when she told them Charlie’d left almost an hour ago. His anger must have shown on his face, because the girl flinched back and reached quickly for something behind the counter. “She, uh, she left this—” the girl stammered, and held out a piece of paper with rough edges where it had been torn from Charlie’s notebook.

Dean snatched the paper from the girl’s hand and stomped out of the cafe, dimly aware of Castiel apologizing to the girl and hurrying behind him. Being outside did nothing to get rid of the urge for violence, but the lack of a captive target behind a counter helped him rein it in a little. He opened the note, Castiel leaning over his shoulder to read.

Dean, it said, in Charlie’s haphazard scrawl, I think I know what our witch doctor was up to. He was probably trying to summon a demon to make a deal, because he almost certainly violated one of the laws of magic. Which is a death sentence, to be doled out by wardens like Harry Dresden. I don’t know if he went to that island to talk to Dresden or to find a way to protect himself or what, but that’s probably the connection. He’s got a one-way plane ticket to Cuba tonight, so I’m headed to his house to see if I can find proof of what he did and maybe help the people he hurt. Should be back in a couple hours. XOXO, Charlie.

“Dammit,” Dean snarled, and crumpled the note in his hand. “This ain’t the time for witch-hunting and she knows it!”

“Actually,” Castiel pointed out, and the reasonableness in his tone set Dean’s teeth on edge, “this is the perfect time for a witch hunt. We have to wait for Sam to return from Pennsylvania with Dresden anyway.”

Dean scowled at him. “Who says we aren’t gonna just pack into that damn plastic go-kart and drive up to Pennsylvania ourselves?”

“Dean—”

“—because Sam should’ve known better than to go running off with a fucking witch in a fucking
alternate fucking reality, and Charlie should’ve—"

“Dean,” Castiel repeated, sharp enough that Dean stopped talking. People on the sidewalk were beginning to stare at them, and with an effort Dean bit back the anger and the frustration (you’re right, though, to be angry, they’re in the wrong and you know it—shut UP SHUT UP SHUT UP), clenching his fists and focusing on the pain of his nails biting into his palms.

Cas grabbed him by the arm and hauled him back to where they’d left the car, jammed between two big SUVs against the curb. He shoved Dean into the passenger seat, slammed the door, then rounded the nose and climbed into the driver’s seat. Dean glared at him, but Castiel kept his gaze fixed through the windshield, face impassive, and while Dean might be immortal now that he had the Mark, he didn’t have the practice - or the patience - that Castiel had. Slowly the anger began to bleed away (except the Mark’s quiet whispers in the back of his mind but those were always there, he could handle those, he could), and Dean sagged into the leather seat.

Finally Castiel spoke, his voice quiet and even more gravelly than usual. “We’re going to go find Charlie. While I believe she can handle a single witch on her own, I think you need to hunt something right now.”

Dean sighed, dropping his head into his hands. “I… yeah,” he said, and sighed again. “Let’s do that.”

“What’s the address?” Cas asked, and nodded to where Dean still held Charlie’s note crumpled in one hand.

“Uh…” Dean uncrinkled the note; sure enough there was an address scrawled on the bottom that he hadn’t noticed earlier. He read it to Castiel, who reached under the steering column to start the car again. Dean closed his eyes as Cas steered carefully out of the parking space and into traffic. Don’t go getting yourself into trouble, Murphy’d said. Hunting a witch probably counted as getting into trouble, but if Dean didn’t kill something soon, he was going to, well, kill something.

He didn’t open his eyes again until the car stopped against a curb and Cas cut the engine. Then he peered out the windshield into the gathering darkness at a series of brick townhomes, elegant and expensive-looking as they marched up the sidewalk. Right, Dean thought. Doctor. Those guys were loaded.

Cas climbed out of the car and Dean followed, checking the address on Charlie’s note again. The house they wanted was about two-thirds of the way up the block, three stories tall with lights on in the upper floor. That probably wasn’t a good sign - Charlie should know better than to turn on lights when she was hunting - and Dean traded an uneasy look with Cas. They hurried together up the steps to the front door, and Dean had the lock cracked in twenty seconds. Anyone looking would know it’d been picked, but he didn’t care about that.

The house was quiet except for the ever-present traffic noise outside and a distant, weirdly jungle-like chirping that seemed to be coming from somewhere upstairs. Dean drew his gun and held it low against his leg as he crept through the dark house, Castiel close behind him. One of the advantages of the Mark was that it had greatly improved Dean’s night vision; he slipped easily and silently around furniture and corners and up stairs until he reached the third floor.

The light they’d seen through the window was coming from the room nearest the staircase. The door was closed, but the chirping was a lot louder up here and the croaks and ribbits and cheeps drowned out any noise that might have been coming from the room. Dean motioned to Cas for caution, then crept forward toward the only other door on this floor, at the far end of the hall. This door was partially open, though all Dean could see of the room beyond was flickering yellow light - probably
candles. Gun at the ready, Dean carefully pushed the door open all the way.

Then frowned, stepping quickly around the door so Cas could join him in the room. The place looked like someone had taken a Satanic cultist’s shrine and tried to start a pet shop for exotic amphibians inside. A pentacle drawn in red chalk covered most of the floor, with tall white candles set up at each of the five points. A folding table shoved against the left wall held several shopping bags filled with various herbs and spices, a couple of wooden bowls with the price stickers still attached, and a handful of other Wal-Mart witchcraft instruments.

The back wall, on the other hand, was lined with more folding tables, on which stood terrariums filled with frantic frogs. Or maybe they were toads - Dean had never been into biology, especially not the kind that involved warts and slime. He glanced over his shoulder at Castiel, who was staring wide-eyed at the terrariums. “Dean,” Cas whispered, “those are—”

Movement at the corner of Dean’s eye and he spun, gun swinging up. He had half a second to recognize Dr. Terry Patterson standing in the doorway, clutching a paper printout and staring at him in wide-eyed shock, and then Patterson’s hand flew up. Dean tried to fire off a shot but something was wrong with his hands, they were shriveling, the gun falling out of his grip as he collapsed to the floor. His muscles twisted and clenched in agonizing spasms, and he couldn’t breathe as the world spun and tumbled around him. Through the pain he saw Castiel move toward Patterson, saw Patterson’s hand swing over to point at Cas, then Castiel was falling as well, only something was wrong, he was way too big, and when he hit the floor the impact rattled Dean’s bones.

For a second Dean couldn’t process what was going on, his vision twisted and distorted and unhelpful, his other senses in overdrive. Castiel was writhing like Dean had been, his body contorting unnaturally, and abruptly Dean realized that Cas wasn’t just contorting in pain - his whole form was shifting, changing, until instead of an angel wearing a human body, a frog lay on its back on the floor.

Oh shit—

“I’m sorry,” a voice boomed overhead, though the tones were little more than a whisper. Dean struggled to twist his own body until he could see Patterson looming gigantic above him, just in time for the doctor to reach down and scoop up Dean in one hand and the Castiel-frog in the other. Shit shit shit—

“I’m sorry,” Patterson said again, and Dean tried to say fuck you, you son of a bitch, but all that came out was an angry-sounding ribbit.

Oh fuck no.

Patterson carried them over to one of the terrariums, nudging the lid off with an elbow and depositing them both inside. Another frog, this one small with red markings, hopped over to them, and Dean didn’t think he was imagining the worry in its eyes, or the question in its chirruped croak. Charlie.

The terrarium rattled and shook as Patterson put the lid back on. Dean walked - hopped - fuck my life - over to the front of the terrarium, and his fucked-up frog eyes let him see Castiel and Charlie following behind him. Patterson crossed the room to pick up the printouts he’d dropped, then set them on the table on the side wall, next to the shopping bags. He started to pull out ingredients, setting them in careful groups, and Dean had killed enough witches, had done enough spells himself, to recognize the making of a summoning spell when he saw one.

Charlie had said Patterson was working with a demon, and Murphy had said that Sam was helping
Dresden with “a bad case of demons”. If Patterson was behind those demons, then it was him who’d sent Dresden and Sam to Pennsylvania - meaning they’d be too far away to stop whatever Patterson was about to do. Which meant that the only person who could help Dean, Castiel, and Charlie was Crowley.

They were so f*cked.

Crowley

Crowley stood at the edge of Lake Michigan, the water not quite daring to lap over the toes of his thousand-dollar shoes. He could sense the island in the distance, the one Patterson had said was called “Demonreach” - and wasn’t that a pretentious name? Its power hummed through the bones of the earth, ley lines spilling out to flow far beneath the lake and back up to the earth beneath Crowley’s feet.

So much raw power in this reality, far more than anything in Crowley’s own, even in the deepest depths of Hell where the souls flowed like oil. He breathed it in, feeling the thrum of it all the way from the crown of his meatsuit’s head down to the very core of his red-smoke soul. Beautiful, he thought. So much potential, and all of it could be his - if his little experiment with Doctor Patterson worked as expected.

Which it wouldn’t, if Crowley didn’t stop daydreaming. He closed his eyes, visualizing the path along the ley line to the island. Despite the additional power, it was harder to do here than in his own reality - the eddies and flows of the magic were entirely different, and the extra power meant that a slip would have much more disastrous consequences. Only when he was sure of his path did he make the leap, crossing the space between the shore of the lake and the interior of the little cabin on the top of the island in a heartbeat. Centuries of practice let him spot the big equipment case propped in a corner instantly. He took two quick steps over to it, one hand out to hook through the strap—

ANGER

roared through him, scouring his soul and leaving him breathless. He spun around to see a hulking monster appear at the entrance to the little hut, some fifteen feet tall and draped in a shapeless black cloak. Green eyes blazed like fire in the depths of its hood, and a long gnarled hand stretched into the hut, clawed fingers like rotten tree branches grasping for him.

NOT YOURS

The thought slammed into him with the same weight as the island’s earlier pressure, and abruptly Crowley recognized it. This terrifying creature was the physical manifestation of the island itself, all that throbbing coiling power made manifest. He’d heard of such things before, but had never seen one in the flesh, and he was suddenly very certain he didn’t want to see this one now.

The creature’s claws were nearly upon him and Crowley grabbed the case’s strap, scrambling further into the hut. He didn’t have time to focus himself for the return trip but he flung himself into the currents anyway, because that hand was too close and he could feel the island gathering its power. While he didn’t know what it would do with all that gathered energy, he did know he didn’t want to find out.

Currents of magic battered him and it was all he could do to hold his meatsuit together, to keep his grip on the equipment case. For a few awful seconds he didn’t think he’d be able to escape the stream and rematerialize again, but finally he found an opening and slithered through, back out into
the chilly streets of a Chicago evening. He’d only been on the island for five or six seconds, but the darkness of the sky meant he’d lost some time trapped in the streams - an expected risk when one plunged unprepared into the ley lines like that, but an annoying one nonetheless.

At least he wasn’t late for his rendezvous with Dr. Patterson - in fact, he had enough time to indulge his curiosity. Patterson had only described the case as “a big black box, the kind you’d put golf clubs or a musical instrument in”. He hadn’t known what was inside, nor why his demonic patron wanted it so badly. Crowley had to walk a few blocks before he found a store that was closed for the night, but it was much easier to break a lock on a door than to teleport across a lake. Safe from prying eyes, he set the case on the ground, knelt beside it, and popped the latches.

Power, gentle and pure and warm, flooded out of the box the moment he cracked it open. He knew that kind of power, had felt it a handful of times before, but even then he’d never seen it quite this pure, quite this…

Holy.

That was the only word for it. This was holy power, the kind God Himself must have thrown around back before He’d walked out on His creations. It radiated warmth and kindness and an unyielding strength that scoured across the surface of Crowley’s Hell-reddened soul. It took everything he had to open the box enough to see what was inside: a heavy European broadsword, its blade sheathed in a black leather scabbard and with a rusty nail set into its crosspiece.

Part of Crowley rather desperately wanted to grab the thing, to lift it out of the box and wield it singing against his enemies. It had power in spades - holy power, to boot - and if there was anything that could stand against Lucifer, this was it. But the rest of Crowley, the part of him that had survived centuries in Hell to become first King of the Crossroads and then King of all Hell itself, kept his hands by his sides. He had no idea what might happen if a demon tried to touch, to wield, such holy power, and while he wanted to find out, he certainly wasn’t going to be the test dummy. No, there was another demon who would serve perfectly well for that.

Crowley took a cab to the doctor’s house, because he wasn’t about to attempt teleporting again. The cabbie gave him and his equipment case an odd look, and Crowley was deeply tempted to flash his eyes at the man just to make him jump. But he restrained himself, because there were more important matters at hand than terrifying a hapless cab driver. Still, when the cabbie dropped him off at the curb in front of Patterson’s house, Crowley couldn’t resist leaning in close to whisper, “It’s not just a rash, mate. You should see a doctor.” He let his eyes flip red, winked, and sauntered away, the case slung over his shoulder by its strap. The cab peeled out behind him, the driver forgetting to ask for payment in his haste to escape.

Patterson’s front door was unlocked - or rather, to Crowley’s trained eye, had been picked open. Roughly. An ominous sign, and Crowley moved more cautiously as he opened the door and headed inside. He could sense Patterson upstairs, and more…

Oh. That was Dean and his pet feather duster. And the cupcake.

*What the hell are they doing here?* Crowley thought irritably. This was *his* deal, damn it, and if they got in his way—

A surge of power, wild and barely controlled, rolled through the house. Crowley hissed between his teeth in exasperation and hurried for the stairs, only to feel another surge of power before he’d made it halfway to the second floor. He nearly ran the rest of the way, slowing to a controlled walk only when he reached the third floor and saw Patterson through an open door at the end of the hall. He couldn’t see Dean - or the others - anywhere, though.
Crowley moved closer, his shoes silent on the thick rug covering the floor, and paused just outside the door. Patterson had his back to Crowley, putting spell ingredients together at a folding table with the exaggerated care of a complete novice. Crowley could sense Dean, the feather duster, and the cupcake, but the only living creatures other than himself and Patterson were the frogs and toads in the terrariums lining the back wall—

Oh. Oh.

Crowley stared across the room into one of the terrariums where three frogs clustered close together, jumping around and croaking madly. He had no idea how the idiots had gotten here, nor what they’d done to Patterson to make him feel threatened—No, of course. They were hunters and Patterson was a witch, and—

He felt the spell half a second before it hit him. He’d been so focused on the frogs that had once been his traveling companions that he hadn’t seen Patterson notice him until it was too late. The doctor jumped a mile, spinning to face him, hands coming up and power surging uncontrolled from him. Then Crowley was on the ground, his nice British meatsuit replaced by a frog. A bloody frog, and wasn’t that just the best thing that could have possibly happened. Patterson stood over him, eyes wild and frantic. “I’m sorry!” he whined. “I’m sorry, you startled me, I didn’t mean to!”

If frog eyes could move, Crowley would have rolled his. Patterson scooped him up and deposited him in the terrarium with the others. “I’m sorry,” he said again, his shoulders sagging in defeat. “I’m sorry.” He spun away abruptly, one hand coming up to cover his mouth, and ran out of the room.

Croaking erupted from behind Crowley, and he turned to find three frogs glaring at him. Dean, of course, was the biggest one, an ugly beast with lumpy green skin and a fierce glare; he made a low angry noise and moved toward Crowley, threat in each of his four whole inches of length. Charlie and Castiel followed, and while they didn’t look as threatening as Dean, Crowley had no doubt whose side they’d come down on in a fight.

Well, Crowley thought. Bollocks.

Chapter End Notes

The SPN S10 finale was quite handy for me, as it proved that Castiel and Crowley can both be affected by physical magic despite being an angel and a demon. And the Hansel & Gretel witch demonstrated the same for Dean. Baleful Polymorphs for everyone!

Also, yes, if Crowley had stayed on the island for about two more seconds, Demonreach would’ve thrown him in maximum security and let Dresden deal with him.
Chapter Summary

In which Harry relives fourth grade, Sam does the puppy eyes, and someone unexpected shows up.

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is long, but I think the next couple are going to be even longer. Now that we've got everyone's timelines more or less lined up, onward with the plot!

Harry

“—and yeah, it looked stupid as hell but damn if the saddle didn’t work, so me and Butters climbed up on Sue’s back and hi-ho-silvered outta there—”

“No way,” Sam said, laughing. “What about the drum?” He looked a lot younger when he laughed like that, the hideous weight on his shoulders falling away until he could have been any thirtysomething guy joking around with friends.

“Butters is a musical genius,” I answered solemnly. “The man kept that thing going through half of Chicago and an entire fight with the necromancers’ zombie army.”

We were nearly to Gladwyne; I was driving again mostly because Sam seemed to default to the passenger side of the car. He’d come out of the Kinko’s pale and drawn, but not shaking quite so badly. He’d tossed me a surprisingly good fake FBI badge without saying anything, then settled in the passenger seat, hunched against the door and picking at his salad without really eating. I’d had some time to think about a plan of attack to get him to open up about whatever had him so scared, and I had decided to start by asking him about what hunters in his reality did. He’d thrown me an uncertain look, and said, “Exactly what it sounds like. We hunt the things no one sane believes in.”

“Demons,” I’d prompted. “Werewolves, vampires…”

He’d given a dry little snort. “To start with, yeah.”

“What else?”

He looked thoughtful for a minute or two, and actually took a full bite of his salad without seeming to notice. “Ghosts are the most common. Wendigos, shapeshifters, ghouls… a few gods.” He shrugged. “Other stuff. weirder stuff.”

I took my eyes off the road to stare at him for a second. “Gods?” I repeated.

“Mostly minor pagan gods,” he said dismissively. “And most of them were eating people.” He flinched suddenly, his head twitching like he wanted to look over his shoulder but had caught
himself at the last second. I thought about how he’d kept doing the same thing back at Murphy’s, and
the back of my neck itched. Sam swallowed, digging his thumb into his palm around the salad cup,
and said to me, “What about you? What does a witch - sorry, wizard - do in your reality?”

“Me specifically, or wizards in general?” I asked. “Because as far as I know, I’m the only one who
advertises in the phone book.”

He stared at me. “You what?”

So I told him about how I’d spent more than a decade as Chicago’s resident wizard-for-hire. I’d
picked up already that Sam was whip-smart, but I got a new appreciation for just how swift on his
verbal feet he could be as he asked innocuous-seeming but carefully pointed questions that had me
talking about the White Council and the Wardens and the war with the Red Court almost before I
realized it. I managed to catch on before I said anything that wasn’t more or less public knowledge in
the magical community, but I still had to be careful and do a little deflection of my own. Which had
led to me telling the story of the time necromancers had invaded Chicago and I’d raised Sue, the
most complete Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton ever found, to serve as my zombie mount in battle.

Sam laughed again, shaking his head in disbelief. “Man,” he said. “A zombie T-Rex. That would’ve
been something to see.”

“She was gorgeous,” I agreed. “In the same way a shark on the hunt is.” I glanced at him and said
lightly, “What about you? Any epic stories, dinosaurs or otherwise?”

His eyes flicked to the side, not quite at me, and the back of my neck itched again. Before I could
comment on it, though, he said, “No dinosaurs, uh, thank God. We did go back in time once to kill a
phoenix—”

“You went back in time?” I repeated incredulously. “How?”

He blinked. “Uh, an angel did it? I mean, it wasn’t the first time—” His eyes narrowed. “What?”

I shook my head. “It’s just… time travel is against the Laws of Magic,” I said. “And for good reason.
From what I understand, there’s just way too many bad things that could happen, paradoxes—”

“The Grandfather Paradox,” Sam said, and shrugged. “I don’t know how it works, but as far as I can
tell we’ve always created stable time loops when we did that. The phoenix’s ashes were never found
because Samuel Colt packed them up and mailed them to me in the future. I saw the message carved
into the baseboard because Dean knew where I’d be in the future. Dad bought the Impala—” He
straightened suddenly in his seat. “We’re here. Take this exit, then a left at the light, that should get
us to the borough police station.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, steering the car as he’d directed. “You’ve never even looked at a
map.”

“I looked it up back in Reading,” he said in that tone that meant I was missing something. “You said
I can’t use the cell phone around you, so I checked it before coming out to the car.”

“Right,” I muttered. “GPS on phones. What will they think of next?”

Sam flicked me that odd look again, like he still couldn’t quite believe that I couldn’t use modern
technology, but didn’t say anything except to give me a couple more directions that ended with the
Caprice pulling into the parking lot outside a small borough police station.

I turned off the engine and Sam ducked his head to peer out the window, his hands moving absently
over his jacket as if making sure his weapons and his own fake badge were in place. “I should’ve had us stop to get suits,” he said, mostly to himself, then glanced at me. “Do you at least know how to hold that?”

“What, the badge?” I asked. I fumbled it out of my pocket and held it up in my best Fox Mulder impression.

From Sam’s expression, I only managed Johnny Utah. His eyes sparkled and his dimples flashed like he was trying to hide a smile. “Here,” he said, taking the badge from me. “You have to sell it.”

Five minutes, and a quick but thorough practice session, later, Sam deemed me suitably federal and climbed out of the car, straightening his jacket and tossing his hair into place with casual ease. He reminded me a little of my brother Thomas, who was equally good at that kind of effortless acting. Sam didn’t have Thomas’s supernatural good looks, but he did have a friendly, boyish charm that he could wrap around himself like a mask.

I, on the other hand, have never managed to figure out the whole “beauty and grace” thing. I had to wrestle my duster back into place after sitting in the car for so long, and shove my hair out of my eyes with both hands. I left my staff in the car, but slipped my gun into the duster’s pocket and made sure my pentacle necklace was hidden under my t-shirt.

“Let me do the talking,” Sam said quietly as I caught up to him.

“Wow,” I said. “I have no idea how I’ve managed to survive my whole life working cases without the help of a hunter from another reality.”

Sam gave me a supremely unimpressed look. “How many times have you impersonated a federal officer?”

“I was hall monitor once in fourth grade.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Oh shut up,” I grumbled.

Sam grinned and pulled open the station door. His posture shifted subtly as he walked through, shoulders straightening, chin lifting, and it wasn’t hard to picture him in a suit and tie, sweeping through the cramped but neat little lobby like he owned it. I followed at his elbow, though I didn’t bother putting on any personas. Sam and his boyish good looks could play good cop - I, with my heavy black coat, scarred face, and looming height, would play the muscle.

The middle-aged woman manning the desk raised her eyebrows as we approached. I saw Sam’s arm start to move and reached for my own pocket, and we pulled out our badges in passable unison.

“Hi,” Sam said, his voice polite. “I’m Agent Betts, and this is my partner Agent Oakley. We’ve got some questions about a case we’re working. Is there someone we can talk to?”

The receptionist stared at Sam for a second in obvious surprise, then glanced at me, then back at Sam. “Uh, sure, I suppose,” she said. “One sec, hon.” She picked up the phone on her desk and spoke quietly into it, then hung up and pointed toward a door to the side of the lobby. “Go on back. Second door on your left. Sergeant Jackson can help you out.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, and flashed her a warm smile. We followed her directions and ended up in a small office crowded with three desks, several overflowing filing cabinets, and a small table that held a rickety old coffee maker. Only one of the desks was occupied, by a square-shouldered, dark-skinned man whose potbelly didn’t quite hide a muscular build. He stood up as we entered and
flashed a polite but wary smile. Sam extended a hand. “Sergeant Jackson?”

“Hello, welcome,” Jackson said in a deep voice. He grasped Sam’s hand, then mine, while Sam introduced us and we flashed our badges again. “We don’t usually get federal visitors.”

Sam grinned, somehow managing to look sheepish. “Well, hopefully we’ll be out of your hair quickly. We just have a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Jackson said, and motioned for us to sit in the chairs facing his desk. “How can I help?”

“We’re investigating a couple of violent assaults in Chicago,” Sam explained as we all sat down. “One of the attackers had received a text message that included an address in Gladwyne. We were hoping you might be able to tell us something about who lives there.” He gave Jackson the address.

Almost before Sam had finished speaking, though, Jackson’s demeanor changed. His posture stiffened, his eyes narrowing. “That’s the old Shilling place.”

“You know it, then?” Sam asked.

“Sure, everybody does,” Jackson answered. He leaned back in his chair, trying and failing to look casual. “They’re old money. Been there since before Gladwyne was Gladwyne. Good people, keep to themselves, don’t do anything to bring the law down on ‘em.”

“What do they do?” I asked. Sam shot me a look but didn’t contradict me.

Jackson shrugged. “Who knows? Probably their great-great-great-grandaddy founded a company and they’re living off the spoils.”

“You don’t know?” Sam asked. He was probably thinking the same thing I was - that in a small town like this, where everyone knew everyone else’s business, it was highly unusual for the local cops to not have any idea where the rich folks’ money came from.

“Sorry,” Jackson said, and shrugged again. “Like I said, they keep to themselves. You probably have the wrong address - the Shillings are good people. Don’t think they’d be involved in any assaults in Chicago.”

“Of course,” Sam said smoothly, and stood. “Thank you for your time.”

I followed Sam out of the police station and back to the car. Once we were safely inside, out of hearing distance, I said, “Well that wasn’t suspicious at all.”

“You think?” Sam said dryly.

I snorted. “How about you use your fancy phone to tell me how to get to ‘the old Shilling place’.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, and slipped out of the car again, already pulling out the phone. I watched through the windshield, fighting back an irrational surge of jealousy as he poked and tapped at the screen. Just once, I wanted to be the one with the cool futuristic gadgets. I mean, sure, the staff and the pentacle and the duster were nifty, but just once I wanted to be in Star Wars instead of Lord of the Rings.

Sam climbed back into the car a minute later and rattled off a series of directions. As I put the car in gear, he reached into his coat and pulled out his little pocketknife, as well as...

“Handcuffs?” I asked curiously. They looked like standard-issue police cuffs, except with odd
symbols carved delicately into the metal.

“We’re chasing demons, right?” Sam said, flipping open the knife. “I figured it might be useful to have a way to bind one.”

We pulled up to a stop sign and I paused long enough to eye the runes Sam was etching into the cuffs. He’d been working on them back at the Carpenters’ house, I remembered, though I hadn’t gotten a good look at them then. Now that I could see them, though, the runes didn’t make any sense. There was a big pentacle on the widest part of each cuff, and a series of smaller, more intricate runes around the bands. “How’s that supposed to work?” I asked curiously.

Sam tapped the pentacle with the knife tip. “Devil’s trap,” he said. “Keeps a demon trapped and prevents them from using some of their powers.” Then he pointed at one of the smaller symbols. “Binding sigil. Keeps them from smoking out of their meatsuit.” He paused, considering. “I don’t know if your demons can do that, though.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I said. “And I think those runes mean different things in your reality than in mine.”

“Possibly,” Sam admitted.

“Is that what your tattoo’s for?” I asked. “To prevent demons from using their powers on you?”

“It’s an anti-possession tattoo,” he said, then sucked in a breath like he’d been struck. His eyes flicked to the side and he dropped the cuffs to dig his thumb into his palm. When he spoke again, his voice was oddly tight, like he was trying to focus on the words instead of whatever had upset him. “Stops demons from possessing you.”

“Sounds useful, if you fight demons regularly,” I said, keeping my voice neutral.

Sam licked his lips, his eyes closing for a second, then he swallowed and blew out a breath. “Turn here,” he said, his voice not quite steady. “The Shilling place should be on the right.”

I followed his directions and found a narrow, scenic little road lined with spring-green trees and a pretty but sturdy wrought-iron fence on one side. A driveway cut through the fence a few miles up the road, the wrought iron stretching up and over it in an elegant arch. There was no gate, though the trees were thicker here, casting long shadows across the road in the gathering twilight, and if there was a house somewhere up the driveway, I couldn’t see it past the trees and the gently rolling hills. I pulled the car to a stop alongside the road near the gate and switched off the engine.

Sam was already reaching for the door handle, about to climb out. I put a hand on his elbow, not exactly restraining, but with enough strength to let him know I wasn’t going to be brushed off. “Hold on a sec,” I said quietly.

He froze, tension in every line of his body. Without turning he said, “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask,” I said. “Look, man, we don’t know what we’re about to walk into up there. Whatever it is that has you spooked, we can’t afford to have it take you down if things get hairy.”

Sam blew out a bitter little laugh. “It won’t,” he said, his voice rough. “The best thing I can do - we can do - is to solve this case so you can help me figure out how to get back to my reality. Then it won’t be your problem anymore.” His voice hitched on the last word and he worried at his palm again. His eyes were dark in the shadows, though there was a shine to them that suggested he was closer to the edge than he wanted me to think.
“Sam—”

“Don’t,” he whispered, and met my eyes. “Please.”

The pain in his eyes, the terror and the grief and the hopelessness, hit me like a punch. I wrenched my gaze away before a soulgaze could start, though even then it took me a second to catch my breath. Sam was still watching me, and God, I didn’t know if it was an act or if it was real, but he looked so lost and terrified and helpless that all I wanted to do was pat him on the head and tell him it would be okay.

But I couldn’t do that, not only because I didn’t even know what he was afraid of, but also because things like that, in my experience, would rarely ever just “be okay”. By his own admission, Sam had been involved with the capital-A Apocalypse, with demons and angels and death and destruction, and even if the only thing haunting him was memories of the past, there wasn’t anything I could do to help him. I sighed and patted his arm, the gesture awkward but all I had to offer. “Okay, fine,” I said, but gently. “Just… don’t get us killed, okay?”

He gave that broken, bitter laugh again. “I won’t.” He shrugged my hand off and climbed out of the car, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he headed up the side of the road toward the driveway to the Shilling mansion. I grabbed my staff from the back of the car, checked that my gun was in my pocket, and followed.

Sam stopped just outside the arch over the driveway, though he wasn’t waiting for me. He ran a hand along the wrought iron of the arch, brow furrowed thoughtfully. As I approached, I realized what had caught his attention: a gentle but powerful thrum of magic permeated the air. “Wards,” I muttered. “Strong ones.”

“Under the fence, I think,” Sam agreed. He glanced at me. “Still want to go in?”

“Chickening out on me, Winchester?”

He snorted and stepped through the arch. I followed, feeling the wards hum against my skin. I didn’t think they were hostile - not yet, at least. An alarm system, maybe, combined with dormant protective wards that had to be damn powerful to be giving off this much residual energy just from sitting there. Unease crawled up and down my spine - not at all helped by the way Sam’s head kept twitching, like he was reacting to things I couldn’t see or hear.

The driveway was long and winding enough that I quickly began to regret parking the car on the street. The place reminded me of the grounds of Raith Manor, all old-growth trees blocking out the last of the setting sun and glimpses of rolling, perfectly-manicured lawns. Maybe a mile from the road, the trees fell away, revealing a massive, Victorian-style house perched regally atop a slight rise in the ground. Elegantly tailored bushes lined the outer walls, with gardens at their feet filled with freshly-budding spring flowers. The driveway curled into a broad roundabout that ran in front of sweeping semicircular stairs marching up to an arched, recessed entryway.

Sam stopped short just inside the tree line, staring up at the house. His brow furrowed, then he blinked rapidly a few times and his eyes widened. I glanced at him, eyebrows raised; he asked softly, “You see that?”

“See what?” I murmured back.

“Wards,” he said. “All over the house. All over… everywhere.”

I frowned, extending my wizard’s senses. I’d been on alert since we passed through the warded
fence, but hadn’t felt anything yet. Then again, Sam had said see - whatever psychic sense he was using to pick up on the wards apparently worked through sight, giving him much farther range than me. As soon as I focused on the house, though, I realized what he was talking about. The place was layered in wards - old ones, powerful ones, probably laid down when the house was built a century or so ago. Even from several hundred yards away I could feel the power thrumming through them. “Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “You think they pay the cops to say they’re good people, or just everybody’s learned not to mess with them?”

Sam had been staring at the house, apparently lost in thought, and now he jerked his head to look at me. “Hmm?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head and motioned to the front door. “You’ve got the whole FBI thing down. You wanna try ringing the doorbell while I scout the grounds and see if I can find anything?”

“Sure.” He headed for the circular driveway, shoulders straightening into that Official FBI Walk he’d done back at the police station. I cut left through the trees before striking out across the lawn, and as I did so I carefully gathered power around myself into a veil.

Veils are complicated pieces of magic. I’m not very good at that kind of delicate spellwork, but years of training my ex-apprentice Molly had given me enough of a skill boost that I felt reasonably comfortable with them. Despite the gathering darkness, the lawn surrounding the house left no place for a sneaky intruder to hide - probably very much by design - and I didn’t want to risk being spotted. Veil firmly in place, I made my way up to the house and around the side, following the wall until I found a set of windows with lights on. I crept close to the wall, dodging flowerbeds to stay in the deepening evening shadows, then ducked beneath one of the windows.

Bingo. I could just hear the murmur of voices inside. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, though, so I closed my eyes, concentrated my will, and Listened.

Listening isn’t a magic thing, not exactly. It’s all about focusing your mind, shutting out distractions, until the only thing that matters is what you’re listening to. I blocked out the soft night noises, the rustle of the wind, my own breathing, until I could clearly hear two voices speaking to each other.

The first was a woman’s, saying in an irritated tone, “—wish he’d leave already.”

“He won’t;” the second voice, a man’s deep rumble. “Not until they’re finished.”

“He could’ve just given her the stupid cup,” the woman grumbled. “It’s not like she needs him around—”

“Are you mad?!” the man hissed. “He may have lost his followers but he’s still dangerous, and his shadow can—”

“My shadow can what?” a third voice rasped. “Hear every word you speak?”

My insides turned to ice. I knew that voice. It had been smooth and rich and melodious once, until I’d nearly strangled its owner to death. It belonged to one of the deadliest men I’d ever faced, who just two months ago had nearly killed me, Murphy, Butters, and the entire Carpenter family.

It belonged to Nicodemus Archleone.
Run, Boys, Run

Chapter Summary

In which Harry demonstrates what a wizard of the White Council is capable of, and Sam and Lucifer work together.

Chapter Notes

Happy 33rd birthday, Sam!

Harry

Don’t panic, I told myself firmly. Don’t panic. As far as I knew, Nicodemus didn’t know I was there; if he did, he wouldn’t be casually terrifying a pair of underlings. He’d be doing his damndest to kill me. Though if Nicky was there, and these underlings were speaking, that almost certainly meant they, too, were Denarians. Otherwise their tongues would have been removed, like the mercenaries back at Murphy’s place.

Which meant that there were at least three Denarians not fifteen feet away from me ...which meant I needed to get gone, like yesterday. But I needed to do it without getting noticed. Through the window, I could still hear Nicodemus: “If you’ve finished talking behind my back, it’s time. Bring all this to the ritual chamber.”

“Of course, my lord,” the woman murmured. Brisk footsteps clicked on a hard floor, then a door slammed closed. Hopefully that meant Nicodemus, at least, was gone.

Keeping a careful grip on my veil, I edged away from the wall, across the flowerbed, and back onto the lawn. The wards hummed against my skin as I did, and maybe it was just my imagination, but they felt stronger than they had a minute ago. Gulp.

I let the veil drop as I rounded the corner of the house; I still didn’t want to be noticed but I also didn’t want to get shot if Sam sensed a veiled person walking around without realizing it was me. The house’s front wall ran straight ahead to my left, while the roundabout was to my right, and the car about a mile and a half further right at the other end of the long driveway - which might as well have been Antarctica for all the good it did us. The house’s entrance was recessed at the top of the broad staircase that led up from the driveway, which meant I couldn’t see Sam or the front door until I reached the edge of the stairs.

A porch light illuminated the entryway and splashed bright yellow light out over the roundabout. Sam stood at the top of the steps, a polite distance back from the open doorway, hands moving as he spoke to someone standing just inside the door. I edged closer, trying to get a look at who he was talking to - and froze.

She was a young woman, and a beautiful one, with long dark hair and wide dark eyes. Her simple
yellow dress highlighted her slender figure, and in her bare feet she was a good foot or more shorter than Sam. She looked delicate, almost fragile, with an air of perpetual sadness about her - and she was nearly as dangerous as Nicodemus. She was the Denarian Rosanna, right hand to Nicodemus’s wife Polonius Lartessa, and a powerful sorceress. If she was here, then Tessa was here too. Double gulp.

I needed to get Sam’s attention without getting Rosanna’s, and get us out of here fast. I started to back up, to retreat around the corner where Rosanna couldn’t see me - but she chose that moment to look past Sam. Her eyes fell on me, and she went deadly still, shock plain on her face. “You,” she hissed.

“Actually,” I said brightly, “I’m Harry’s life model decoy. If you want to speak with the real Harry, his office hours are from one-thirty to two PM every third Thursday of the quarter.”

Rosanna’s expression twisted with fury. Sam fell back a step, one hand reaching for his gun, but she didn’t come flying out of the house like I’d expected. Instead she spun and ran inside, shouting something in a language I didn’t recognize.

Sam glanced at me, then back at the open door, then at me again, his eyes wide and confused. I waved an arm at him, already moving away toward the driveway. “This is the part where we make like trees,” I called. “Or better yet, like Speedy Gonzales.”

He followed, taking the stairs three at a time and catching up to me in a few long strides. I do a lot of running for exercise, and also because when you’re a squishy wizard - or even a wizard made slightly less squishy by the Winter Knight’s mantle - your best bet for not getting dead in a fight is to be able to run faster than the other guy. Given my height, I can outrun most things, but to my surprise, Sam kept up with me. His legs were almost as long as mine and he clearly had a lot of practice; maybe the running thing was just as true for squishy hunters in his reality as it was for wizards in this one.

We were barely halfway across the grass circle in the middle of the roundabout when a hideous shriek erupted from within the house - Lartessa’s voice. An instant later, a tidal wave of magic roared through the wards that covered the house and the grounds, and I felt them burn to violent life. The air around us turned thick, like we were running through water instead of air, and each step suddenly became a struggle.

Despite the danger, I couldn’t help taking a second to admire the ward. Wards work best when they have a limited, clearly-defined space to defend. The acres of open ground surrounding the house were well beyond the means of a typical defensive ward. But this miasma was a simple effect that took very little energy - yet which could slow down an intruder long enough for the Denarians to deal with them. Not to mention that even if the unlucky intruder managed to get to either the house or the fence surrounding the grounds, they’d then be faced with the powerful wards on those structures.

Sam grunted beside me as he fought through the thickened air. “What the hell?” he panted.

“Ward,” I gasped back.

“Can you do anything?”

“Dunno,” I said. “Maybe.” I reached under the collar of my shirt and pulled out my pentacle amulet. Holding it aloft in front of me, I forced my will through it until it glowed with a soft blue light, bright in the rapidly-growling twilight. But the air didn’t get any less thick - the wards were too strong. “Dammit,” I muttered, and let the amulet fall back around my neck.
Sam glanced at me but didn’t say anything, just lowered his head and pushed harder against the restraining murk. We’d managed to get as far as the point where the roundabout rejoined into a single straight driveway running out through the trees to the road, but that only meant that at this rate, we’d make it to the road in, oh, about three hours. Which was about two hours and fifty-nine minutes too late.

A roar shattered the air behind us, and I glanced over my shoulder in time to see three Denarians burst out of the mansion’s open front door and bound down the stairs. I’d been expecting Tessa, after that shriek, and maybe Rosanna, but all three of them were unfamiliar to me. One of them was covered in what looked like feathers made of dripping blood, one looked like someone had taken a knot of worms and given it a roughly humanoid shape, and the third looked vaguely like an upright, tailless crocodile, with knobby, warty, yellowish hide. They were all big and ugly and fast, apparently unhindered by the miasma that had Sam and me trapped. If I couldn’t get rid of the ward, they’d be on us in seconds.

I closed my eyes, taking one of those precious seconds to focus my will deep within myself. I blocked out the howls of the approaching demons, Sam’s labored breathing beside me, my own panting exertion. I had one shot at this, one shot to knock out a ward that had probably guarded this house for over a century. If I failed, well, I didn’t actually know what Tessa and Nicodemus would do to me - or to Sam - but it would probably make “hideous torture” sound pleasant.

I gathered my will. Gathered in the terror that shot ice through my veins at the pounding footsteps of the approaching Denarians. Gathered in the rage that lived deep inside me, born of the other times I’d fought them, when they’d kidnapped and tortured a little girl, when they’d brutalized and murdered an old man. When they’d hurt Karrin Murphy. I took all that emotion, added in a dose of Winter cold, and channeled it through my staff as I slammed the end of the wood into the earth.

“SOLVOS!” I bellowed. “SOLVOS, SOLVOS!”

Power flooded out of me, through the staff, and out through the ground to where the ward’s anchors had been buried deep beneath the dirt. Glittering lines of light flashed and flared across the pavement and out into the grass, burning away the ward, shorting its power into the depths of the earth. The miasma vanished, and Sam and I lurched drunkenly forward. Sam grabbed my elbow, making sure I was steady on my feet, and we both took off running again.

Behind us, the Denarians howled in anger. I risked a glance over my shoulder and saw, to my immense relief, that while we weren’t gaining any ground on them, they weren’t gaining any ground on us, either. My chest heaved and my lungs burned as I ran, my feet pounding against the pavement of the driveway, Sam matching me stride for stride.

Then one of the Denarians spat a word in a language I didn’t recognize, and a bolt of what looked like purplish-green lightning slammed into Sam’s spine.

---

Sam

Agony spiked through Sam’s back, out along his arms and legs, all the way into his teeth. He lost track of time for a second; when it came back, he was flat on the ground, his palms burning from skidding on the asphalt, his elbows and knees aching from the impact. Lucifer’s Grace throbbed deep within his chest and he knew without asking that if the archangel hadn’t been there, Sam would be dead. But that seemed to be the extent of Lucifer’s willingness to participate; he’d been curled up tight and hidden under Sam’s ribs ever since Sam had knocked on the mansion’s front door.
Somewhere overhead, Sam heard Dresden shouting his name, tried to respond but his jaw wasn’t working right. Dresden shouted again, and a wash of heat rolled past Sam in time to intercept the creature - monster - thing that was leaping at him. Fire slammed into the thing’s chest and knocked it out of the air, but the other two were already in motion, one of them going for Sam and the other for Dresden. Sam struggled to move, to dodge, to do anything, but whatever had struck him had left his muscles spasming weakly, his body sluggish and barely able to move, he couldn’t get out of the way—

Dresden appeared above him and raised his staff.

Sam hadn’t had a chance to watch Dresden fight up close before. Back on the pier, he’d been distracted by the demons attacking him, and then at Murphy’s house they’d split up, Dresden going inside while Sam stayed out on the lawn. But now Dresden stood directly over Sam, stance half protective, half a challenge to the creatures attacking them, and, well. Sam had thought the married witches he and Dean had gone up against a few years ago had been powerful, certainly enough so that he and Dean hadn’t tried to kill them.

Dresden could have wiped the floor with both of them.

He shouted something in faux-Latin, pointing the staff at the worm monster as it leaped for Sam, and invisible power battered the thing, knocking it head over heels across the lawn. More fake Latin and a sweeping hand gesture shot needles of ice to embed themselves into the thick hide of the third monster. It howled in pain and fell back. The first monster, the one with the blood-drenched feathers, had recovered from the fireball and charged forward again, but Dresden spun his staff in a circle, planted one end against the pavement, pointed the other at the monster, and bellowed, “Arietius!” The creature’s head snapped back like he’d punched it and it staggered away, momentarily dazed.

Another shout, another gesture, and the worm monster, which had regained its feet, was suddenly encased in a thick layer of ice that trapped it in place. On Dresden’s other side, the crocodile-thing bellowed, sweeping its arm over its chest to knock away the ice studding its skin. It knotted its hands together and slammed them hard into the ground. The impact was like an earthquake, the dirt bucking beneath Sam and throwing him entirely into the air for a second. Dresden staggered, and the blood monster, no longer dazed, flew out of the gathering dusk toward his back.

Sam managed to make his muscles respond enough to yell, “Dresden!” He was expecting another spell, but instead Dresden planted his feet, pivoted his hips and shoulders, and drove the end of his staff up and into the feather-thing’s stomach. He didn’t have the strength, or the mass, to stop its leap completely, but he didn’t need them. He just let the impact drive the staff into the ground, which did. There was a disgusting splorch and the creature stopped short a foot or so off the ground, impaled on the wood, its breath leaving it in a pained whoof. Dresden grinned, a fierce and dangerous light in his eyes that reminded Sam of Dean, and said, “Always wanted to try the spit-roasted chicken thing.”

The feather-beast snarled and squirmed until its taloned feet caught the ground, then wrapped its hands around the staff and yanked it out of its body. Dresden barely managed to let go in time to not get dragged along as the creature flung the staff away, but he used the moment of distraction to summon another fire blast that sent the creature staggering.

Muscle control was finally returning to Sam’s arms and legs and he struggled to push himself up, to do anything to help Dresden. The guy was good - way beyond good - but three-on-one odds were nobody’s bet. Dresden seemed to realize it, too; his next spell summoned a gale-force wind that momentarily blasted all three monsters twenty feet back. He glanced down at Sam. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Sam answered, which was… close enough. “What the hell are these things?”

Sam stared. “These things are angels?!” Deep inside his soul, he felt Lucifer’s Grace surge, somewhere between exasperation and an odd sort of disgust. *The Fall didn’t do much for them,* Lucifer grumbled. *They barely look like themselves anymore.*

Sam ignored him, caught on the revelation that they were up against angels. It was a long shot, but Dresden was already squaring off again with the three creatures as they circled him and Sam, and if it didn’t work they wouldn’t be any worse off. Sam didn’t have time to root around in his pocket for his knife, but his hands were already bleeding from the fall onto the asphalt and it wouldn’t be the first time he’d torn open his own skin with his teeth.

He remembered Lucifer a second later, but almost before he’d formed the thought - *What’ll happen to you, will you be all right?* - Lucifer shifted inside him, and his ghostly hands settled onto (into) Sam’s own. Sam didn’t fight it when Lucifer guided his fingers, and together they began to sketch a blood sigil.

---

Harry

---

Sam still hadn’t moved, hunched on the ground like he was in pain. This wasn’t the first time I’d faced multiple Nickleheads on my own - wasn’t even the first time this year, and God I needed a better hobby - but I’d been slinging around a lot of magic already tonight. Taking down the ward had been costly enough, but I was having to draw deeper than I liked on the power of the Winter Mantle for enough energy to slug it out with the Denarians, and I couldn’t do that for much longer.

I wished, for just a second, that Michael was here with Amoracchius. Or any of the Knights of the Cross with their holy swords, the only power on Earth that could match the Denarians. But they weren’t here - Butters was off at that conference and Sanya was in East Asia somewhere. And Michael wasn’t actually a Knight anymore, and Amoracchius was safe back in my cottage on Demonreach.

I was on my own.

I spread my hands and took a breath, trying to ready myself for whatever the three Fallen were about to do. They were circling me and Sam like hunting wolves, slow and predatory, and I couldn’t watch all three of them at once. It was a small mercy, at least, that aside from the lightning bolt Worm Boy had hit Sam with, none of them appeared to be sorcerers.

Then all three of them raised their hands in unison and began chanting in a language I didn’t recognize.

Me and my big damn mouth.

I reached for power, drawing in as much energy as I could and preparing to throw it all into a shield spell. Without knowing what they were going to do, I wouldn’t be able to make a very effective shield, but if I tried to just attack one or two of them, the others would leap at me while I was distracted, and I simply didn’t have the juice to hit all three at once. *Crap.* Sam was still on the ground, and I gritted my teeth in frustration, because we didn’t have *time* for this. The Mantle wanted to just book it, to leave Sam there and let the Denarians have him, but I shoved that thought down, hard. It wasn’t Sam’s fault he’d been injured, and I wasn’t going to leave him behind. But I needed to figure out what to do about the Denarians and their spell, and fast, or it wouldn’t matter anyway.
Moving in perfect synchrony, the Fallen raised their hands, their chant growing louder. The language sounded old, somehow, the words reverberating through my bones even though I couldn’t understand their meaning. Whatever they were doing, I had to be ready to stop it. I lifted my own left hand, shield spell at the ready.

Sam shouted, “Hey!”

All three of the Denarians twitched in surprise and looked down at where he lay on the ground. Sam rolled to the side, revealing a sigil drawn in what looked like his own blood on the asphalt beneath him. He gave the Denarians a split second to see the symbol, then slapped his bloody palm down onto it.

Power surged through the air, blasting out from the sigil along with a flash of brilliant white light that stabbed into my brain through my eye sockets. I cried out, twisting away from the light, but even as I did I saw the Denarians also reeling back - and then disappearing, their bodies dissolving into the light until it faded, leaving nothing behind except me, Sam, and the starry night sky.

Sam lowered his arm slowly. He’d fully expected to be banished along with the other fallen angels, but to his surprise he was still lying on the driveway of the Shilling mansion. Harry Dresden stood a few feet away, blinking and scrubbing at his eyes with his hand. The malformed angels were nowhere in sight.

Sam took a deep breath and blew it out in a relieved sigh. Somewhere deep in his soul Lucifer’s Grace thrummed, and he jumped, then glanced guiltily up at Dresden. Fortunately, Dresden was staring around in shock and didn’t seem to notice.

Lucifer? Sam thought cautiously.

“Told you,” Lucifer’s voice scoffed in Sam’s ear, and Sam jumped again, twisting around to see Lucifer standing over him, his hands on his hips. “I’m an archangel, Sammy. We created that sigil. I know how to write myself out of it.” His lips curled in a slow gentle smile as he crouched next to Sam and poked at the bloody lettering. “Not half bad, eh?” he added. “You and me, working together—”

“Sam?” Dresden said, which startled Sam again but spared him having to respond to Lucifer. “Stars and stones, man, what did you do?”

“I, uh,” Sam said, and carefully pushed himself to his feet. His palm stung where he’d ripped into the flesh with his teeth to get enough blood, but otherwise the effects of whatever he’d been hit with seemed to be fading. “I banished them.”

Dresden stared at him. “You banished them.”

“Yeah.” Sam rooted absently in his pocket for a handkerchief to wrap around his bleeding hand. “We don’t actually know where they go, we used to think they got sent back to Heaven but the sigil still worked after Metatron locked Heaven, and Cas said something once about ending up on a dog track in Australia…”

He trailed off, suddenly and acutely aware that Dresden was staring at him. (Like he was a freak, a monster, and Lucifer swatted him on the back of the head, hard enough to sting. “My freak,” Lucifer muttered irritably.) Before Sam could think of any way to respond - either to Dresden or to Lucifer -
Dresden shook his head and blew out a sigh. “Your reality’s weird.” Then he jogged a few steps across the lawn to where his staff had fallen and scooped it up.

Sam just nodded numbly. He turned toward the road again, but Dresden stopped, pointed the staff at the sigil, and muttered, “Combusto, combustum.” Tiny flames erupted from the ground around the sigil, burning the blood until nothing was left but a fine coating of ash. Sam’s confusion must have shown on his face, because Dresden said, “I told you, blood’s a powerful focusing tool. There’s more Denarians in that house - you don’t want to hand them your blood on a silver platter.”

“Right,” Sam said, and tried to smile. “Now whose reality is weird?”

Dresden snorted.

Sam took off for the road at a long-legged, ground-eating jog; Dresden fell into step beside him on the right, and Lucifer kept pace without seeming to move on his left. Sam threw a glance over his shoulder at the house, but despite what Dresden had said about more fallen angels being in there, they didn’t come running out. “I don’t know how long they’ll stay banished,” he added. “It’s anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more, depending on how long it takes them to, I don’t know, put themselves back together, but—”

“If they went to a racetrack in Australia,” Dresden interrupted, “then unless they know some good Ways through the Nevernever, they won’t be back for a few days at least.”

“They can’t fly?” Sam asked curiously.

“Oh,” Dresden said. “Even if they could get on an airplane, which I doubt, that’s still like a twenty-four-hour trip.”

Sam gestured vaguely. “No, like, angel wings flight. It looks almost like teleportation.” Dresden raised an eyebrow at him. “Your angels don’t do that?”

“No,” Dresden said. “But even if those three are trapped in Timbuktu, we need to get gone. As soon as ol’ Nicky and Tessa figure out what happened, they’re going to come after us, and you can bet they won’t give you time to draw that symbol again.”

Sam nodded. They had reached the forest that ran around the outer edge of the property, the towering old trees wrapping them in cool darkness. He could barely see the driveway, but didn’t dare take out his flashlight and risk giving their position away to any other pursuers. He also didn’t dare look to his left, where from the corner of his eye he could just see the glowing orange embers of Lucifer’s eyes. The back of his head still stung where Lucifer had smacked him and he couldn’t stop thinking about the possessiveness in the archangel’s voice when he’d said “my freak”.

But that was a puzzle for later, when Lucifer was the only angel around. The night was eerily quiet as Sam and Dresden ran through the trees, the only sounds their panting breath and the slap of their shoes against the asphalt. Sam kept expecting to hear another outcry from the house, to feel the wards surge to life again (and he didn’t know if that was normal, if Dean would be able to feel it if he was here, or if it was because Sam had Lucifer riding along inside him, or if it was just more of Sam’s own freakishness), but the silence held.

From Dresden’s own frequent glances back at the house, it was making him nervous, too. “Where the hell are they?” he muttered, mostly to himself, then louder to Sam, “How big’s the range on that banishing sigil?”

“No that big,” Sam answered. “You think maybe they just don’t want to risk it? I mean, we’re
leaving, if that’s all they care about—”

“I doubt it,” Dresden said darkly. “Keep your eyes open.”

It felt like a million years, but was probably only a minute or two before they reached the gate leading out to the road. There were more wards here, the ones Lucifer had pointed out earlier, thrumming with slithering energy against Sam’s skin. Dresden leaned on his staff, took a deep breath, and murmured something, and the energy parted long enough for them to slip through. But the effort clearly cost Dresden; he staggered hard and Sam had to grab him by the arm to keep him from falling over.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Just a little tired,” Dresden said. He braced himself on his staff and dug around in his pocket, then pulled out the car keys and tossed them to Sam. “Let’s get out of here.”

Sam didn’t need to be told twice. He got the car unlocked and slid into the driver’s seat, and the moment Dresden was inside with the door closed, Sam put the pedal to the floor. The car’s engine coughed and sputtered unhappily, as unlike the Impala’s deep comforting rumble as a kitten’s first mews were to a tiger’s roar, but the wheels spun against the pavement and they left the Shilling house and its fallen angels behind.
The Devil's In the House of the Rising Sun

Chapter Summary

In which an unexpected ally turns up, and the Denarians discover they’ve bitten off more than they can chew.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting - recent SPN episodes’ (mis-)handling of Sam and Lucifer have pretty much destroyed my will to write this story. :( I definitely still plan to finish it, but it might go slowly for a bit while I try to find my footing again and figure out how to deal with canon.

On a more cheerful note, I'm really glad to finally get to this chapter - I've been planning this scene since the beginning of the fic. Enjoy! :]

---

Sam

“Whaddya think, Sammy?” Lucifer asked, his casual tone not quite able to hide a hint of excitement. “We made a pretty good team back there, huh?”

Sam glanced in the rearview mirror. Lucifer sat directly behind him, leaning forward so that his breath chilled the back of Sam’s neck, his too-pale eyes lit with an excited fire. Sam was glad that Dresden had sunk against the door of the passenger seat and apparently passed out, because he didn’t think he could keep himself from visibly reacting to Lucifer. Still, he remembered to keep the words inside his head when he answered stiffly, I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed. “Sam, Sam, Sam,” he purred, and a cold strong hand slid onto Sam’s shoulder. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. That’s how it’s supposed to feel, Sammy. When an angel and his vessel work together. When you aren’t fighting me. I know you felt it. How right.”

Sam shuddered. Gritted his teeth and swallowed hard. He wanted to deny it, to tell Lucifer he was wrong - but he couldn’t. Not completely, and Lucifer knew it. Working with Lucifer to draw the sigil, he’d felt… well, right, in a way that he couldn’t remember ever having felt. He’d spent his whole life feeling wrong, dirty, out of place, but for those few seconds when he and Lucifer had wanted the same thing, had worked together to make it happen…

He’d felt like he belonged. And if that was what belonging felt like, he never, ever wanted to feel it again.

“Ouch,” Lucifer said, hurt that almost sounded sincere in his voice. “This is how it’s supposed to be, Sam. You’re my vessel. Why won’t you accept it?” His chin jutted in a child’s stubborn pout. “Why won’t you accept me?”
Because you’re evil, Sam ground out. You think I - and my whole species - are nothing but mistakes. You want to destroy the world—

“Not the world,” Lucifer interrupted, waggling a finger. “The world is beautiful and perfect. Daddy dearest’s best work. But humanity had to go and fuck it up. You’re the ones who are destroying the world, Sammy. Not me.”

And whose fault is that? Sam shot back.

“What, the whole serpent, apple, Eden thing?” Lucifer asked. “Come on, Sam. All I did was prove how unworthy humans are. Why do you think Dad kept you people locked up in the first place? He gave you free will, but even he was afraid of what you might do with it. And he was right! The moment you had the chance, you fucked it up. You made the wrong choice. You spat in God’s eye and laughed.”

Sam shook his head. He was exhausted to the bone, still cold with the leftover adrenaline and terror of their flight from the Shilling mansion, and he didn’t want to be having this conversation right now. That’s the point, he thought tiredly. Having free will means having the freedom to make the wrong choices sometimes. God didn’t create us to be perfect. He gave us free will so we could make choices and make mistakes and learn and grow from them.

“And are you growing, Sam?” Lucifer asked, his voice suddenly low and with a dangerous edge. “Because you’ve done nothing but fight and kill each other since you figured out how. Do you know how many wars humans have fought? How many humans have died at the hands of other humans? Because I do, Sammy. I watched, and I paid attention, and I counted, and when it got too much, when I went to my dad and I said ‘I cannot love these creatures, Father, not when they do nothing but kill and rut and kill some more,’ he cast me out.” Lucifer’s voice twisted into a sudden snarl, his hand clenching painfully tight on Sam’s shoulder, on his soul, and Sam flinched hard enough that the car swerved.

Dresden startled awake, blinking dazedly and groping for his staff. “Sam?” he said blearily.

“Sorry,” Sam said. His voice came out in a breathy little wobble, Lucifer’s rage ice-cold against his spine, clawing into his soul, and it was all he could do to keep the car pointed straight. He didn’t even know where they were anymore, had been driving blindly first to get away from the Denarians, then because he’d been paying too much attention to Lucifer. “I’m fine.”

Dresden snorted. “No you’re not. Pull over, I’ll drive for a bit.”

Sam nodded numbly and obeyed, turning the car into the first driveway he saw. It was a narrow little entrance, shaded by tall trees, that opened onto a broad, well-lit, and mostly empty parking lot. The only other car was parked a few hundred feet away, close to the gorgeously modern glass-walled office building the parking lot served; otherwise, they were alone. Lucifer had subsided a little, enough that Sam could at least force his body to respond after he’d parked the car, to climb out and lean shakily on the hood. Dresden got out as well, circling the car to stand next to Sam, one hand half-raised awkwardly like he wanted to offer comfort but wasn’t sure how, or even if it’d be welcome.

But just his presence was oddly, unexpectedly comforting, enough that Sam had to bite back a sudden sob. It was what Dean used to do, before the Cage, before Purgatory, before the Mark, and Sam hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it. He let his head fall forward, his hair a curtain around his eyes, and a moment later Dresden rested his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Offer still stands,” Dresden said quietly. “If I can help…”
Lucifer chuckled, low and ugly, his Grace curling possessively around Sam’s soul. Sam shuddered and didn’t say anything. After a moment, Dresden lifted his hand, patted Sam awkwardly on the shoulder a couple times, and said wryly, “Oh-kay. Good talk. Moving on.”

It was such a Dean thing to say that Sam snorted a hiccuping little laugh. He scrubbed a hand over his mouth and pushed upright, about to turn to look at Dresden when he realized Lucifer was staring at something behind them, a frown wrinkling his forehead. Even as Sam started to turn to follow his gaze, an incredulous voice said, “Harry?!”

Harry

I spun, startled. “Butters?!” I demanded.

The little coroner stood a few feet away, staring at me. Waldo Butters was nobody’s idea of a warrior, standing only a few inches over five feet and weighing maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. His shock of black hair stood up in all directions, and his glasses made his eyes look even wider, adding to the look of surprise on his face. He was dressed in slacks and a rumpled button-down shirt, which was possibly the fanciest I’d ever seen him look, though the black sneakers he wore in place of dress shoes were a concession to the practicality of both his jobs. As a medical examiner, he was on his feet most of the day.

As the newest Knight of the Cross, he had to be ready to answer the White God’s summons at any moment.

“What are you doing here?” Butters asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I pointed out.

He sighed. “I told you I was going to be at the IAC&ME conference this week. In Philadelphia?”

“IAC&ME?” Sam repeated, and I turned to see his brow furrow. “Isn’t that the coroners’ association?”

“Yes,” Butters said, and squinted at him curiously. “How did you know that?”

“Uh,” Sam said, his expression that of a deer spotting the oncoming semi, and it occurred to me that the most likely reason he knew that was because Sam had faked a coroner’s badge or three.

Harry to the rescue, then. “Butters,” I said, “This is Sam Winchester. He’s helping me on a case. Sam, this is Waldo Butters, Chicago’s finest medical examiner.”

Sam tilted his head like he was listening to something. “And Knight of the Cross?”

I blinked. Sam twitched and said, “You told me, remember? Back in the car?”

I… was pretty sure I hadn’t - we hadn’t talked about the Knights at all - but maybe Murphy’d told him. Before I could press the point, Butters said, “A case, Harry? What case gets you all the way out to Philadelphia?”

“The Denarian kind,” I answered grimly, and Butters flinched.

“Oh,” he said, and looked down, fiddling with something in his pocket. “So that’s what Michael meant about ‘extreme coincidences’?” I raised an eyebrow and Butters clarified, “I went to dinner
with some MEs from Detroit, but when I left to go back to the hotel my phone battery was too dead to get directions, and then I got on the highway in the wrong direction, and when I realized and pulled off to turn around, my rental car started to make this godawful noise, so I pulled in here, and now the damn car won’t even start.” He gestured irritably toward the car at the front of the parking lot. “But you’re here, and apparently there’s Denarians here.” He bit his lip and looked away. “I guess I just thought I’d get a little more time to practice, y’know?”

I winced. Butters had only picked up *Fidelacchius* two months ago, and hadn’t exactly been a paragon of swordsmanship before that. “Well,” I said, “I’m hoping we shook them. So if we’re lucky, you’re just insurance, and we won’t have to deal with them at all.”

“Right. Well, Denarians or no, I’m stuck anyway,” Butters said with cheer false enough that I could tell he didn’t believe me. “I gotta call the rental company and get them to send someone for the car —”

“I, uh,” Sam spoke up suddenly. “I could take a look. I mean,” he added when we both looked at him in surprise, “my brother’s the mechanic, but he showed me a few things.”

“...Sure,” Butters agreed after a moment. “If you can fix it, then I don’t have to screw around with the rental company, and if you can’t, I guess I’m not any worse off, huh?”

Sam’s mouth flickered in something that almost managed to be a smile, and he started off across the parking lot toward Butters’ car, which was a relatively modern little Japanese number. I grabbed my staff out of my own car, then Butters and I followed, Butters running ahead the last few steps to unlock the car and pop the hood. Sam pulled a little penlight out of a pocket and stuck it between his teeth, then bent over the engine. I hung back - the car probably had enough electronics in it that I didn’t want to risk making the problem worse - and after a moment of hovering nervously around Sam, Butters joined me.

“Denarians, huh?” he said, voice pitched low enough that Sam wouldn’t hear. “And what’s with this guy?”

I brought him up to speed, starting with finding Sam on Demonreach, the demons’ attack, the cell phone message that had led us here, and finally our, er, tactical retreat from the Shilling mansion. Butters listened with wide eyes, and when I finished, he shook his head in disbelief. “Jeez,” he muttered. “I leave town for five freakin’ days and this is the kind of trouble you get yourself into.”

I snorted. “Hate to bust your bubble, but I’m plenty capable of getting myself into trouble regardless of the presence or absence of very practical and level-headed medical examiners.”

Butters laughed out loud at that. Sam glanced up at us, then his gaze darted to the side, then he hunched his shoulders and went back to work on the engine. Butters frowned uneasily. “So, Harry,” he said quietly, “maybe I’m just being paranoid, what with the fallen angels gunning for me, but...” He paused, seeming to struggle for words. “You remember that Halloween a while back, the one with the zombies?”

“How could I forget?”

“Well,” Butters said, then hesitated again, eyes flicking to Sam and back.

“Spit it out, man,” I said, though I kept my own voice pitched low.

Butters took a deep breath, then said in a rush, “Remember when you went to talk to a girl who’d helped you, only when I came looking for you you were in a dark room by yourself? And you said
the girl was actually a demon who was making you see things?"

I stared at him. He continued, without waiting for a response, “Because this Winchester guy keeps looking around exactly the same way you did then.”

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, much the same way it had the moment I’d realized the girl I’d thought was an innocent, albeit conveniently helpful, human was actually the fallen angel Lasciel. It was no wonder Sam’s twitches and glances had made me so uneasy - I’d never seen it from the outside before, but my subconscious had been picking up on the fact that Sam had been acting like there was another person in the room.

My thoughts raced. Vadderung had confirmed Sam was from another reality, which meant that at the very least, he wasn’t one of this reality’s thirty Nickelheads. He’d said angelic possession worked differently in his reality than in ours, and anyway from what Murphy’d told me of their conversation, the Fallen didn’t exist as such in his reality. So, a regular demon maybe? Some other entity, something that I didn’t know about, or which didn’t have a counterpart in this reality? I glanced at Sam, who was studiously not looking at us, but his shoulders were hunched up around his ears and I could see the tension in his movements.

I was just starting to shift my weight, to walk closer to him to ask him a few very pointed questions, when his gaze snapped up suddenly. Now that I knew what he was doing, I could see how his eyes fixed on a point a few feet away from him, around the eye level of a tallish man; how he stared at the spot for a second and then turned to look past Butters and me as if responding to something. His eyes widened.

For a second I couldn’t decide whether to turn around. I was pretty sure Sam knew we’d been talking about him, and the “hey, look over there” routine was the oldest trick in the book. On the other hand, the shock and sudden fear in his eyes looked real. And then I realized I could hear a low, angry buzzing noise.

I turned around, and for a moment didn’t see what was wrong. The parking lot was still empty except for my car, its sides black in the shadows from the trees—Wait. Not black from the shadows. The car was covered in a thick layer of something that swarmed and flowed and buzzed, and even as I watched, the stuff melted away to the ground - revealing nothing but a metal frame. Everything that wasn’t metal on the car was just gone. Even the tires, and as the last of the swarm vanished, the bare frame dropped to the ground with a clatter.

Before I could do much more than stare in shock, a surge of slithering energy roiled across the parking lot and the lights blew out in a shower of sparks. I raised my staff, gathering my will on reflex even as I strained to see in the sudden darkness. Beside me, Butters drew the slender hilt of Fidelacchius from his pocket, and as he did, a brilliant glowing blade sprang out from the end, humming with warm, fierce power.

I heard Sam make a startled noise behind us, and half-turned, trying to get him in my peripheral vision. The sword’s light showed me that he’d drawn his gun and was holding it down by his leg, his eyes flicking back and forth like he wanted to stare at the holy lightsaber but also was trying to watch for danger. At least he looked as startled as we did. If Butters was right about him being possessed by something akin to a Fallen, this would be the perfect time for him to turn on us. But he looked more worried about whatever was coming from the darkness at the other end of the parking lot.

Speaking of which… I turned to face the darkness again, keeping my staff at the ready. A moment later I saw two spots of sickly green light seeming to float through the air toward us. Eyes - or more specifically, the eyes of a Fallen. As they got closer, coming into the light of Butters’ sword and the dim moonlight reflecting off the glass walls of the building behind us, I made out the body
were attached to: a skittering creature that looked like nothing so much as a child-sized, humanoid praying mantis with red-and-black chitinous skin: Polonius Lartessa, Nicodemus’s sorceress wife.

Even as she approached, her stomach began to heave, and my own gut twisted because I knew the disgusting sight that was coming next. Instead of vomiting, Tessa reached up with her mantis-clamp hands and hooked them into her mouth, pulling to the sides like she was putting on a too-tight shirt. Tessa’s human head, which looked about fifteen years old with huge green eyes, short grey hair, and a heart-shaped face, emerged from the mantis mouth, pushing clear until the empty mantis head flopped down her back like a grotesque hood. She showed teeth in an expression that wasn’t even in the same family tree as a smile, her demon’s glowing green eyes still blinking ominously on her forehead.

Several yards to the left, I spotted another figure emerging from the shadows, this one a classical demoness with red skin, black bat wings, and goat legs that ended in cloven hooves. Rosanna, Tessa’s right-hand temptress, in her demon form now. And to the right… the shadows roiled like live things, and when they parted, Nicodemus Archleone himself stood there, a dark-haired man in a neat suit with the slender grey tie-that-wasn’t hanging from his neck. The three of them closed on us with deliberate, taunting menace, and I realized that Butters and Sam and I had started backing up. Which was probably exactly what the Nickleheads wanted - to drive us into the center of the U-shaped building behind us, where we’d be trapped by the walls on three sides and the demons in front.

“Harry Dresden,” Nicodemus said. His shadow danced under his feet, stretching forward into the dim light instead of away from it, its hands reaching out with clawed fingers. Sam hopped back an extra step to avoid them, his eyes huge. Nicodemus continued, “I don’t know what you think you’re doing here, but I’ve had quite enough of you throwing wrenches into my plans.”

“Oh please,” I shot back. “You went to Mab for help. Did you honestly expect anything else?”

He smiled coldly, though his eyes glittered with malice, and his shadow stopped menacing Sam to flash over toward me, forcing me to take a couple of quick steps backward. We were well inside the building’s courtyard now, glass walls towering on three sides of us and the Denarians blocking the only way out. Pointing out that Nicodemus had colossally underestimated Mab in what was probably the biggest screw-up of his two thousand years of life was not the best of ideas when we were trapped like this, but hey, I didn’t stop running my mouth for people I respected a lot more than ol’ Nicky.

Tessa laughed, cold and sharp. “Don’t worry, he’s learned his lesson well,” she hissed, and Nicodemus scowled. “But you haven’t,” Tessa continued, to me. “I don’t know why you continue to pursue us, wizard, but you will pay for interrupting our work.”

That, at least, explained why she and Nick hadn’t come after us right away. Nicodemus had said something about a ritual back at the house; they’d probably been just kicking it off when Rosanna went to get them. If we were lucky - for some truly shitty definition of lucky - it was something that required a certain confluence of time or energy, and our interruption would throw them off for a considerable time, until whatever forces aligned again. Not that that would matter much if they killed us here and now, but maybe it would do Sanya some good.

“Hey,” I pointed out. “It was your choice to answer the door. I mean, Girl Scout cookie season’s over, and I don’t think you guys would get much out of a visit from Jehovah’s Witnesses—”

Tessa hissed, one hand making a sharp gesture, and I barely managed to get my will up in time to stop her spell on my shield in a flash of blue-white light. The spell looked like the same purplish-green lightning that the other Denarian had hit Sam with, and I had no intention of finding out what it would do to the rest of us. “I am,” Tessa snarled, her voice taking on a buzzing, two-layered quality
that sent chills along my spine, “utterly finished with you, wizard.”

I weighed my options, even as I continued to fall back, keeping pace with Butters and Sam. I was running on fumes after the fight at the mansion, but if I hit either Rosanna or Nick with everything I had, I might be able to clear enough of a path to run. But Tessa was incredibly fast, and I’d had a taste two months ago of what her insect swarm could do if she caught me. Sam could keep up with me if I ran, but I wasn’t sure if Butters could - I was a foot and a half taller than he was, and while his holy sword leveled the supernatural playing field between him and the Denarians, it did nothing to make up for the vast difference in simple experience.

Translation: this was very, very bad.

Behind me, Butters made a frightened noise, and then a moment later my shoulders bumped up against the inner wall of the building behind us. From the corner of my eye, I could see Butters and Sam pressed against the glass wall beside me.

Strike that. Now it was downright disastrous.

Rosanna, Tessa, and Nicodemus stood in a line in front of us, maybe twenty feet away, spread out just far enough that there was no way we could make a break for it. Butters lifted *Fidelacchius* a little higher, but even its bright, steady hum seemed to struggle against the shadows flowing from around Nicodemus. Rosanna crouched slightly, poised to leap at us, and Tessa’s hands were up again, preparing to cast—

“Enough.”

It took me a second to realize it was Sam who’d spoken. His voice was different, though not in the way the Denarians’ voices changed when their Fallen were speaking. No, it was simply the way he spoke: not particularly loud, and with a calmness bordering on laziness. Yet something about it carried like a whip crack, and all three Denarians’ heads snapped to him.

And… they froze. All three of them, like they’d been punched in the gut, their eyes widening in shock. Even more disconcerting, a pair of glowing green eyes opened over both Rosanna’s and Nicodemus’s own eyes - and the Fallen looked just as shocked as the humans.

“You,” Tessa whispered, and at the same time Nicodemus breathed, “Impossible.”

Sam gave a cool little shake of his head, his hazel eyes glittering. “Nah,” he said, still in that strange, soft, lazy voice. “Just improbable.” He strolled forward a few steps as he spoke, placing himself square between Butters and me, and the Denarians. His posture was different, too, and his movement. For the first time since I’d met him, he seemed comfortable in his body. Until now, he’d always been slightly hunched, drawn into himself, like he was trying to make himself smaller, trying to apologize for his height and his broad shoulders. But now he moved like a man confident in his own skin, like he had every right to be that big. Hell, I was four or five inches taller than him and I still suddenly felt weirdly small.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Butters throw me a baffled glance. I shook my head - I had no idea what was going on. Except… it occurred to me suddenly that maybe Sam’s mental ride-share had taken the wheel. If so...

“No,” Nicodemus said. “It can’t be—Impossible.”

Sam - or rather, the creature possessing him - smiled, an odd, almost gentle expression. As he did, the temperature dropped, plummeting thirty or forty degrees in the space of a few seconds. “You keep
using that word,” he said, his voice taking on a hint of a Spanish accent. “I do not think it means what you think it means.”

“Rosanna!” Tessa barked, and the demon-girl crouched, wings flaring as she prepared to attack.

“Enough,” Not-Sam said again, sharper this time, though he still didn’t raise his voice. Rosanna fell back, looking startled and a little scared, and she threw a pleading look at Tessa. Sam flicked a contemptuous glance at her, then looked at Tessa and Nicodemus in turn. “Imariel,” he said coolly. “Anduriel. Take control of your vessels before they embarrass you.”

My blood ran cold. He was speaking to the fallen angels, by name, with a lazy familiarity. Without consciously meaning to, I backed a few steps away from Not-Sam, sideways along the wall of the building. On Sam’s other side, Butters was doing the same thing, his eyes huge behind his glasses, Fidelacchius wobbling in his hands.

Nicodemus spoke again, but this time it wasn’t his voice. Anduriel’s melodic, androgynous voice said, “You cannot be here. It’s not possible.”

Not-Sam tilted his head, like Hell’s spymaster was nothing more than a particularly unusual insect. “I shouldn’t have to explain myself to you,” he said, his voice low and suddenly chilling. Just as suddenly, it turned amused, almost playful, one corner of his mouth curling upward: “But since you’re struggling so badly…”

Power, freezing cold and so strong it was almost physically tangible, flooded the little courtyard. Overhead, lightning flashed and thunder boomed, and the temperature plummeted again. My breath plumed out before my face and I shivered even in my heavy leather duster and with the Winter Mantle to protect me; I couldn’t imagine how cold Butters had to be in his light button-down.

The sound of ice crackled behind us, and I turned just enough to see frost racing up the glass walls of the building behind us, like a Fantasia animation gone mad. It spread up and out from a point directly behind Not-Sam’s shoulders, stretching out to the sides—and I took a couple quick steps away from the wall as I realized the shape it was forming.

Wings. Enormous wings, curled inward by the u-shaped walls of the building, drawn in swirls and whorls of ice and rising up from Not-Sam’s shoulders to spread and flare sixty feet high and three times that tip to tip. As they did, the glittering ice caught the dim moonlight shining through the clouds roiling overhead, caught the flashes of lightning flickering across the sky to a near-constant rumble of thunder. The light flashed through the ice, reflected and amplified until the wings shone with the brilliant rosy glow of a winter morning. It focused on Not-Sam’s head, wreathing his golden hair in a crown of dawn’s light, and as it did, his wings flared wide. Thunder cracked and lightning flashed, and the frozen glass under the wings exploded, a billion glittering shards flying backward into the building.

The Denarians stared, their expressions openly awed - even the normally unflappable Nicodemus. The creature wearing Sam’s body took another step forward, and in that same low, calm, dangerous voice, said, “My reasons for being here are my own.” He looked from one to the other, his cold hazel eyes meeting each set of green demon eyes in turn. “Now,” he continued. “Stop. Bothering. Me.”

Just like that, the Denarians ran. Tessa’s mantis skin wrapped back up around her head and she skittered away into the deep shadows, while Rosanna spread her wings and took flight over the trees, and Nicodemus’s shadow wrapped around him and he simply vanished. Not-Sam watched them go, amusement dancing in his eyes. Without the icy wings to amplify it, the halo of light around his head had faded, but I could still feel the thrum of power that surrounded him like a physical force. On his other side, Butters stood frozen; I was pretty sure only sheer stubbornness, and maybe the power of
the holy sword in his hands, had kept him from fleeing with the Nickleheads.

The creature that wore Sam’s body turned, his movements lazy and relaxed, and he smiled at me. “You’ve figured it out,” he said, sounding amused.

“Yeah,” I said. My voice shook and I swallowed, hard, until I could get the next words out. “Heya, Lucifer.”
In the Pale Moonlight

Chapter Summary

In which everybody manages to have a civil conversation.

“You, Lucifer,” I said. My throat was dry and my voice was hoarse. I shifted my grip on my staff, though I was acutely aware of just how useless it would be, if this turned into a fight.

The devil’s eyes crinkled at the corners, a smile utterly unlike any expression I’d ever seen Sam make. “Hello, Harry Dresden,” he said. It wasn’t even my full Name, and he clearly hadn’t put any effort into it, yet the sound of it sent a shiver of power along my spine.

I wasn’t sure what I expected him to do - smite me where I stood, maybe, or, I don’t know, sprout horns and a tail and start playing the fiddle. But he just stood there, a faint smirk curling the corners of his mouth, amusement in his eyes. I said, “I didn’t expect Satan to quote The Princess Bride.”

“You are not entertained?” he said.

I stared at him for a minute. That had to be a coincidence. Didn’t it? Lucifer stared back, utterly still in that creepy way some nonhumans had, his smirk never faltering. Finally I shook my head. “So, um,” I said carefully. “was it you all along? Or is Sam—”

“Oh, Sam’s real,” Lucifer said, and tapped his temple with a finger. “He’s safe in here. We have a deal, Sammy and me. I save his brother, and in exchange I get… Him.”

“There are about six bajillion different kinds of wrong with that,” I said, and shook my head. “I guess this explains why Sam didn’t want to do a soulgaze.”

Lucifer’s smirk grew wider. “Nah,” he drawled. “I wouldn’t have let you see me. He was just afraid looking at his soul would kill you.”

I frowned. “It doesn’t work like that.”

Lucifer shrugged and something in the air stirred, power thrumming around me; I thought I heard the rustle of ice-dusted feathers. “Maybe. You would’ve at least ended up modeling the latest in white jackets with extra-long sleeves, though.”

“Why? He’s human, isn’t he?”

“Oh, sure,” Lucifer agreed easily, then his smile turned sharp. “But let me tell you, Michael was pissed that Sammy dragged us back into that cursed Cage.” Thunder growled overhead, low and ominous, and the temperature dropped again. “Time passes differently down there, Michael had centuries to take it out of Sam’s hide.”

It took me a second to realize that Lucifer meant Michael the archangel, based on what Murphy’d said Sam had said about stopping the Apocalypse. “Just Michael?” I asked, thinking about Sam’s terror back in the print shop, the “seizure” he’d had at Murphy’s that sounded an awful lot, in retrospect, like someone getting magically tortured.
Lucifer waved a hand dismissively. “All right, so I let my temper get the better of me, too. And now Sam hates me.” He sounded almost disappointed by that, almost pouting, but then he grinned abruptly. “Not enough to keep him from making a deal for his brother, though.”

I swallowed. I’d seen some pretty awful things with my Sight, including a look at the true form of a -

*gah* - a naagloshii. I didn’t need to add the sight of a soul tortured for freaking *centuries* to my mental roster of nightmares. Yet somehow Sam was still alive, and even - as far as I could tell, at least - relatively sane. Maybe not so sane as to not make a deal with the freaking *devil*, but given what I’d done to save my own family, I was hardly in a position to throw stones.

Behind Lucifer, Butters moved, edging away from the building with *Fidelacchius* still held carefully between himself and the devil. I caught his eye, trying to convey *don’t do anything stupid* without doing anything that might draw Lucifer’s attention to him.

It didn’t work. Lucifer turned his head just enough to see Butters out of the corner of his eye, and *tsk*ed. “Please,” he said, his voice gentle. “Let’s not.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“He said, his voice gentle. “Let’s not.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Just like that?” Butters asked skeptically.

“I’m not doing anything,” Butters answered, much more calmly than I’d expected given the situation. “But I’m tired of staring at your shoulder blades and I just don’t trust you not to jump down my throat for moving.”

Lucifer blinked, like that wasn’t what he’d expected. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said, and glanced at me. “Either of you. My deal with Sam hinges on being in our reality, not this one. As soon as we find the path back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

I frowned. That… was a good point, actually. Sam and I had talked about this being a trap, but the Denarians had been surprised to see me. Tessa had implied that I was there specifically to mess with whatever ritual they’d been working on, but I wasn’t - I didn’t even know what the ritual was. I was only there because of the demon attacks and the cell phone with the address of the Shilling estate; I hadn’t even known the Denarians would be there. It didn’t make sense - why set a trap so that the trap-ee shows up just in time to interrupt something important? “If they weren’t expecting me,” I said out loud, thoughtfully, “then who was?”

“That,” Lucifer said, “is a very good question. Too bad there isn’t, you know, a *detective* around who might be able to *detect* the answer.”

I scowled at him. “So I’m a little rusty. It’s been a busy couple of years.”

He gave me a sweet smile in response. “Better bust out the oil, then. If Anduriel and his flunkies do come back, you’ll want to actually. You know, *Do* something about them.”

“Question,” I said. “If you’re, *you know*, the freaking *king* of fallen angels, why don’t you just do something about them? Like, say, kill them? I mean, if anyone’s going to have the mojo to do it, it’s you.”

He fixed his eyes on me, and I quickly moved my own gaze away. I had no idea what would happen
if I soulgazed the devil, and I didn’t want to find out. Lucifer said, “I suppose it would be convenient for you if I killed them. But, at least in our reality, when I pick a fight with another archangel it’s called the Apocalypse.”

It took me a second, but then I remembered standing before two doors, discussing balance with an archangel. “Uriel,” I said quietly. “His job is to maintain balance between Heaven and Hell. You’re Hell, even if you’re from another reality. You act, he gets to react.”

The corners of Lucifer’s eyes crinkled in that eerie smile again. “Exactly,” he agreed. “This…” He waved a hand, indicating the escaped Denarians, the thunderstorm overhead, the shattered glass void in the shape of wings behind him. “Nothing. All I did was stop hiding, at Sam’s request.”

“And you spoke to the Nickleheads,” I pointed out. “You scared them off.”

“I gave their human vessels a choice,” he said calmly. “Just like it was Sam’s choice to ask me to stop hiding. That’s important, you know. Choice. Free will.” He said the words like they were curses, his expression going dangerously dark for a moment. “Uriel has nothing to balance.” The unspoken for now hung heavy in the air.

“Well, then,” I said, and clapped my hands together briskly. “Let’s get going before Nicodemus comes back.”

Lucifer smiled again, then abruptly he staggered, his eyelids fluttering. Before I could react, he caught his balance and straightened - only it wasn’t Lucifer anymore, it was Sam. His eyes were too wide, his expression startled, and his hands moved like he wanted to pat down his body, like he couldn’t believe he was back.

Then he saw me and Butters staring at him. Pain and grief and shame and guilt flooded his expression. His shoulders slumped and he flinched away from us, his eyes fixing on the ground. “Sorry,” he whispered, and turned away. “I’m—I’ll leave. I’m sorry.”

I caught his arm. He flinched again, hard, and when he looked up at me, the fear and despair in his eyes stunned me. He looked like he thought I was going to hit him. He looked like he thought he deserved it.

Hell’s bells. I had no idea how long he’d been sharing brain space with the devil, but it had happened before he’d come to my reality, which meant at least twenty-four hours. Which was a lot longer than most people could’ve done it. But this kind of reaction… this wasn’t just from twenty-four hours of Satanic companionship. I’ve seen abused people before. Red Court slaves. The half-human changelings who’d been used as playthings by the sick freak who’d been the previous Winter Knight. Ivy, the Archive, after she’d been kidnapped and tortured by the Denarians. Others. They’d all had that same look, that same horrible resigned terror, expecting to be hurt and to be unable to do anything to stop it.

Sam was nearly six and a half feet tall, built like a Bowflex advertisement, and could kill demons with his brain. But that didn’t mean there weren’t bigger, scarier things out there, things like the archangels that had had him for hundreds of years, things that could - and had - tortured him into expecting violence. Just like he was clearly expecting me to attack him now.

“Sam,” I said, as gently as I could. “You don’t have to go.”

He stared at me like I was speaking Klingon. I added, “There aren’t a lot of people who’ve both had a fallen angel lurking in their brain and made a deal with the devil to save someone they cared about. Your devil’s a bit more literal than mine, but not by much. I have an idea of what you’re going
through.” I tightened my grip on his arm for a moment, trying to make it reassuring, then let go. “If you want to leave, it’s your choice. I’m not going to stop you. But you don’t have to.”

He kept staring at me. I waited. Butters came to stand beside me, Fidelacchius hissing softly as the glowing blade faded and he tucked the handle into his pocket. He didn’t say anything either, but he didn’t need to. I could feel the power of the sword - the power of a Knight of the Cross - thrumming around him, a steady soothing energy. Sam stared at Butters for a minute, too. His eyes shone in the dim moonlight and he was clearly trying not to blink and knock the tears loose.

Finally he nodded, the movement jerky and scared. “Okay,” he whispered.

I gave him what I hoped was an encouraging smile. “Great. Let’s grab the car and—” I’d started turning as I spoke, and now found myself staring at the stripped metal frame of my car. “Or not,” I finished lamely. “Dammit, that was my car!”

“I, uh, hear there’s a brisk trade in automotive scrap metal,” Butters said, and grinned shakily at me when I glared at him. “You barely paid four figures for that monstrosity, Harry, and I’m not convinced you didn’t over-pay.”

I folded my arms and glared at him. “It was my car,” I grumbled, but then I sighed, because frankly Butters was right. And it wasn’t like there was anything I could do about it right now. I looked over at Butters’ rental. “I guess you’re driving,” I said to him.

We both looked at Sam, who flinched again under the combined scrutiny, but he said, “It, uh, it was just a slipped belt. It should be fine for now. You’ll want to let the rental company know, though.”

“I can do that,” Butters said, relieved. “That’s a lot less bad than telling them it’s stuck in a parking lot in the middle of nowhere because it won’t start.”

One corner of Sam’s mouth quirked in something that almost managed to be a smile. He headed over to the car, and Butters and I followed. Sam went for the passenger side again, like he always did, so I went for the driver’s side on reflex before remembering that Butters would be driving. But he passed me and went to the back door instead. “You drive,” he told me. “I’m still shaking from the adrenaline rush, and anyway I don’t think either of you will fit in the back seat.”

I snorted. “This is why I miss the Beetle.”

“You wouldn’t have fit in the Beetle’s back seat, either,” Butters retorted. “Just try not to blow up the electronics, okay?” He tossed me the keys and we climbed in. I had to shift the seat back far enough that I could even get my legs into the car, and Sam was clearly trying to scrunch into the smallest space as far from Butters and me as possible in the passenger seat, but finally everyone was settled. I put the car in gear, and we drove off into the night.
Chapter Summary

In which Lucifer knows his memes, Butters is a Knight, and Harry worries about Sam.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the super-long delay! Real life’s been a bitch lately. Mostly, though, it’s turned out to be a lot harder than I expected to write Harry and Lucifer talking to each other.

Harry

Butters’ little Japanese rental started making odd coughing noises about two minutes after we left the parking lot, and a little puff of smoke erupted from beneath the hood. At least the headlights kept working - I could hear the distant wail of a police siren growing quickly closer, but this was no time to get stopped by the police. The building Lucifer’s wings had destroyed had probably had some kind of alarm system, and I wondered absently whether “archangel wings” would count as an act of God for insurance purposes.

Sam sat huddled in the passenger seat, hugging himself, his gaze distant as he rested his forehead against the glass of the window. I waited a few minutes to see if he would talk on his own, but he didn’t say anything. Finally I opened my mouth to speak, but as if he’d sensed it, Sam said, quick and tight, “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you.”

I shrugged, careful to keep my hands on the steering wheel where he could see them. “I can understand why you didn’t,” I said. “Being trapped in an alternate reality is a tough enough pitch without throwing Satanic possession into the mix.”

He shot me a look from under his hair. “I’m surprised you still believe anything I’ve said,” he admitted.

“Someone I trust confirmed the alternate reality part,” I told him. “And I’m not going to… I don’t know, hit you or whatever it is you think I’m going to do to you, okay?” He stared at me, startled; I added, “I told you, I’ve been where you are. I had a fallen angel in my head for a while. And I made a deal with one of the scariest beings on the planet in order to save someone I care about. It’s not the kind of thing you go shouting from the rooftops. I don’t blame you for hiding it.”

His jaw tightened and he looked away; I could tell he didn’t believe me. “Sam,” I said, putting just a hint of power in his Name, enough to make him turn back to me, hazel eyes wide. “I swear on my power, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Emotions flickered across his face in the strobing glow of the streetlights: doubt, fear, relief, and something that might almost have been hope. Finally he managed to huff out a crooked little laugh, looking back out the window and scrubbing a hand over his mouth. “That’s a first for me.”
I hid a wince. Whatever - whoever - had traumatized Sam like this hadn’t been Lucifer. Or at least, not only Lucifer. Like I said, I’ve seen a lot of abuse, and there’s a difference between someone who’s afraid of a particular abuser, and someone who expects that kind of pain from everyone. I didn’t think I wanted to know what Sam had been through, what had happened to him that he expected everyone he met to hurt him. And Sam pretty clearly didn’t want to talk about it. So I just said, “Lucifer said you made the deal to save your brother?”

Sam nodded without looking over at Dresden. He’d known this question was coming. “Do you know what the Mark of Cain is?”

Dresden shook his head, but to Sam’s surprise, Waldo Butters piped up from the back seat: “It’s the mark God put on Cain after he killed Abel, right? The one that made him a pariah.”

“That was the official story,” Sam agreed. Lucifer, sprawled in the back seat behind Sam, snorted. “So what was the real story?” Dresden asked.

“Cain discovered that Lucifer was talking to Abel. Trying to convince Abel to join him, become a demon. Cain interfered. Offered himself in Abel’s place. But Lucifer only agreed on the condition that Cain kill Abel first. Then when Cain did it, Lucifer gave him the Mark.” He shrugged. “At least, according to Cain.”

“It’s true,” Lucifer said lightly. “Cain always was an honest guy.”

Dresden and Butters were both staring at him, so Sam added, “Lucifer says it’s true.”

Dresden looked a little unsettled, but said, “So the Bible’s wrong about the Mark’s origin. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“The Mark turned Cain into a Knight of Hell - a kind of uber-demon,” Sam said. “Basically immortal, with an insatiable blood lust.” He shivered, remembering the barn in Ohio, the despair in Dean’s eyes when he’d fallen into Sam’s arms. “There were other Knights of Hell, including a demon named Abaddon. She turned up a couple years ago. Tried to take over Hell. Crowley - a demon - told Dean - my brother - that the only way to stop her was to use the First Blade to kill her. But the First Blade can only be wielded by the bearer of the Mark of Cain.”

Dresden took his eyes off the road long enough to stare at Sam. “Hell’s bells, do people in your reality just really like making horrible deals or something? Because it sounds like you’re about to tell me that your brother managed to get the Mark of Cain so that he could kill this Abaddon.”

Sam flinched, hunching against the window. “He didn’t know,” he said quickly. “Crowley didn’t tell him about the Knights of Hell thing.”

“Sounds like the kind of thing you ask about beforehand,” Butters said from the back seat.

“It really is,” Lucifer agreed cheerfully. “And Cain gave him the chance. Like I said, honest guy. But no, big brother Dean had to charge in and do it anyway, consequences be damned.” He smiled. “Literally.”

“So,” Dresden said when Sam didn’t continue, “your brother takes the Mark of Cain so he can kill Abaddon, but he missed the part where doing so would turn him into some kind of bloodthirsty uber-
demon. So you went to the source and cut your own deal to get the Mark off your brother.”

Sam nodded, letting his head fall against the window. It sounded so damn stupid and he was so
damn tired. “Pretty much.”

“Hell’s bells,” Dresden muttered again. “I thought fairies were bad.”

“He keeps saying that,” Lucifer said thoughtfully. “The fairies must be really different in this reality.
In ours they’re mostly just pests.”

Sam had actually been wondering that himself. He asked Dresden carefully, “You said you made a
deal. Was that with a fairy?”

Dresden nodded, his mouth tightening. “With Mab, actually.”

“Mab?” Sam repeated. “The, uh, fairy midwife from Shakespeare?”

“Uh,” Dresden said. “No. Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness.”

Sam felt his eyebrows go up. “Wow,” he said. “I, uh, I’ve read a little about the Queen of Air and
Darkness. I thought she was just a myth.”

“Not in this reality,” Dresden said grimly. “She’s one of the six Fairy Queens, and the ruler of the
Winter Court of the Sidhe. Think winter personified and with hundreds or thousands of years of
practice in scheming and manipulation. She wanted me to be her Knight - her mortal servant - for
years. A few years ago, things got bad. I needed power and she was the lesser of a whole lot of evils.
I made the deal.”

Lucifer had leaned forward, watching Dresden intently; abruptly he sat back, eyebrows going up.
“He has a daughter,” he said, surprised. “A secret daughter. He made the deal to save a daughter he
hadn’t known he had until she needed rescuing. And now he’s bound to a fairy queen.”

Sam blinked, then looked back at Dresden. “Oh,” he said quietly.

Dresden’s eyes narrowed. “That was a very pointed ‘oh’. You’re not reading my mind, are you,
psychic boy?”

“Uh, no,” Sam said hurriedly. “I can’t - I mean, I’m not that kind of psychic. It’s, um.”


“He, uh, he can hear you,” Sam said, while Lucifer cackled in amusement.

“So, where exactly is he?” Butters spoke up from the back seat. “I mean, he’s not just inside your
head, right? You kept looking around before, like you could see him.”

“Sort of,” Sam admitted. “He’s, uh, inside me—” and he couldn’t stop a shudder just from saying it
— “but it’s easier to talk when he projects himself.”

Dresden nodded to himself. “Lash did that to me before I knew it was her. After, sometimes, too.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Butters said. “So where is he now?”

“Sitting behind me,” Sam admitted. “Humming the Imperial March.”

He could see the moment Butters realized that that meant he was sitting within arm’s reach of the
Sam closed his eyes, his body sagging. I felt the shift in the air, a sudden chill that was part metaphysical power and part plain old temperature plummeting. When Sam opened his eyes again, it was Lucifer behind them.

He grinned, sharp and lazy. “Really, I’m surprised you find it surprising. Sam grew up on movies.” He tapped the side of his head. “Anything Sam knows, I know.”

“So it wasn’t a coincidence,” I muttered. “Gladiator, really?”

Lucifer shrugged. “I liked Star Wars better.”

I stared at him. “Seriously?” That was… unsettling, if only because when I’d been mostly dead, Uriel had also admitted to being a Star Wars fan. I didn’t think it would go over with Lucifer very well to mention that, though, so I just said, “I’d’ve figured people murdering each other for entertainment would be more your style.”

“I saw enough of that before my father cast me into the depths of Hell,” Lucifer said, his voice suddenly low and ugly, and I felt the temperature drop again. “But Star Wars? Humans telling themselves that they won’t always choose the dark side, when it comes down to it? Comedy gold, right there.”

“That’s awfully cynical of you, Luci,” I said. “Even for—” Then my brain caught up to my mouth and I froze. Uriel had very nearly smited me - smote me? - for shortening his name; I didn’t want to think about how Lucifer would react.

Except he… didn’t react, except to tilt his head, birdlike, when I didn’t continue. “What’s the matter, wizard?” he asked. “I’d say cat got your tongue, but your tongue has so far been...” He licked his
lips, the motion thick with innuendo and sinister glee. “Unstoppable.”

“Eurgh,” I said, and shuddered. “No, just… Uriel wasn’t too happy without the end of his name, and I—”

“You thought I wouldn’t be, either,” Lucifer said. He smiled, lazy and cold. “It’s fine. Uriel always was kind of prissy, but me?” He spread his hands in an exaggerated “no big deal” gesture. “It’s not like anyone calls me by my real name anymore, anyway.”

I blinked. “Lucifer’s not…”

He made a rude noise. “Of course not. Your Latin’s awful but I would’ve thought you could figure that one out, at least.”

I stared at him for a second, then looked at Butters in the rearview mirror for help, but he looked as lost as I was. Lucifer rolled his eyes. “Oh, please,” he said. “It means ‘morning star’ or ‘light-bringing’. That’s all.”

“Oh,” I said. “So, what, when people say Lucifer Morningstar, they’re really calling you Morningstar Morningstar?”

His eyes narrowed. “If you so much as think the word ‘moon’ I will kill you, Uriel and his Apocalypse be damned.”

In the back seat, Butters made a choking noise, like he was trying not to laugh. Lucifer glared at him, then at me. Which would have been funnier if I knew what the hell he was talking about. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Butters choked again. Lucifer’s jaw worked and every surface on the inside of the car was suddenly frozen over with a paper-thin layer of ice - including Butters and me. That shut Butters up, and Lucifer’s irritated frown relaxed into an amused grin. “For someone who claims to be ahead of the ‘monsters’—” Lucifer actually sketched the air quotes with his fingers, which, let’s be honest, was not something I’d ever expected to see, “—in this regard, you’re awfully behind on your memes, wizard.”

“Whatever,” I shot back wittily. “So if ‘Lucifer’ is just a Latin title, then what’s your real name?”

He looked away, the amused smile fading; the temperature dropped again. “I don’t have one,” he said quietly.

I stared. Lucifer continued, his voice bitter, “When Dad had Michael lock me up, He also scrubbed my name from creation. Setting an example, like He hadn’t already terrified everyone into obeying Him unquestioningly. Defy Daddy, lose everything.” He shook his head. “No one remembers my name. I don’t think even He does.”

“That’s awful,” I said, and to my surprise, meant it. Lucifer sounded almost... sad. I mean, I’ve seen monsters play the “sympathy for the devil” card before, but it was hard to believe that that was all Lucifer was doing. Even if Names didn’t work the same way in Sam’s reality as in this one, which by his reaction earlier I was guessing they didn’t, losing your name regardless of capitalization had to suck.

Lucifer gave me a look from under his hair, though there was something about it - an extra tilt to his eyes, maybe, or just the fact that he was the freaking devil - that kept it from being quite as gut-wrenchingly pitiable as Sam could manage. “Most people would say it’s no more than I deserve,” he pointed out softly.
I shrugged. “I’m not exactly Mr. Clean and Pure myself. Stones and glass houses, man.”

“Even for the devil himself?” His tone was light, mocking, but there was something underneath it that I couldn’t quite identify.

“Even for the devil,” I said.

“Especially for the devil,” Butters added from the backseat.

Lucifer shot him a startled glance, then snorted. “Humans,” he murmured. He closed his eyes, and when they opened again, Sam was back. He looked away from us, chewing the inside of his cheek and hunching his shoulders.

There wasn’t much else to say after that. We drove in silence, except for Butters giving me directions, until we pulled into the parking lot of a fancy hotel. A pair of slender banners bearing the IAC&ME logo framed the doors, though there was no other sign of the convention. Probably the hotel didn’t want to spook anyone by broadcasting the fact that a bunch of doctors who carved up dead people for a living were hanging out there. I parked and we climbed out.

“You gonna be able to get home from here?” Butters asked me.

“We’ll manage,” I said. I was pretty sure there was a Way through the Nevernever nearby; my knowledge of the Ways was out of date after having been dead, in killer rehab, and then pregnant with a brain baby for a couple years, but there were usually paths between big cities like Philadelphia and Chicago. Then something occurred to me. “Hey, any chance you have that, uh, old reference book I gave you? I promised Sam I’d help him get back to his reality and I think it might help me.”

Butters stared blankly at me. I glared back, willing him to catch on. Bob the Skull was a secret that very few people knew, due to how dangerous he could be in the wrong hands. But then Sam looked to his left, head tilted like he was listening to Lucifer, and said to me, “Why do you want a talking skull?”

“Oh,” Butters said. “Yeah, he’s here.”

I clapped a hand to my forehead and sighed, then looked toward the spot where Sam seemed to see Lucifer. “Dude. Stay out of my head.”

Sam raised an eyebrow at me, clearly skeptical about the chances of that happening; I ignored him and said to Butters, “Can I borrow him for a few days?”

“Sure,” Butters agreed. “I’ll go get him. I’d invite you up, but Andi’s probably asleep, and…”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We’ll wait.”

He nodded and headed inside. I leaned on the side of the little car and folded my arms; Sam hitched a hip onto the hood and likewise settled in to wait.

Then I felt a surge of unfamiliar power, and a voice behind us said, “Hello, Moose.”
The Enemy of My Enemy

Chapter Summary

In which Sam threatens, Crowley explains, and Harry deduces.

Harry

“Hello, Moose.”

I whirled, grabbing for my staff, aware of Sam likewise spinning, his gun appearing in his hand. A skinny man stood behind Butters’ rental car, a faint smirk on his lips as he watched Sam. He had neatly-trimmed black hair and bronze skin, and he wore a tailored business suit.

“Goodness,” he continued, his tone mock-incredulous. “I didn’t think they came bigger than you, but you’ve gone and found yourself a giraffe.”

“Crowley?!?” Sam said, disbelief in his voice.

“In the meatsuit,” the man agreed. He blinked - and when his eyes opened again, they were blood-red from corner to corner. He let us both get a good look, then blinked again, returning his eyes to normal. He opened his mouth to say something—

—then Sam’s eyes narrowed dangerously and he lifted a hand. I felt his blood aura surge, strong enough that I tasted copper on my tongue. The man’s - Crowley’s? - eyes widened and he scrabbled at his throat, choking noises tearing out of him.

“I told you,” Sam said, his voice low and frighteningly calm, “that the next time I saw you, I would kill you. You have ten seconds to give me a reason not to.”

“Sam—” I said, but he ignored me, all his attention on Crowley. He wasn’t hunched in on himself anymore, standing tall with his chin lifted, his arm outstretched and his fingers curling slowly as if he was closing them around Crowley’s throat.

“Damn it, Moose—” Crowley gurgled.

“Nine,” Sam said coldly. Golden light flashed under Crowley’s skin, outlining his ribs and skull.

“Eight.”

Crowley’s eyes widened in what looked like real fear. “Dean’s in trouble!” he choked out.

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “You’re lying,” he said. “Dean isn’t in this reality.”

“Of course he is,” Crowley snapped, then gasped in pain as the golden light flashed through him again. “How do you think I got here?”

“Sam,” I said again, and put a hand on his outstretched arm. He glanced at me, anger darkening his eyes to glittering voids. I knew that anger. I knew how badly it could screw up your thought process. I kept my voice steady, calm: “Questions first, killing later.”
His muscles tensed under my hand and for a bad second I thought he was going to attack me instead. Then he took a deep breath, and I saw it when he clamped down on the anger, felt the thrumming bloody power curling back beneath his skin. Crowley sagged, falling against the car and gasping. I kept my hand on Sam’s arm, half restraining, half reassuring; he leaned into my touch for a second.

Then he lunged forward, grabbed Crowley by the arms, and wrestled him face-down onto the hood of the car. I shouted and started forward before I realized that Sam had pulled the handcuffs he’d been carving from his pocket and slapped them on Crowley’s wrists, binding his hands behind his back.

“Dammit, Moose!” Crowley snarled, his voice muffled from being smashed against the metal of the hood. “What the blazes—”

Sam let him go and stepped back. I saw Crowley test the cuffs, felt the surge of power as the binding sigils Sam had carved into them activated, saw Crowley’s face darken as he realized he was trapped. Sam gave him a tight, angry smile. “Insurance,” he said flatly.

Crowley’s eyes narrowed and he glared back. Before he could say anything, I asked Sam, “So who is this joker, anyway?” Clearly they knew each other, and just as clearly weren’t happy about it.

Sam didn’t take his eyes off the man. “This is Crowley. The crossroads demon I mentioned.” I nodded, remembering the name from our discussion in the car - Crowley was the demon who’d set Sam’s brother up to make the deal that had gotten him turned into an uber-demon. No wonder Sam wanted to kill him.

“A crossroads— I’m the bloody King of Hell,” Crowley snapped, indignant. “I didn’t fight my way to the top for an idiot like you to—”

The air temperature plummeted and I felt a rush of wind, accompanied by a sound like feathers rustling, and this time it was Sam’s cold aura that flared up. No, I realized suddenly. Not Sam’s aura. Lucifer’s. Sam reached out a hand, fingers curling like he was gripping someone’s arm the way I’d gripped his a moment ago. I saw his arm and shoulder move as if being pulled. His voice calm and utterly empty, Sam said to Crowley, “The only reason Lucifer hasn’t killed you yet is because I’m asking him not to. Maybe you should think twice before you finish that sentence.”

Crowley’s eyes darted from Sam’s face to the spot in front of Sam’s hand, still outstretched like he was holding someone back. He swallowed hard and didn’t say anything.

“Now,” Sam said. “What happened to Dean?”

Crowley scowled. “When he realized what you’d done, your brother called me, his pet pigeon, and yet another obnoxious ginger, and we followed you here.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“Because,” Crowley said in a duh-you-moron tone, “we didn’t like the idea of leaving the bloody devil to try to restart the bloody Apocalypse!”

Sam’s expression went exasperated, like he wanted to argue the point on principle but didn’t actually disagree. Crowley glared at him for a second or two longer before continuing, “We landed on an island in the middle of the lake, and happened across a man nosing around.”

My turn to blink in surprise - and worry. Very few people know about Demonreach; even fewer would willingly go there. I said, “Who was he?”
The demon looked over at me. “I don’t suppose you remember terrorizing a witch a few years back?” he asked blandly. “Fellow by the name of Terry Patterson? Plastic surgeon?”

I furrowed my brow, thinking. It took me a minute to place the name, but finally I had it. “Yeah,” I said. “Minor talent in the Paranet, has a knack for shapeshifting. He used it on his patients, to improve their results. The White Council didn’t like it much.” Sam raised an eyebrow at me, obviously curious; I explained, “Using magic to change another person’s shape is a violation of the Laws of Magic. But since he was only using his power to kinda... smooth the edges of the surgeries he was performing - surgeries which people were paying him to do, and do well - I let him off with a warning.” I’d planned to check back in on him a few months later, but then Susan had shown up and told me we had a daughter, and everything had gone to hell.

“You scared him but good,” Crowley told me. “He stopped using his magic on his patients. Most didn’t notice, but he had one repeat customer who was… less than happy with the less-than-perfect results this time around. Apparently she lit into him on a day when he was already tired and frustrated, and he, well.” Crowley smirked. “He turned her into a frog. And then, when her husband and son came looking for her, he panicked and turned them into frogs as well. Then his housekeeper when she asked a few too many questions about his sudden interest in herpetology, and a well-meaning neighbor with exceptionally poor timing.”

My stomach sank. Dammit. The White Council had its Laws, and the singular, very final punishment for breaking them, for a reason - namely that even one use of black magic was enough to corrupt the wielder. Once you’ve used that kind of power, it becomes easier to do it again. And again, and again, exactly as Patterson had apparently done.

Sam was watching me, his expression unreadable. To Crowley, he said, “What does this have to do with Dean?”

“Well, the good doctor knew that it was only a matter of time before the great scary witch Dresden came after him. So he made a deal with a demon - not me, Moose, relax - for help.”

“My bells,” I muttered.

Crowley continued, as if I hadn’t spoken, “This demon agreed to take care of Saruman here, in exchange for a sword Dresden kept on the island—”

I’d had my mouth open to protest being labeled “Saruman” - I was clearly Gandalf - but Crowley’s words stopped me cold. “What?” I demanded. Sudden fear and anger surged in my gut and I took a step toward Crowley. “He took the Sword?”

“That’s why he was on the island when we were,” Crowley confirmed. “Of course, we had no idea about any of that at the time, we just used him to get a ride back to the mainland so we could go searching for Sam and his— and Lucifer. We split up, so I’ve no idea why Dean and the others went after Patterson, but evidently they did because by the time I found them, he’d turned all three of them into frogs. He got me, too, hence the new meatsuit.” He smirked again. “No Devil’s Traps in this reality. I just smoked right out.”

Sam grimaced, looking away and scrubbing a hand over his jaw. I ignored him, still reeling from the revelation that Patterson had somehow managed to steal the holy sword *Amoracchius* from where I’d hidden it on Demonreach. If he gave it to a demon… if that demon used it for anything other than its intended purpose…

The Sword would be destroyed.
“Patterson has the Sword now?” I demanded.

Crowley nodded. “He’s meeting his demonic patron in—” He made a show of checking his watch. “About an hour, after which he plans to hop a flight to the Caribbean.”

“Leaving the demon to come after me,” I said, then stopped and clapped a hand over my eyes. “Damn it! It’s already been coming after me, hasn’t it? That’s what all this—” I waved a hand vaguely—“has been about. That’s why the demons attacked me at the docks, that’s why they tried to kidnap Murphy. It was a trap, with the Denarians as the weapon. No wonder Nicky’s crew had no idea why I was here.”

“So it was,” Crowley agreed. “The idea was that you’d go haring off half-cocked - according to the good doctor’s demonic patron, it’s something of a theme with you, no wonder you get along so well with Moose—”

I growled, Sam started to raise his hand, and invisible angel wings rustled again. Crowley flinched, then tried to cover it with a cough. “Anyway,” he continued hurriedly, “you’d go off half-cocked and run smack into these Denarians, whatever they are, and either die at their hands or be so occupied fighting them that Patterson could escape. Then his demon could finish you off afterward and sell the sword to the Denarians for their trouble.”

“Damn it,” I muttered, and looked over at Sam. “We gotta get back there. If Patterson gives that Sword to a demon…”

“It breaks,” Sam said. “Ms. Murphy told me. And he’s got Dean.” He glanced to the side, presumably at Lucifer, his mouth thinning, then turned back to me. “We can’t get back to Chicago in an hour, though.”

“Sure we can,” I said. “How did you think we were going to get back, anyway?”

“Oh, hotwire a car and drive?” Sam said, in a tone that suggested he did that all the time. I resisted the urge to clap a hand over my eyes again. *Alternate reality*, I reminded myself. Sam apparently forged law enforcement badges all the time; why would I have thought he’d be squeamish about stealing a car? “No,” I said, and wagged my staff pointedly. “Wizard, remember?”

“You can Apparate?” Sam asked, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“No,” I repeated. “And before you ask, no, we don’t do the stupid fireplace powder thing, either.” Sam snorted. I continued, “Does your reality have the Nevernever?”

“Uh…” Sam said. “Maybe? I mean, I think there’s some kind of dimension where fairies live, and the Veil for ghosts, but I’ve never heard the term ‘Nevernever’.”

“You can Apparate?” Sam asked, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“No,” I repeated. “And before you ask, no, we don’t do the stupid fireplace powder thing, either.” Sam snorted. I continued, “Does your reality have the Nevernever?”

“The what?”


“Uh…” Sam said. “Maybe? I mean, I think there’s some kind of dimension where fairies live, and the Veil for ghosts, but I’ve never heard the term ‘Nevernever’.”

“Nor have I,” Crowley chimed in.

“It’s—” I started, but was interrupted by the front door of the hotel opening and Waldo Butters hurrying out, carrying a small sturdy backpack. He hurried over to us, then stopped to frown at Crowley. I said quickly, “Someone else from Sam’s reality.”

“Oh,” Butters said. He adjusted his glasses, then handed the backpack to me. “I’ll be back the day
after tomorrow. Think you’ll be done by then?”

“Hopefully,” I said. “Thanks, man.”

“Welcome,” he said. “Be careful, Harry.”

“You too,” I answered solemnly. “The Denarians are still just one town over. Hopefully they’ll leave you alone, but…”

“Yeah,” he said. He gave me a nervous smile, then turned to head back inside. “See you in a couple days.”

I waved, and he disappeared into the hotel. When I turned back around, I found Sam watching Crowley narrow-eyed, and Crowley staring thoughtfully after Butters.

“I don’t think he’s human, that one,” Crowley said. “There’s something… odd… about him.”

“He’s human,” I said. “He just has Someone watching his back.”

Crowley squinted at me. I gave him my best smug wizard smile, slung the backpack holding Bob the Skull over my shoulder, and hefted my staff. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”
“Tell me, Samantha,” Crowley muttered, quietly enough that Dresden, walking a few feet in front of them, wouldn’t hear. “Why doesn’t our favorite angel simply…” He fluttered his fingers in the demon manacles. “Fly us back?”

They were following Dresden through the evening streets of Philadelphia, toward someplace from which Dresden would apparently be able to get them back to Chicago. Dresden had gripped his pentacle necklace for a moment, his eyes going distant, then motioned for Sam and Crowley to follow him away from the parking lot of Butters’ hotel. Sam wasn’t sure where they were going; there wasn’t much in this part of town except for the hotel and a series of large buildings that might have been schools or churches or government offices, but Dresden seemed to have a plan. At least it was late enough at night, and the area of town empty enough, that no one else was around to wonder why two scruffy NBA rejects were running around with what appeared to be a successful young businessman in handcuffs.

Sam glanced at Lucifer, who was walking between Crowley and Sam and scowling at the demon. Sam suspected he was doing it to annoy Crowley, as it meant that Crowley had to get hit with the full force of Lucifer’s icy presence if he wanted to stay close enough to speak privately to Sam. Lucifer looked away from Crowley long enough to roll his eyes and make a go-ahead gesture. Sam answered, “This reality has archangels, too - and they aren’t caged up or dead. They won’t make a move if Lucifer doesn’t, but if he does something they could interpret as helping Dresden…” He shrugged.

“What?” Crowley said. “So instead we’re stuck following Slenderman there to who-knows-where, through who-knows-what?”

Sam rolled his eyes, fighting down the urge to just kill Crowley and be done with him. Between his own power and Lucifer’s returning Grace, he had more than enough strength to do it, but Crowley knew more about the witch they were up against than either Sam or Dresden. And he’d apparently been involved in getting Dean and the others to this reality, which meant he might be useful for getting home.

Not that Sam was glad about that. Dean had been turned into a frog because he’d followed Sam here, and maybe under other circumstances it would have been something Sam could laugh at. Something he’d tease Dean about forever, because there were things that little brothers just did not let go. But right now, with the Mark and Lucifer and everything else that was going on, the last thing they needed was to be distracted by idiot witches who couldn’t control their powers. Not to mention, as a frog Dean - and Cas and Charlie - were all but defenseless. If that witch decided to kill them to cover his tracks, there wasn’t anything they could do about it.
Sam would just have to get there in time.

Crowley, of course, didn’t seem to notice that Sam didn’t feel like talking - or more likely, didn’t care. “Where’d you find him, anyway?” Crowley asked, nodding toward Dresden. “I’ll admit I didn’t expect you to free Lucifer, but traveling to an alternate reality and shacking up with a witch —”

“Can I at least mute him?” Lucifer asked petulantly, talking over Crowley. “I can unmute him if you need to ask him anything. He talks too much.”

Sam bit his lip, giving the offer serious consideration despite himself. He wasn’t entirely sure why Lucifer was asking him instead of just doing it, but then, a lot of things Lucifer had done since Sam had first let him take control of his body against the Denarians hadn’t made sense. Part of him wanted to ask, but most of him was afraid of learning the answer. So he just said out loud, “No, leave him alone. He’s not worth it.”

Crowley blinked, then went abruptly white under the bronze of his meatsuit’s skin when he realized who Sam was talking to. He took several quick steps to draw even with Dresden, close enough at his elbow that Dresden gave him a curious look.

“Good riddance,” Lucifer muttered, and stuck out his forked tongue at Crowley’s back. To Sam, he added conversationally, “It’s because you aren’t fighting me anymore, Sammy. You’re letting me in. Isn’t it nice? Working together?” His voice dropped to a seductive purr and he trailed a finger down Sam’s spine to his hip. “Like we’re meant to be?”

Sam’s blood ran cold and he stopped short, stomach roiling. Was that—But he’d—Lucifer had—Sam had already said yes, what else was there for him to give?

“Everything, Sammy!” Lucifer said. He spread his arms, pirouetting to face Sam. “Come on, we both know how well it worked out the first time you said yes. You fought, Dean cheated, we both ended up back in Hell. Not a great outcome for anyone. And even when you’re not actively trying to reneg on our deal, it’s…” He paused, head tilting birdlike while he sought the proper word. “Uncomfortable, to have you sitting in there screaming and scratching and hating me. But this?”

He stepped in close and reached up, his hand sliding over Sam’s jaw in a caress, a twisted parody of the way Dean would touch Sam’s face when he was worried about him. “Where we work together? Where everything just…” He shivered in obscene pleasure, his body pressed close enough that Sam could feel the motion from his stomach to his thighs. “Fits? Perfection.”

Sam tried to step back, tried to put some distance - any distance - between them but Lucifer’s hand still cupped Sam’s jaw and Sam was shaking too hard to move, the part of him that remembered the Cage sobbing hysterically, the rest of him thinking, you did this to yourself, this is your fault, you fucked up in the first place, if you hadn’t—

“Sam? Sam!”

Dresden’s voice, and Lucifer let go of Sam’s face, his gaze flicking to the side in annoyance. Sam still couldn’t move but he could feel something tugging on his shoulders - Dresden’s hands, turning Sam to face him. He didn’t think Dresden could see Lucifer but Dresden had still managed to avoid him, another wizard thing maybe. Sam looked up into Dresden’s dark worried eyes, trying and failing to say something.

“Come on, man, talk to me,” Dresden was saying, his voice quiet but urgent. “Sam—”
“Fine,” Sam finally managed to choke out. “’m fine.”


Sam nodded jerkily and managed to take a breath, then another. Dresden kept his hands on Sam’s shoulders until the shaking eased. “What’d he do this time?” Dresden asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Sam whispered. “It’s not—It’s nothing.” He shook his head and pulled away from Dresden.

“Nothing doesn’t leave you shaking like a stormtrooper bringing bad news to Darth Vader,” Dresden said. “Where is he?”

Sam pointed without looking. He didn’t have to; Lucifer’s presence was ingrained in every atom of his being.

“Okay,” Dresden said, and turned to face the direction Sam had pointed. “Luci, this is for you.” Lucifer tilted his head, his expression one of delighted anticipation. Dresden continued, “We get it. You’re the devil, you’ve got creepy nasty appearances to keep up. Fiddles to play, deals to make, yadda yadda. But how about you get your horned head out of your pointy-tailed ass long enough to think about how you’re shooting yourself in the foot, here.”

Lucifer stared at Dresden, then turned to Sam. “Is he serious?” he demanded incredulously.

Sam flinched, and Dresden shifted, putting himself between Sam and Lucifer. “Yeah, you’re shooting yourself in the foot and you’re too caught up in indulging your twisted little fantasies to see it. I figure, right about now you’re asking what the hell I’m talking about—”

Lucifer, who’d begun to say exactly that, snapped his mouth closed, his startled expression rapidly turning annoyed.

“—or else telling me to shut my piehole, but guess what, I’m going to tell you anyway, because I’m the one with a physical voice box right now,” Dresden continued cheerfully. “See, you said you want to get back to your reality. Obviously, you need Sam for that. But I’m guessing you need me, too, because otherwise there’s no reason for you to hang out with me like this. If you could do it on your own you’d’ve done it already.”

Cold flashed through the air around them, frost forming on the windows of the nearby buildings as Lucifer’s eyes narrowed and he snarled, “Who does this overgrown worm think he is?!” Sam flinched away again, Cage-forged reflexes taking him partway behind Dresden before he caught himself.

Dresden just raised an eyebrow. “What, you wanna have an A/C-off, Luci?” he said. “‘Cause I can do that too.” He raised his arms theatrically and the temperature plummeted again, a sharp wintery wind swirling through the air. He added, singsong, “The cold never bothered me anyway!”

Sam didn’t know whether to scream, or laugh, or maybe just break down in hysteria. Lucifer’s expression was darkening with fury, his Grace thrumming around him - through Sam’s bones, through his soul - and Sam remembered it all too well from the Cage, Lucifer’s rage shredding Sam into a billion agonized pieces. But Dresden had started singing, horribly off-key, “It’s funny how some distance makes everything seem small,” and the fact that he could do that to Lucifer’s face was more than Sam could handle.

It was apparently more than Lucifer could handle either, because Grace roared through Sam’s body and suddenly Sam was shoved down deep inside his own mind and Lucifer was snarling through
Sam’s mouth, “You think you’re funny, ape?”

Dresden stopped singing and swung around to flash Lucifer a bright grin. “I think I’m hilarious.”

“I’m playing by the rules of your stupid reality as a courtesy,” Lucifer spat, taking a step closer. The effect wasn’t as intimidating as he’d clearly hoped for; he was used to Sam’s height but not Dresden’s. “But I will fight Uriel and the entire host of Heaven if I need to, if that’s the price for ripping you apart atom by atom.”

Dresden tilted his head back a little so he was looking down his nose at Lucifer. “Really? You think you could take on that many angels all by your lonesome? I mean, I know you’re the Big Scary Devil and all—”

Lucifer curled his lip disdainfully. “You’re willing to bet your life on that?”

Dresden blinked, then a slow smile spread across his face. “Well, my name’s Harry,” he said in a Southern accent, “and it might be a sin, but I’ll take your bet, you’re gonna regret, ‘cause I’m the best that’s ever been.”

For several long, agonizing seconds Lucifer just stared at Dresden. Sam, curled up tight in a corner of his own mind, held an imaginary breath and prayed - to whom, he didn’t know - that Lucifer wouldn’t kill Dresden on the spot. He could still see out of Lucifer’s - Sam’s - Lucifer’s now - eyes, could see Crowley standing frozen a few feet away, clearly trying to be invisible. Could see Dresden and the shit-eating grin he wore, looking enough like Dean used to before the Mark and Purgatory that Sam’s heart ached. Please, he thought. Please.

Then Lucifer threw his head back and laughed, his anger melting away like a late-spring frost. “I knew I was right to like you.”

Dresden snorted, though Sam didn’t miss the infinitesimal relaxation of his shoulders. “That’s a first,” he said lightly. “Most people I mouth off to just want to punch me.”

Lucifer flexed his hand and grinned. “I can do that, if you want.”

“Ah—Nah, I’m good,” Dresden said, and made a show of checking an invisible watch on his wrist. “Also, we need to get moving again. Time’s a-wastin’, and all.”

“It is that,” Lucifer agreed. He glanced past Dresden, and for just an instant Sam thought he saw someone standing behind the wizard: a young man with deep brown skin, wearing neat jeans and a plain T-shirt the color of summer sunshine, his golden eyes fixed on Lucifer. Then Lucifer pulled away, shoving Sam back into control as he went, and when Sam blinked his eyes, the man was gone.

Dresden was watching Sam closely, so Sam dredged up something that was close enough to a smile that Dresden said, “You good?”

Sam nodded. He didn’t trust his voice just yet, but Dresden evidently didn’t mind. He turned to the wide marble steps of the building next to them, and said, “The Way is up here. Come on.”

“I still don’t know where you think we’re going,” Crowley grumbled, but he followed Dresden and Sam up the steps.

At the top, Dresden stopped and held up his staff, then used its tip to draw a line in midair. “Aparturum,” he murmured. Sam stared in fascination as light and power gathered along the line he’d drawn, flowing upward and downward to create a shimmering, ethereal doorway. Dresden
flashed Sam a grin, said, “Geronimo!” and stepped through.

Sam motioned for Crowley to go next; the demon went readily enough, though he grumbled under his breath. Sam took a deep breath, steadying himself. Lucifer had gone dormant again, his Grace a quiet thrum pulsing in sync with Sam’s own heartbeat. The idea that he wanted yet another level of surrender from Sam was terrifying, sickening, but there wasn’t anything Sam could do about it right now. The more important thing was to make sure Dean was safe, and Cas and Charlie too. They could deal with everything else later.

Holding that thought close, Sam stepped through the magical door.

---

Harry

Being a wizard has its disadvantages. For example, I can’t use anything technological, and I find myself in situations where a deadly supernatural being is about to turn me into its personal dinner menu more often than most people. But sometimes there are perks, as well.

Like watching someone’s face light up with wonder the first time they see the Nevernever.

Crowley hadn’t betrayed much emotion when he stepped through the door, looking around with one eyebrow raised dubiously before joining me on a small icy patio. Sam, on the other hand, stopped short and stared, open wonder on his face.

We stood in the middle of an icy courtyard. Snow covered the ground at our feet, and pillars of shimmering ice stretched high overhead, supporting an elegant archway over the patio where Crowley and I stood. Bright yellow winter flowers, their petals spread in six-pointed stars, lined a path beyond the arch that led up to a towering mansion which appeared to be carved entirely out of ice. A broad road, paved with pale grey and white stones and dusted with snow, ran in front of the arch, perpendicular to the path. Beyond the road, a snowy forest sparkled in the pale winter sunlight.

“Whoa,” Sam breathed. He turned in a slow circle, taking it in, before finally looking up at me. The awe on his face made him look almost painfully young as he asked, “Where are we?”

“Somewhere in the middle of the Winter Court’s territory,” I answered. “Normally we’d have to bargain for passage with the lord of the land—” I nodded behind me at the icy mansion— “but I’m the Winter Knight. I can walk around freely, as long as I - and my guests - don’t bother anybody.” Which was technically correct, although there were enough asterisks attached for a Pratchett novel. Being Mab’s Knight didn’t actually give me free reign to run around Winter, it just meant that the inhabitants would be much less willing to risk her wrath by breaking her favorite toy.

I kept a careful eye on the mansion as I steered Sam and Crowley onto the cobblestone road, but no one came out to challenge us. Score one for knighthood, I guess. I also had to keep half an eye on Sam, who lagged behind Crowley and me, trying to look everywhere at once. At least we wouldn’t have to be in here very long. My mother’s ruby with her knowledge of the Ways had told me that a ten-minute walk along this road would take us to a crossroad with a traveler’s resting spot, from which I’d be able to open a path back to the real world that would put us in the lobby of a hotel in downtown Chicago. Assuming we made it there without getting eaten by a particularly wintery grue, which was still possible since not all creatures of the Nevernever were intelligent enough to—

“Quite the show you put on back there,” Crowley said, and I jumped about a mile. Hey, I was watching for threats. I was on edge. So sue me.
While I got my heart rate back under control, I glanced over my shoulder at Sam, who’d fallen back to stare at a bush at the edge of the road, its branches lined with frost. Tiny multicolored lights blinked deep within the bush, most likely a group of dewdrop fairies like the Za Lord’s Guard. He was far enough away that he wouldn’t hear me if I spoke quietly, which hopefully meant that Lucifer wouldn’t be able to hear me, either.

“Wasn’t a show,” I told Crowley, keeping my voice low. “I’ve been… close enough to where Sam is that I’m not going to stand there and let the freaking devil try to tear him apart even further.”

“You should be more careful,” Crowley said.

“What, because of his ridealong?” I asked, and scoffed. “Please. He may be an archangel, but—”

“Not because of Lucifer,” Crowley interrupted. “Because of Dean Winchester.”

I stared at him, confused. “Sam’s brother?”

“The one and only,” Crowley said, though there was an edge to his voice. “Let me give you a friendly bit of advice, from someone who’s had to spend far more time around the Winchesters than I would have preferred.”

I eyed him. “A demon, giving a ‘friendly bit of advice’. Why am I inclined to not believe anything you’re about to say?”

“Please,” Crowley said disdainfully. “I’m a businessman. What little I’ve seen of your local demonic populace suggests they are very much… not. But if you prefer, consider it a warning.”

“About Dean Winchester?”

“About doing anything that could be interpreted by an overprotective big brother as coming between him and his bouncing baby Sasquatch,” Crowley said. “The Winchesters are dangerously tangled up in each other, Dresden. I’ve seen what happens to anyone who gets between them. It’s not something one discusses in polite company.”

I rolled my eyes. “Or maybe they just don’t like a demon sticking his nose in their business.”

“Scoff all you want,” Crowley said. “But when push comes to stab, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned and yelled over his shoulder, “Enough sightseeing, Moose, unless you want your brother to be stuck a warty toad forever.”

Sam shot Crowley that flat, exasperated look, but sped up a little to walk with us again. “So how does this place work?” he asked, then, before I could respond, “Is it just fairies here? Is it all winter? Are there—”

I answered his questions automatically, facts and lore rolling off my tongue even as my mind stayed stuck on Crowley’s words. I couldn’t figure out what his game was - he was a demon, he had to have some ulterior motive, but warning me about Dean Winchester didn’t make sense. And I hadn’t gotten the impression that Sam was dangerously tangled up with anyone except Lucifer—

Except that Sam had made his deal with Lucifer to save his brother, consequences be damned. He didn’t talk much about his brother, but I thought about how he’d said his brother was possessive, how he’d expected me to hit him. Maybe Crowley’s warning wasn’t so far off. If so, it meant that I’d have to watch out for Sam’s uber-demon of a brother on top of a rogue polymorphing warlock, a demon and its army of needle-toothed minions, and the freaking devil.
Hell’s bells. And this was supposed to be my *vacation*. 
In which Crowley is a weasel, Sam is fed up, and Harry learns what "smoking out" means.

We emerged from the Nevernever in a back corner of the lobby of the Kimpton Burnham Hotel, an old boutique place filled with elegant dark wood, luxurious carpets, and marble and wrought iron accents. This late in the evening, the lobby was mostly empty, though I could see a bored-looking uniformed bellhop standing by the elevators, his back to us.

Sam, who’d been asking questions nonstop the entire time we were in the Nevernever, fell silent as soon as we were back in the mortal world, his shoulders squaring and his expression going blank. He grabbed Crowley by the upper arm and hustled him forward, projecting a distinct *don’t bother me* aura. I followed close behind, trying to use my body to hide Crowley’s handcuffed wrists from sight. We were a strange enough group as it was, and while Sam’s and my fake FBI badges could get us out of a tight spot, we didn’t have the time to get *into* a tight spot in the first place.

Fortunately, the bellhop barely glanced at us as we passed, and the desk clerk just flashed a smile and a cheerful “Bye!” Then we were out the front door and onto the street. This being Chicago, the streets were still busy despite the late hour, but Sam didn’t even slow down. He steered us down the sidewalk a ways, then stopped beside a late-model Civic parked against the curb. I saw his hands do something with a slender piece of metal, then the passenger door opened and he shoved Crowley into the seat.

“Hey,” I objected belatedly. “We can just call a cab.”

Sam shot me an exasperated look as he rounded the nose of the car to the driver’s door. “We don’t have time to wait on a cab,” he pointed out. “Plus we might need the car later. And if it makes you feel better, it’s a rental car. At worst someone’s out their rental fees.”

I started to protest, but Sam had already slid into the driver’s seat and was reaching under the steering column. I clapped a hand over my eyes, grumbled under my breath, and got into the backseat. *Obviously this is how Sam is used to operating,* I told myself. *He knows what he’s doing.*

*He’s going to get us arrested,* myself told me back, sharply. *Just because he’s from another reality doesn’t mean we should let him run wild.*

I reminded myself of the fight outside the bar yesterday night. Of Lucifer’s power filling Sam’s eyes with pale blue light when he’d threatened me twenty minutes ago. *If all he’s doing is stealing us a car to get where we’re going faster, I think we’ll survive,* I told myself, then firmly shut down that chain of thought. Up front, Sam had finished hotwiring the engine, and now he smoothly pulled the car out into traffic.

Crowley was giving directions, which meant I had nothing to do except sit and wait. Then I
remembered how Lucifer had apparently been sitting in the backseat of Butters’ rental earlier. Curiosity, and maybe a bit of reckless disregard for life and limb, drove me to put my thumbs in my ears, wiggle my fingers, and stick my tongue out at the empty half of the backseat behind Sam.

There was a pause that I felt was distinctly startled, then the window on that side of the car dusted over with frost, and an invisible finger drew a cartoonish face sticking its tongue out back at me. I grinned and made a different face, tugging at my eyelids and twisting my tongue around.

Don’t look at me like that. I wasn’t just doing it because I was bored. If Satan was busy with a stupid-faces contest, he couldn’t bother Sam. And if we were about to walk into a hostage situation with a warlock, I needed Sam’s head in the game. I saw Sam glance at me - and presumably Lucifer - in the rearview mirror a couple of times, but he didn’t otherwise react, which I counted as a win.

It was maybe fifteen minutes later, closer than I liked to Crowley’s stated one-hour deadline, that we rolled to a stop in front of a row of townhomes lining a wealthy Lincoln Park street. We climbed out of the car - Sam circling around to open Crowley’s door and haul him out - and gathered in the shadows of one of the decorative trees lining the sidewalk. Crowley pointed with his chin at one house standing in the middle of the street, dark on the lower floors but with lights visible in the third. “There,” he said. “Doctor Patterson’s up there.”

“Good,” Sam said.

Then he grabbed Crowley by the collar and yanked him forward, pressing the blade of his demon-killing knife to Crowley’s throat.

He’d moved so fast I didn’t have a chance to react; I had no idea where he’d pulled the knife from. “What the hell!” I yelped.

Sam didn’t so much as glance at me. To Crowley, his voice low and dangerous, he growled, “I’m going to take the cuffs off, and you’re going to smoke out of that meatsuit and back into your old one. Got it?”

“Oh, I’m confused,” Crowley said. His eyes were wide, though his voice was level when he continued, “You’re doing this out of a misguided idea of saving this meatsuit, I’m sure, but perhaps you missed the part where, in order to make good on your threat, you’d have to kill said meatsuit.”

Sam smiled. It wasn’t a nice expression. “Perhaps,” he echoed, “you missed the part where I don’t need the knife to kill you.”

Crowley gulped. “My old meatsuit is currently a frog,” he said, desperately. “I won’t be able to—”

“We don’t need your help,” Sam said. “We just need you to let this poor bastard go. Unhurt.”

“What if the good doctor notices me coming back?” Crowley tried. “You wouldn’t want him knowing you’re coming.”

“Then don’t let him notice you,” Sam said coolly.

Crowley glared, but it was clear he’d lost the argument. Though I wasn’t sure what, exactly, they were arguing about. Crowley was a demon; any body he had should be formed from ectoplasm, and it didn’t matter what shape he inhabited. I was about to ask Sam why he cared when Sam pulled the cuffs off Crowley’s wrists, and Crowley threw his head back and opened his mouth in a scream.

Except instead of sound, a flood of blood-red smoke poured out of his mouth and gathered in a hellish cloud over our heads. When the last bit of smoke had left the body, the cloud unraveled again
into a stream that zipped up through the air toward the windows of Dr. Patterson’s townhome. The body that had been Crowley collapsed, boneless; Sam caught it around the shoulders and eased it to the ground.

“Hey,” he said, and gently patted the man’s cheeks. “Hey, c’mon, wake up.”

My stomach roiled as I realized what was going on. Crowley hadn’t formed a body out of Nevernever ectoplasm, like the demons I was used to dealing with - he’d possessed some poor innocent man. The phrase “meatsuit” suddenly made a lot more sense: he’d put on someone’s body like it was a suit, just like the Nightmare had taken over the body of the girl Lydia all those years ago.

Hell’s bells. Demonic possession wasn’t unheard of - obviously, given what had happened with Lydia - but it was the exception by miles. Sam and Crowley, though, both treated it like it was a given - the normal way demons operated in their reality.

Which shined a whole creepy new light on Sam’s demon-killing knife.

I shuddered, and made myself look down at Sam and the poor guy Crowley had been wearing like a well-tailored suit. He was stirring, his eyes blinking slightly and then flying open in terror and sudden realization. He flailed, making terrified whimpering noises; Sam held him until he calmed down a little.

“Easy,” Sam murmured. “Easy, it’s all right, you’re safe. He’s gone. You’re safe now.”

The guy stared at Sam, then up at me, clearly skeptical of that. I crouched down on my heels so that I wouldn’t look quite so much like the spectre of Death looming over him in the shadows, and said, “Hey, man. What’s your name?”

He stared for a few more seconds, like I was speaking Wookiee, and swallowed a few times. Finally he managed, “Sujay Patil. My… my name is Sujay Patil.”

“Great,” I said, keeping my voice gentle. “Sujay, I’m Harry. This is Sam.”

“You were possessed by a demon,” Sam said. “It sucks, believe me, I know, but you’re safe now.”

“I don’t—A demon?” Sujay said, his voice squeaking. “But I—But that’s—But…”

“Look,” I interrupted. “It’s a lot to take in, and you’re pretty shook up right now. Sam’s going to call you a cab, and you’re going to go to Saint Mary’s Church, okay? Ask for Father Forthill, tell him Harry Dresden sent you. Got it?”

Sam glanced at me, then eased away from Sujay and stood. He strode a few long steps up the sidewalk, pulling his cell phone from a pocket. Sujay kept staring at me, so I repeated the instructions, and finally he nodded. He was ashen under his bronze skin, and shaking like a leaf, but I thought he’d be able to at least get to Forthill in one piece. It wasn’t the first time I’d sent refugees from supernatural mayhem Father Forthill’s way; the priest would be able to help him out.

Sam rejoined us, cell phone vanished back into a pocket. “Cab’s on its way,” he said, and offered a hand to Sujay. The man took it and Sam hauled him to his feet. “You okay to wait here for it? Driver said it’d only be a minute or two.”

Sujay nodded hesitantly. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“We’re going to deal with the guy who’s responsible for all this,” Sam answered. He kept his voice
neutral, but Sujay still shivered. Sam gave the man’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll be all right,” he said. “It might take some time, but you’ll be fine.”

Sujay nodded again, and Sam and I stepped away, up the street toward Patterson’s house. When we were out of earshot, Sam looked at me from under his bangs and said, “What?”

I scowled. “You knew that whole time that there was an innocent guy in there?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, in that tone that meant he didn’t think it was anything unusual. “That’s how demons work. They take a meatsuit, wear it until they don’t need it anymore, and then smoke out and take a new one.” He frowned at me. “You weren’t surprised when I told you my tattoo’s to stop demonic possession, why are you surprised now?”

“Stars and stones,” I muttered under my breath, then, louder, “Because that poor guy was being ridden by a freaking demon this whole time!”

“And what would you have done about it?” Sam asked, exasperation plain on his face. “Look, I want to kill Crowley, believe me I do, but he’s back in his old meatsuit now, and we need to deal with the witch.”

“So what about his ‘old meatsuit’?” I demanded. “The one that’s been possessed and now turned into a frog?”

“Crowley’s had that meatsuit as long as we’ve known him,” Sam said. “More than… God, more than five years. If the guy wasn’t already dead when Crowley took him over, he’s been through enough that it’s just an empty body by now.” He stopped walking and faced me. “Look, it sucks, I know. I hate it too. But it’s just how demons work, and there’s not anything we can do about it.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. Dammit. He wasn’t wrong. That was the worst part. Part of me wanted, petulantly, to point out that that wasn’t how demons worked in my reality, but the more sensible part of me knew that that wasn’t the point. The point was that Sam had come from another reality, and his brother had chased him here, apparently with the help of the kind of demon typical to their reality, and the only thing I could do to stop more people in my reality from getting possessed was to send them back to their reality as soon as possible.

Which meant dealing with Patterson so that we could sit down and figure that out without demons chomping at us every ten seconds.

Sam

It was obvious as soon as Sam reached the front door of Doctor Terry Patterson’s townhouse that the lock had been picked. Out of curiosity, he tried the knob; it turned and the door swung open. He wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad sign, and a glance at Dresden told him that the wizard was equally uncertain. Sam motioned for Dresden to stay behind him, drew his gun, and crept forward into the quiet foyer.

The house’s lower floors were dark, but enough light shone through the windows from the streetlamps outside that Sam didn’t have to pull out his flashlight. He eased through the house, gun leading the way through doors, clearing each room they passed before approaching the staircase. They cleared the second floor the same way, though Dresden had his head tilted in a way that suggested he was paying attention to something above them on the third floor. Lucifer seemed nearly as distracted, tossing glances up at the ceiling on occasion, and finally Sam raised an eyebrow at him.

What is it? he thought.

“Powerful magic,” Lucifer said, his voice loud in the silence of the house. Sam jumped before remembering that he was the only one who could hear Lucifer, and Lucifer grinned cheekily before continuing, “I think the doctor’s getting ready to summon his demon friend.”

Sam nodded and turned to the staircase again. Better if they got to Patterson before he could summon demonic backup—

“Scratch that,” Lucifer said, and at the same time Dresden went stock-still, his whole body tense. “He’s summoning him right now.”

“Dammit,” Sam hissed.

He and Dresden bolted up the staircase, but even as they reached the top, a man’s voice rose to a shout at the far end of the house: “Chaxuneudahl! I summon thee!”

Sam felt a thrum of power, hot and slithery across his psychic senses, then a rush of air blasted out of the open door of a room at the end of the hallway. Dresden shoved past Sam and ran for the door, his staff raised, and Sam followed close on his heels. Through the open door he could see a pillar of thick, tarry smoke and hungry flame whirling in the center of the room beyond, a pillar that was rapidly congealing into something vaguely human-shaped. Past it he could just barely make out several terrariums filled with frogs and toads hopping and croaking frantically.

Dresden reached the doorway - then stopped so abruptly that Sam smacked into his back. Dresden grabbed the doorframe for balance, seeming determined to keep them from going further into the room; after a moment Sam realized why. A complex pentacle, carefully drawn in red chalk, covered
most of the room’s floor. Candles and various other objects stood at the five points of the pentacle’s inner star, and a braided rope of gold, silver, and copper wire sat on top of the chalk lines. Dresden had stopped just short of crossing the pentacle’s outer ring.

“Uh, Sam,” Lucifer said from behind him, but Sam barely noticed. The humanoid shape forming at the center of the pentacle had solidified into the kind of demon Sam had only ever seen in video games: chitinoid body armor like hardened lava, pulsing fire-red veins visible where the armor plates overlapped, spiky protrusions at its joints, and hands and feet tipped with razor-sharp claws. It was facing to one side of the room, molten eyes fixed on a human man standing just outside the circle there. The man wore slacks and a button-down shirt, which, combined with his golden-brown hair and chiseled features, made him look incongruously like a stock photo of a businessman.

Unlike a stock photo, however, the man wasn’t smiling - in fact, he looked downright scared. “Hello, Chaxuneudahl,” he said to the demon, then turned to face Sam and Dresden. “Warden Dresden.” Then he paused and blinked at Sam, as if unsure what Sam was doing there.

“Sam,” Lucifer said again.

At the same time, Dresden drawled, in a passable Bugs Bunny voice, “What’s up, Doc? Aside from the whole, y’know.” He waved a hand at the demon, and Sam noticed that he was even being careful not to reach past the edge of the pentacle. “Summoning demons to murder a wizard of the White Council thing. And the breaking of the Second Law of Magic thing.” He made a show of squinting past the demon at the terrariums that lined the back wall of the room. The amphibians inside redoubled their croaking; Sam spotted a group of three that included a tiny red frog, a bright blue frog, and a big angry-looking green-and-brown toad. Maybe, if he was really lucky, he could get a photo before they got turned back.

“Yes, well,” Patterson said, his voice shaking despite the bravado in it. “I’m about to solve all those problems.”

“Not if you keep doing what you’re doing,” Dresden said. He looked outwardly calm, but Sam could hear an edge to his voice. “Give me back the box, send Magmar there back to the Nevernever, and we can talk this out—”

“Talk?” Patterson barked out a harsh, humorless laugh. “You’re the one who told me what the penalty for breaking the Laws is, Warden. According to you, there is no ‘talk’. Just my dead body in the middle of a White Council kangaroo court.”

Dresden winced visibly at that, and Sam remembered Dresden talking about how the wizards’ council dealt with witches who broke the Laws, how Dresden had originally tried to give this guy a second chance. “Look, man, I was just trying to scare you straight, there’s other options—”

“No,” Patterson said, and flashed a wide, despairing smile. “I didn’t just take your word for it, Warden. Everyone says that once you’ve broken one of the Laws, your life is over. I’m not—I can’t—” He shook his head. “I’ve never been a good person, but I don’t want to die.”

And with that, he kicked over one of the candles standing at the edge of the pentagram.

“SAM!” Lucifer yelled, and Sam felt cold hands grab him, felt the brush of feathers against his skin - but it was too late. The candle’s flame had landed in a puddle of oil, and fire rushed across the surface of the puddle and along a line of oil stretching to the side.

And out into a circle that flared to fiery life around Sam and Dresden.
I hopped back a step as a line of fire erupted at my feet. The circle wasn’t very big - I had to all but step on Sam’s toes to stay out of the fire - but it also didn’t seem to be anything particularly special. The smug expression on Patterson’s face said otherwise, though it wasn’t much more than a thin veneer over the terror that was making him shake like a leaf. Cautiously, I extended my wizard’s senses to the ring of fire, but still couldn’t feel anything except maybe the faintest hum of an unfamiliar power when I focused hard enough. It was a little like trying to tune a radio - a distant sound that might have been something other than blank static, if I could just find the right wavelength. Whatever it was, though, it didn’t feel like the trap Patterson clearly thought it was.

“There!” he shrieked, and pointed at a spot on the floor in front of me. “Chaxuneudahl, I’ve got the box, and you have access to the Warden. Kill him and the box is yours!”

The demon turned to me, its magma eyes bright and hungry. I looked down to where Patterson had pointed, not sure what he was—

Oh, hell’s sweet tinkling little bells. I didn’t know whether to be afraid of the demon that was eyeing me like I was lunch, or professionally offended that Patterson could be that stupid. He’d overlapped the two circles in the doorway, so that when the fire circle lit up, it burned away the chalk and the thin wire braids of the summoning circle. Which meant that nothing was holding our friendly lava monster back.

Chaxuneudahl clearly knew it, too: he grinned, wide and toothy, lava dripping from his obsidian fangs like saliva. “Wizard,” he said in a voice like the hiss of water vaporizing. “Many and fearsome are the tales I have heard about thee. I look forward to filling my stomach with thy tender flesh.”

“I have it on good authority that my flesh isn’t very tender,” I told him. “In fact, the last nasty that tried to eat me thought I was downright gristly. And anyway, aren’t you supposed to be attacking the guy who summoned you, now that you’re free?” Not that I wanted Patterson to get eaten, either, but I stood a better chance of taking out the demon if I could get in a sucker punch or three while he was focused on the doctor.

“I bear no animosity toward this patron of mine,” Chaxuneudahl said. “He has brought me the Unbroken Sword and Margaret LeFay’s scion.” His big head swung around to grin at Patterson. “Provided he upholds his end of the bargain, I see no reason not to accept what he offers.”

Patterson gulped and flinched back a step, his back bumping the wall behind him. The movement was enough to let me see Amoracchius’s case, propped up in the back corner of the room. Dammit. I’d been half-hoping that Crowley had been wrong, that Patterson hadn’t managed to find the Sword. But I’m not the kind of guy who gets luck like that.

So. Time to make my own luck.

I stretched out my wizard’s senses one more time, just to be safe, but still couldn’t feel anything from the circle of fire at my feet. So I planted my staff for balance and stepped over the flames, around the doorframe, and into the room next to Patterson.

He stared at me like I’d just stepped across the freaking Black Gate of Mordor. “Wha—How—” he sputtered, staggering backward away from me. “He said that circle would hold anything!”

“He who?” I asked. Chaxuneudahl had turned when I moved, watching me with that creepy lava grin stretching his face, but he hadn’t attacked yet. I honestly wasn’t sure what he was waiting for - I
hadn’t ever met a demon with that kind of patience when mayhem was at hand. Not that I was 
complaining, of course, but we wizards like to feel like we know what’s going on. Demons acting all 
weird and not chomping faces did not make me feel like I knew what was going on.

“Crowley!” Patterson all but wailed in despair. He sagged against the table at the far end of the room, 
beside the box that held the Sword. “He said it could even hold up to an archangel!”

“Were those his exact words?” Sam asked from behind me. His voice was tight, and I glanced over 
my shoulder to see that he still stood in the middle of the circle of fire, his whole body tense. “Or did he just say it could hold an archangel?”

And then I realized why Sam hadn’t left the circle. Crap. Crowley was a demon, and he’d come here 
specifically to help Sam’s brother recapture Lucifer. Of course he’d set up a trap, of course he’d use 
cat’s paws and patsies to keep himself safely removed from the action. If that ring of fire really could 
keep Lucifer trapped, it meant he was out of the fight - and so was Sam.

Patterson stared at Sam helplessly. “He…” he said, and then his shoulders sagged. “I’m such an 
idiot,” he whispered.

“Summoning a demonic hitman because you couldn’t control your powers certainly puts you up 

Patterson slumped further against the table, his eyes falling closed in despair. “I don’t even care 
anymore,” he said, his voice empty. “Take the damn box and go.”

“Oh, I will,” Chaxuneudahl said. His smile grew wider, nearly splitting his skull in half. “And I’ll kill 
the wizard, and I’ll kill you for your audacity in binding me.”

As he spoke, slithering demonic energy surged through the room and send goosebumps crawling 
across my skin. The high narrow window at the back of the room burst open and one of those silver-
skinned, needle-toothed demons crawled through, claws punching holes in the walls as it leaped over 
the terrariums to land on the floor beside the now-broken summoning circle. Three more followed it, 
spreading out to fill the entire back of the room. From the corner of my eye I saw Sam spin around, 
saw him tense - more of them must have come up the hall behind him, though I couldn’t see them 
from where I stood.

Double crap. No wonder Chaxuneudahl hadn’t attacked right away - he’d been waiting for his goons 
to get in place. I had no idea whether I could have taken him in a straight fight, especially since I was 
already worn out from fighting the Denarians only a couple hours ago, and would have been 
hampered by the small space and the need to avoid killing the humans in the room. But a small army 
of demonic thugs certainly didn’t help my chances.

One of the silvery demons picked up the box that held Amoracchius and cracked it open. Warm, 
quiet energy flooded the room, pushing back against the demons’ malevolent power, and the demon 
held the box up for Chaxuneudahl to see. “It is genuine, my lord,” the demon hissed.

“Good,” Chaxuneudahl replied. “Now kill them all and feast on their entrails.”
Harry

This was hardly my first rodeo, so I was already gathering my willpower on Chaxuneudahl’s “kill them all”, and on the second syllable of “entrails”, I pointed my staff at the demon. “Infriga!” I roared, and unleashed a blast of Arctic cold that swirled around Chaxuneudahl, encasing him in a thick layer of ice from horned head to fiery toe.

Even as I did, one of the silver demons leaped at me, so instead of blasting Chaxuneudahl to smitherens like I’d planned, I aimed at the silver demon and shouted, “Forzare!”. An invisible fist of kinetic energy slammed into the demon and knocked it backward through the air - and straight out the back wall of the room. Brick and plaster and glass from the little window exploded out into the night air. Through the hole in the wall I could see a narrow gap of air - and then the back wall of another townhouse, complete with little windows mirroring Patterson’s own. The wall had a noticeable dent in it where the demon had hit before falling out of sight to the ground below.

Crap.

I’d forgotten, for a second, that I was fighting inside a narrow townhouse with sleeping neighbors on all sides. I’ve never been easy on buildings, even before I got the Winter Knight power-up - but the force spell I’d hit that demon with hadn’t been anywhere near my full strength. If I wasn’t careful, I could take down this building and all the homes around it - and risk killing everyone inside.

Something heavy whizzed past my ear; I had half a second to realize that it was a candlestick before having to duck another one. Glancing around, I spotted Doctor Patterson, backed into the far corner of the room by a pair of silver demons, frantically grabbing things off the table behind him and flinging them wildly at the demons. The demons themselves were grinning hungrily, dodging the projectiles with lazy ease, advancing on Patterson with the slow grace of cats stalking a trapped mouse.

Fortunately, that meant they both had their backs to me, so I gripped my staff in both hands, braced my feet, and swung the staff like a baseball bat at the nearest demon’s knees. “Line drive!” I hollered. Bone and tendon cracked and the demon collapsed with a howl of surprise and pain.

“Dresden!” Sam yelled from behind me. “Watch your back, they’re coming through the walls!”
Even as he said it, I heard the crunch of plaster, and spun around to see a claw-tipped silver hand punch a hole in the wall beside the door. Sam had his gun out, but his expression was tight and frustrated and he wasn’t shooting. I hadn’t got a good look at the layout of the third floor in our rush to get here before Patterson finished his summoning, but I had a vague recollection of another door on the side of the hallway - probably another bedroom, whose back wall was also the front wall of this room on that side of the door. If the demons were in there, Sam couldn’t see them to shoot them, and he’d probably also realized the danger of sending deadly projectiles into the walls on either side.

A wooden bowl flew past my head and straight toward Sam; he dodged to one side to avoid it, but overbalanced trying to keep from crossing the circle of fire and ended up falling to his knees and one hand. “Watch it!” he shouted irritably at Patterson.

More crunching noises from the far end of the room and two more silver demons crawled in through the hole in the back wall. As I turned to face them, swinging my staff up, I realized that the pillar of ice in which I’d trapped Chaxuneudahl was melting, water dripping from the bottom of the pillar even as it evaporated in hissing steam on top. “Oh, that’s not even fair,” I muttered. One of his arms came free and he used it to claw away the ice around his head and shoulders.

The demons performing an impromptu remodeling on the wall behind me had made a hole big enough to crawl through, and were crowding into the little room, silver claws slashing at me. I dove to the side, rolling past Chaxuneudahl while he was still kicking his legs free of ice, and ended up on the other side of the room. Patterson was still trapped by the two demons; the one whose knees I’d smashed had recovered enough to claw at his feet, forcing him to climb up onto the table to get out of the way.

This was… not going well, to say the least. If I used fire, I’d probably burn down the whole block. If I used force, I risked landing furious and hungry demons on top of some poor muggles asleep in bed. Ice might work on the silver demons - but even as I thought it, Chaxuneudahl raised one hand, palm up. A ball of fire erupted over his hand and he flung it at me. I got a shield up in time to block it, but still felt the heat wash over me as the ball splashed against the shield. Which meant ice would only last as long as it took for the freaking fire demon to melt it.

Okay, fine. I would just have to get creati—

Patterson flung a glass bottle at the demons in front of him.

That, in itself, wasn’t any different than what he’d been doing for the last few seconds while I thought. What was different, though, was that this bottle trailed thick clear fluid from its open mouth as it flew through the air, straight toward Sam and the ring of fire that surrounded him. He was still on his hands and knees, and when the bottle smashed into the hardwood floor in front of him, the clear liquid inside sprayed out through the fire - and all over Sam.

Fire raced up his body, engulfing him in an instant - far faster than should have been possible, even given the oil spray, and I realized belatedly that it must be the same stuff fueling the burning circle - the burning circle that could keep an archangel trapped. Sam’s back arched in agony and he screamed, the sound starting out human but climbing up the scale until the glass walls of every terrarium in the room exploded. I clapped my hands over my ears, hunching against the sound and the flying glass, dimly aware of Patterson and even the demons likewise cowering.

Then another sound filled the room, deep below the overwhelming wail of an angel’s cry of pain.

**Thu-thump**

Like a massive, angry heartbeat, only the heart that made that sound was like nothing I’d ever felt. It
was darkness, and cold, the silence of death. It was hunger, loneliness, the vast nothingness of an empty night. It was the polar opposite of everything in the power of the Swords of the Cross, overwhelming the gentle warmth that emanated from the Sword that a silver demon still held in its box.

Thu-thump

Movement on the table where the terrariums had been, one big toad hopping forward, mouth open in a furious croak. It leaped right off the table - and as it did, its body stretched, grew, changed. Became the shape of a man: tall, bowlegged, wearing jeans and flannel and a denim jacket, and after a startled second I recognized him.

Dean Winchester, Sam’s older brother, who bore the Mark of Cain, who was some kind of unstoppable, immortal uber-demon.

Thu-thump

His gaze was locked onto Sam, still twisted in agony as he screamed and burned in the middle of the ring of fire. Without so much as glancing to the side, Dean stretched out an arm and closed his fingers around the hilt of Amoracchius.

For an awful instant I thought the dark empty power radiating from him would overwhelm the Sword, would break it as surely as Chaxuneudahl would have - but then the Sword’s own power, light and warmth and unyielding grace, burst through the room, chasing Dean’s darkness away in a flood of holy energy.

“SAM!” Dean screamed, and charged into the demons standing between him and his brother.

The demons were still cowering under the sheer volume of Sam’s - or rather, Lucifer’s - screams, and Dean’s first swing decapitated two of them before they could even move. Another demon managed to swipe razor-sharp claws at his head, but Dean sliced through its arm at the elbow. He obviously didn’t have Michael’s decades of training and experience with a broadsword, but rather wielded Amoracchius like an oversized machete. As inelegant as it was, it was effective, demon bodies falling around him like weeds.

But Dean was still all the way at the back of the room, and a dozen demons, including Chaxuneudahl, stood between him and Sam. He wasn’t going to get there in time to help. He was, however, providing a hell of a distraction. I surged to my feet, swinging my staff up at neck level to one of the silver demons as it rushed past me toward Dean. The blow caught it perfectly under the chin, its needle teeth clicking together hard enough that several of them snapped off. But I didn’t stop there. The demon’s feet had gone out from under it when I’d clotheslined it, and now, with its head caught on my staff, I used the momentum of the blow to shove it back toward Sam. At the last second, I pulled my staff free of its neck and hooked a foot behind its knee. It toppled over backward - and landed squarely across the burning circle that trapped Sam.

There was a sound like enormous wings flapping, a blast of cold air, and then Sam simply vanished. The sudden cessation of sound was a physical relief, and I staggered a step before catching my balance again. Across the room, Dean Winchester was a whirlwind of steel at the center of a press of demons. Chaxuneudahl watched from a few feet away, already calling fireballs into his hands. He’d apparently forgotten all about me, what with the unstoppable demonic Knight of the Cross a few feet away.

His mistake.
I took a few extra seconds to gather my willpower and my focus. Then I aimed the tip of my staff at the back of Chaxuneudahl’s head and pushed power through the spelled wood. “Forzare,” I hissed.

As a rule, I’m better with big, flashy spells: blasts of flame, pillars of ice, invisible bulldozers, that kind of thing. But I’ve learned a lot over the years - including how to focus my power instead of spreading it out over a large area. This time, when I aimed kinetic force at Chaxuneudahl’s head, it wasn’t a giant flat wall.

It was a narrow spear.

It bored through Chaxuneudahl’s armored skull like a drill, punching a hole some four inches deep into his brain. Or, I guess, whatever passes for a brain when your physical presence is a body constructed of ectoplasm. Hot orange magma dripped out like blood, hissing where it hit the wood floor. Even a hole halfway through the brain probably wouldn’t be enough to stop a demon - but I didn’t stop, either. Even as Chaxuneudahl began to react, twisting around, one hand coming up to throw a ball of fire at me, I focused on the tiny hole and whispered, “Infriga.”

Water condensed from the air into a thin plug of ice that filled the hole in Chaxuneudahl’s skull. But water and lava don’t get along so well. In fact, when water is abruptly superheated like that, it turns into steam. Steam expands outward. In this case, trapped in the narrow hole by the still-frozen outer end of the ice plug, the violently expanding steam blew Chaxuneudahl’s head open.

Bits of skull and drops of burning magma flew everywhere, hissing and sizzling when they hit the wooden floors, the plaster of the walls. Chaxuneudahl’s body twitched like it was still trying to fight, and I braced myself to attack again. But to my relief, it only managed a few spasms before collapsing limp to the floor.

Revealing Dean Winchester, standing in the middle of a pile of silver demon bodies, Amorrachius in hand. He looked up at me, and the murder in his eyes made my blood run cold. At the same time, I felt Amoracchius’s power fade abruptly, felt the surge of cold hungry darkness that roared out from Dean to take its place.

*Thu-thump*

Dean’s cold green eyes fixed on me, and he raised the Sword to attack.
Brother's Keeper

Chapter Summary

In which there are definitely no chick-flick moments, Patterson continues to be a problem, and Charlie saves the day again.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for the long delay! I just started a new job and moved to a new house, but in between starting and moving I was spending four hours a day commuting - which didn't leave any time for writing. While we still need to unpack everything, I'm hoping that I'll have more writing time again. Let's see if I can get this beast finished before Season 12 starts! ;)

Harry

Dean Winchester advanced on me, *Amoracchius* hanging loose in one hand, the tip of the blade not quite touching the floor. Its gentle warmth had died, replaced by the cold hungry darkness that radiated from Dean himself. I backed up, out of the room, across the now-dying ring of fire into the hallway, trying to stay out of reach. If he attacked, if he used *Amoracchius* to draw innocent blood, the Sword would break. I couldn’t allow that.

Dean kept pace with me as I moved, steady and relentless as a hunting cat. There was nothing human behind those cold green eyes, just a predator, just the immortal demon Sam had told me about. I didn’t know if talking would do any good, if there was anything left in him that could understand me, but I tried anyway. “Hey, man, the demons are dead,” I told him, keeping my voice calm and level. “They’re gone. You killed them all. You won. It’s time to put down the—”

He growled at me, and I didn’t see him change pace or take an extra step but he was suddenly a few feet closer.

“Okay,” I said, and tried not to sound nervous. From the way his already intense gaze sharpened, I didn’t think I’d succeeded. “Um. Look, you want to find your brother, yeah? You want to make sure he’s safe? If you put down the Sword we can go find Sam—”

At the mention of Sam’s name Dean’s growl turned into a snarl. He brought the Sword up, swinging it back over his shoulder as he prepared to charge me.

A sound like fluttering wings and Sam Winchester appeared out of nowhere, standing between us. He showed no signs of having been burning to death just a few minutes ago; his skin, hair, and clothes were whole and undamaged. He wobbled slightly, the motion I’d begun to recognize as the moment when Sam and Lucifer swapped control, then spread his arms wide, his gaze fixed on his brother. “Dean,” he said quietly. “It’s over. It’s okay, Dean. I’m fine. Dean.”
Over Sam’s shoulder I could see Dean’s eyes focus on his brother, and I felt the rush of dark power drawing back into him. *Amoracchius’s* gentle warmth returned - and then the Sword clattered to the floor as Dean went abruptly limp.

Sam had apparently been expecting that, because he managed to catch Dean and ease him down to the ground. They knelt together in the middle of the hallway, huddled close; I could hear the murmur of their voices but couldn’t make out the words. There was something oddly, unsettlingly intimate about the way they leaned into each other. Not romantic or anything - ew - but, looking at them, it was obvious that as far as they were concerned, the world began and ended with each other. I remembered suddenly Crowley’s warning: *The Winchesters are dangerously tangled up in each other.* Maybe the erstwhile King of Hell hadn’t been that far off, after all.

I decided to leave them alone for a bit, and eased around them back into the summoning room at the end of the hall, stamping out the last of the ring of fire as I went. I still needed to deal with Dr. Patterson, and I had no doubt that at least one neighbor had gotten annoyed by all this noise after quiet hours and called the cops, which meant we’d need to vacate soon. I’d grab the polymorphed frogs, collar Patterson, and get the hell out of Dodge.

...Except that when I got back to the room, it was empty except for a half-dozen or so amphibians and the puddles of ectoplasm that were all that was left of Chaxuneudahl and his silver minions. Patterson was gone.

---

Dean

Dean was shaking almost too hard to breathe, the Mark burning hot and angry under his skin. Whatever power was in that sword, it was the perfect opposite of the Mark’s own, and at first, when the only thought in his head had been saving Sam from the fire, he hadn’t even noticed how much the Mark hated it. But then Sam was gone and the silver things were dead and the only person left was Harry Dresden, who’d taken Sam away from him in the first place, and the Mark had drowned out the sword’s gentle hum until the only things left in Dean’s head were blood and death and mayhem. But Sam was back now, his hands on Dean’s arms, his stupidly long hair in Dean’s face as he leaned in close, and Dean knotted his hands in Sam’s jacket and just held on until he managed to get himself under control.

“Sam…” he said, and then stopped, because he had no idea what to say. He’d seen Sam trapped by the circle of holy oil, had seen him burning, had seen him vanish and reappear just like an angel, and it had been years but he still remembered that horrible moment in Detroit when the devil had smiled with Sam’s mouth and shattered Dean’s last thin hope. “Lucifer—”

“It’s just me right now,” Sam said. “He’s not…” He stopped and shook his head, his bangs brushing Dean’s face. He still hadn’t looked up to meet Dean’s eyes.

“Dammit,” Dean muttered. Because it was Sam under his hands, Sam who sounded scared, of Lucifer or Dean or maybe both of them, but just like in Detroit Dean had been clinging to one last tiny thread of hope, and this time it was Sam who’d broken it. “Sam—”

“Don’t,” Sam said sharply. “Dean, I…” He stopped again, took a breath, and Dean could feel the way it hitched in his chest. “I couldn’t let you become a demon again, Dean. I just… I couldn’t.”

“But *Lucifer*?!”
“He promised he’d get the Mark off you,” Sam whispered. “After that…” His voice caught; he swallowed and tried again. “After that it won’t matter. You’ll be safe. You and Cas and Charlie, you’ll be fine.”

Dean shook his head, because it did matter (no it doesn’t, the Mark crooned, he’s right, you’ll be happier with him gone, let him suffer with Lucifer for—and Dean shoved it down deep where he almost couldn’t hear it any more). “Sam—”

“Don’t,” Sam said again, but his voice was gentle this time. His fingers tightened on Dean’s arms, then he let go, his hands dropping to his lap. For a minute they were silent. Dean tried to think of anything to say that wasn’t tearing Sam a new one for releasing the freaking devil because he thought Dean would be better off without the Mark than with Sam safe by his side. From the tension in Sam’s body, Sam was braced for Dean to yell at him, was sitting there waiting for it, but Dean had just watched him burn and was about to lose him to Lucifer again, and he just… he couldn’t.

Finally Sam seemed to realize Dean wasn’t going to go off on him, and huffed out a tired little laugh. “First a Knight of Hell, now a Knight of the Cross,” he murmured, one hand reaching out to hover over the sword where it lay by Dean’s knee, though Dean noticed he was careful not to touch it. “Pick a side already.”

“Shut up,” Dean retorted, because he was definitely the master of witty banter and they definitely hadn’t been having a chick-flick moment.

Sam finally looked up at that, equal parts fear and hope in his eyes, and Dean tried to smile at him. He must have done okay, because Sam smiled back, tentative, before looking away again. “We, uh,” Sam said, and Dean nodded, letting go of his jacket (trying not to think about Sam burning, Sam vanishing).

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. He wasn’t sure if Sam was helping him up or he was helping Sam up, but they managed to get to their feet. Sam’s eyes focused on something over Dean’s shoulder and Dean turned to see Harry Dresden emerge from the wreckage of Patterson’s summoning room. He carried a wooden bowl in one hand that was full of frogs and toads, and had a bag that Dean recognized as Charlie’s slung over his shoulder next to the backpack he’d been wearing.

Dresden studied them for a moment, dark eyes sizing them up the way Dad used to all those years ago when Dean and Sam had been kids and had gotten into a fight, like he was cataloging their injuries and making sure they weren’t about to go at it again. And when Dresden said, “You good?”, Dean couldn’t help but notice it was directed mostly at Sam.

He tried to tell himself it was just because Sam had been on freaking fire less than five minutes ago, but made sure to keep himself between Dresden and Sam anyway (Sammy’s ours, the Mark crooned at the back of his head, ours to protect and ours to destroy if we choose). “Where’s the doc?” Dean asked, to drown out its voice.

“He rabbited,” Dresden answered, sounding frustrated. “Must’ve slipped out while we were all distracted.”

“Well, I wouldn’t’ve stuck around if I was him,” Sam said, and shouldered pointedly out from behind Dean. “How do we find him?”

“Good question,” Dresden said. He started walking up the hall to the doors leading into the townhouse’s other bedrooms. “If we’re lucky, he’ll have left behind something I can use to track him with—”
“Like you found me?” Sam asked. He rescued the bowl from Dresden as he passed, balancing it carefully in both hands. Frog-Castiel and frog-Charlie both made little chirping noises at him and he grinned back.

“Yeah,” Dresden said. He ducked into the master bedroom, but emerged a moment later looking annoyed. “Damn. He cleaned up. Must’ve known enough about how tracking spells work.”

“So we got bupkis,” Dean said. “Great.”

“Maybe not,” Sam said, and turned to Dresden. “Didn’t Crowley say something about Patterson hopping a flight to the Caribbean?”

“Yeah, he did,” Dresden said slowly. “He’s probably headed to O’Hare, then.”

“That’s gonna be a bitch to search—” Dean started, then paused. In the bowl in Sam’s hands, frog-Charlie hopped up and down, chirruping frantically, her little frog hands waving at Dean. He stared at her for a second, then memory struck and he said, “Charlie found his plane ticket, when she was digging up dirt on him for the hunt. We get that, we’ll at least know what terminal to start in.”

Sam handed the bowl of amphibians to Dean and gestured for Dresden to hand him Charlie’s bag. He rooted around in it for a minute, then pulled out Charlie’s tablet. Dresden backed away immediately, as if the thing was a bomb instead of a pocket-sized computer. Sam didn’t seem to notice, though, flipping it on and hurriedly typing in a password.

From the bowl in Dean’s hands, Charlie chirped something indignant-sounding; Sam said absently, “Good Charlie told me your password when you came back from Oz and we needed to find Bad Charlie.”

“Came back from Oz?” Dresden echoed from where he stood at the other end of the hall. “As in—”

“Yellow brick road, Wicked Witch, Dorothy, the works,” Dean said. Dresden raised an eyebrow, managing to look skeptical and impressed at the same time. Just to see how he’d react, Dean added, “The Wizard of Oz turned out to be an evil dick, so we helped kill him, and Dorothy took over Emerald City.”

“Uh-huh,” Dresden said in a “humor the crazy guy” tone.

“You should tell him about the zombie T-Rex,” Sam said to Dresden.

“The what?” Dean demanded. Dresden grinned and one corner of Sam’s mouth curled up in a little smirk, though he didn’t look up from whatever he was doing on the tablet. Dean stared at Sam, then at Dresden, not sure if he was more baffled by the idea of a zombie T-Rex or annoyed that Sam had been hanging out with a freaking witch for one freaking day and already had in-jokes with the guy.

Before he could decide what to say, Sam held up the tablet triumphantly. “Got it,” he said, and turned the screen to show an image of Patterson’s itinerary.

“Yahtzee,” Dean said, and grinned at him.

“Great,” Dresden said. He waited until Sam had turned the tablet off again, then headed for the stairs. “Let’s get out of here. I can hear sirens - the cops’ll be here any minute and we need to get to Patterson before he gets on that plane.”

Sam followed Dresden and Dean fell into step behind Sam. According to the itinerary, they had just over half an hour before the plane departed, which wasn’t a lot of time to drive across Chicago to the
airport, get inside, and hunt down Patterson. But Dean would do it if he had to chase that damn plane
down the tarmac himself.

He wasn’t about to let the son of a bitch who’d burned his brother escape again.
Do Not Meddle in the Affairs of Wizards

Chapter Summary

In which Harry is a wizard, Bob gets to have some fun, and Dean is sick and tired of magic.

Harry

Dean Winchester, it turned out, drove like a demolition derby enthusiast who’d had a few too many at the pub: keeping the speedometer at fifteen or twenty miles over the limit, taking corners fast enough that I was pretty sure the side wheels came off the ground a couple times, barely pausing at stop signs and rocketing through lights that could charitably be called “blood orange”. Sam, sitting in the front seat beside him, swayed and rocked with the car’s motion like it was second nature to him. I, however, was stuck in the back seat with my knees folded almost to my chest and my staff banging my shoulder every time we turned.

After my third or fourth grunted “ow!”, Sam twisted in his seat to look at me. “You okay?”

“Sure,” I drawled, as Dean whipped around a curve onto the highway to the airport and the momentum slammed me into the window. “Peachy.”

“Hey, you wanna bitch about the driving, next time you drive,” Dean said.

“I wasn’t aware that that was an option,” I said. When we’d left Patterson’s townhouse and headed to the stolen rental car, Dean had gone straight for the driver’s seat.

“It’s not,” he shot back.

Sam rolled his eyes, his expression fondly amused. Despite what had happened at Patterson’s house, Sam seemed more relaxed than he’d been since I met him. He’d been hunched and tense and afraid from the moment he woke up on Demonreach, but around his brother he seemed calmer, steadier. But after a moment the amusement faded and he met my eyes. “You okay to do this hunt?” he said, gentle emphasis on the last four words.

I looked away before a soulgaze could begin. “It’s not a hunt,” I said, and couldn’t stop myself from hunching my shoulders deeper into the sturdy leather of my duster. I might be a Warden of the White Council, sworn to uphold its Laws - but that didn’t mean I had to like being the one to play judge, jury, and executioner. I’d participated in a few warlock trials before, including my own and my former apprentice’s, but if - when - we caught Patterson, it would be the first time I’d be the one holding the sword. Metaphorically speaking, since I didn’t actually have a Warden’s sword, but the gun in my duster’s pocket would do the job just as well.

Technically, I did have the option of taking Patterson into custody and hauling him back to the White Council’s headquarters, where some other Warden could do it. Or calling a tribunal, summoning whichever Council members were available to Chicago for the same purpose. But that felt… skeevy, wrong. I’d been the one who’d spoken with Patterson the first time, who’d warned him off black magic. I was responsible for him; I should have done more to help him. I mean, sure, I was dead for
most of a year after talking to him, and then working for Mab and trapped on Demonreach by the baby intellect spirit growing in my brain, but still. I should have done something.

But I hadn’t done anything, and Patterson had slipped up - just like the fundies on the Council liked to remind everyone was the inevitable outcome of dabbling in black magic even once, the reason why the Laws, and the punishment for breaking them, were so absolute. And now it was on me to stop him before he could hurt anyone else.

“If it ain’t a hunt,” Dean groused without turning, “then what is it, a fucking slumber party? We hunt witches that hurt people. He’s a witch, he’s hurting people. End of story.”

Sam shot Dean that flat, exasperated look, but Dean didn’t seem to notice. Turning back to me, Sam met my eyes for another second, long enough that I could see the sympathy in his gaze. I wasn’t sure if that said more about him, that even possessed and tortured by the devil, he had the time and energy to be concerned about me - or if it said more about me, that the guy who was Satan’s freaking chew toy pitied me. I was glad when we finally reached O’Hare’s international departures terminal and Dean swung the car to a stop in front of the passenger drop-off area.

I started to climb out, but then Sam said, “Hold on, what are we gonna do with…” He trailed off, looking down at the frogs in the bowl in his lap.

Dean, halfway out of the car himself, stopped and scowled. “Leave ‘em, Sammy, we’ll come back for ‘em.”

“This is a no-parking zone,” Sam pointed out. “We leave them here, they’re going to get towed along with the car.”

“Dammit,” Dean muttered, and looked over his shoulder at me. “Any bright ideas, witch boy?”

“Wizard,” I corrected him. “And no, I—”

“Hey, uh, Harry,” a voice said behind me, low enough that the Winchesters wouldn't hear, and I just about jumped out of my skin before remembering the backpack with Bob the Skull.

“Not now, Bob,” I hissed.

“Hey, I’m trying to help you here,” Bob said. “You need someone to watch the frogs, you got a handy intellect spirit with nothing better to do than babysit—”

“I’m not leaving you in charge of a car,” I said. In the front seat, Dean was staring at me like I’d gone insane, while Sam, who knew about Bob from whatever Lucifer had told him back at Butters’ hotel, mostly looked intrigued.

“Aww, come on, Harry!” Bob protested. “I’ll follow the speed limit and everything!”

“We’re running out of time,” Sam pointed out. “If you’ve got an option, let’s take it.”

This was a terrible idea. “Fine,” I muttered. “Bob, you have my permission to leave the skull for the sole purpose of driving this car until we get back. Stay within the airport bounds, follow all traffic laws, take care of the frogs, and don’t let anyone see you. Circle back here every five minutes until we’re back. Understood?”

“Yes, boss!” Bob chirped. I set the backpack on the floorboards of the car, and a swarm of orange lights flowed out of it and down into the undercarriage. The car’s engine revved and the steering wheel twisted back and forth.
Dean shot out of the car like it had bitten him. “What the *fuck*?!”

I shook my head and climbed out of the car. “Don’t ask.”

Sam eyed me, then carefully set the bowl of frogs on the front seat. “We’ll be back as soon as we find Patterson,” he told them, then closed the door and looked at me, eyebrows raised.

I shook my head again and repeated, “Don’t. Ask.”

He snorted but didn’t press the issue. The car’s engine revved again and I winced, expecting the worst - but the car sloooowly pulled away from the curb and disappeared around the curve of the ramp. When I looked back at the Winchesters, Dean was staring at me open-mouthed. I grinned at him and wagged my staff. “Wizard,” I said.

Sam grinned too, then when Dean glared at him, gave him an innocent look. Dean scowled and stomped toward the terminal entrance. “Let’s go,” he grumbled.

We hurried into the building. A couple dozen people waited in line at the ticket counters, and I scanned over their heads until I spotted the monitors displaying flight times and gate numbers. Even this late at night, there were several flights getting ready to take off, and it took me a few seconds to find the one listed on Patterson’s ticket. “This way,” I said, and led the way toward the security checkpoint. “He doesn’t have that much of a lead on us,” I continued as we half-walked, half-jogged. “And he probably parked correctly and everything. So hopefully he isn’t through security yet.”

“If he is,” Dean started, “then—”

“I see him!” Sam said. I followed his gaze across the handful of people trudging through the security lines, and finally spotted Patterson sitting on a bench putting his shoes back on - on the other side of the checkpoint. He was glancing nervously over his shoulder, and while being tall helps you see over other people’s heads, it also makes you easier to see. His eyes widened as he recognized me, and he hastily shoved his feet the rest of the way into his shoes, grabbed a bag from the bench beside him, and bolted.

Almost at the same time, both Winchesters took off running as well. If they exchanged any kind of signal, I didn’t see it, but they split up to veer in two different directions around the ropes marking the TSA lines. Sam vaulted the gate used by airline crew and breezed past several startled TSA agents before disappearing after Patterson into the depths of the terminal. Dean, on the other hand, slowed to a stop in front of the main checkpoint, already holding out an FBI badge at the agents there. Maybe it was just their standard MO, but, hell’s bells - I’ve seen less coordinated hive minds.

I caught up to Dean just as he was saying, “Special Agent Allman,” to the TSA agents; then he jerked his chin after Sam. “That’s my partner, Special Agent Betts—”

“I don’t care who you are,” one of the agents snapped. His hand rested on a Taser at his belt; another agent, behind him, had already drawn his weapon. One of the others was trying to calm down the civilians who’d been going through the line, while the rest watched us nervously. “This is a secure area, you can’t just barge through!”

His eyes cut to me, suspicious, and I said quickly, “Harry Dresden, consultant with the Chicago PD.” I could have tried my own fake badge, but here in my hometown I was much more likely to be recognized, and anyway maybe name-dropping CPD would get us some slack.

“I just said I don’t care,” the agent spat. Okay, no slack. He turned back to Dean. “If you really are
FBI agents, call your partner back here and you can go through security just like everyone else.”

“We can’t do that,” Dean said in a voice that suggested his patience was rapidly running out. “There’s a suspected kidnapper getting on a plane—”

The TSA agent interrupted him with another demand to call his partner back, and I tuned them both out. Arguing with the TSA wasn’t going to get us anywhere but in handcuffs as soon as real cops showed up. And we didn’t have time to waste - if Patterson got on that plane, he’d be in the wind. The White Council was still rebuilding after the devastation of the war with the Red Court of vampires; it didn’t have the resources to spare on chasing a rogue warlock across continents. Not to mention all the people Patterson could potentially hurt while he was on the run.

We needed a distraction. Better yet, we needed something that would keep Patterson’s plane grounded and give us room to chase him without civilians getting in the way.

Fortunately, I’m good at distractions.

I’ve mentioned a few times that technology and magic don’t get along so hot. Less-powerful practitioners like Patterson could sometimes use modern tech with little trouble - though given Patterson’s growing power, I was worried about the very modern airplane he was about to get on. But fully-fledged White Council wizards like me can blow out a computer at thirty paces without even trying.

I gathered my will, drawing in as much power as I could. I wouldn’t be able to draw a circle on the ground to help me focus, what with the pissed-off TSA agents ready to jump down our throats, but I was keyed up enough, nervous and angry and frustrated enough, that I could channel plenty of power even without the help of a circle. I gathered it up, packing in more and more until my fingers tingled and my back teeth itched from holding all that power inside myself. Dean and the TSA agent were still arguing, which meant they didn’t notice when I lifted my staff, touched the end of it to the worn-down carpet under my feet, and pushed all that energy out into the terminal building with a muttered, “Hexus.”

Immediately every light in the building blew out in a shower of sparks, plunging the place into darkness. Computers sparked and fizzled, emergency lights flickered wildly and then went dark, the TSA agents’ radios died in a burst of static and startled voices, and someone’s cell phone warbled the first few bars of “The Final Countdown” before squealing into silence.

That’s what happens when I do try.

Shouts and screams of fear pierced the sudden darkness, covering my voice as I grabbed Dean’s arm and hissed, “Come on!” I could barely make him out in the dark, but didn’t need to see to follow him as he vaulted the gate and slipped past the panicked TSA agents. We stumbled through the benches and security stations on the far side of the gate, and by the time we’d reached the entrance to the main terminal my eyes had adjusted enough to see the fire alarm on the wall. I could see lights beginning to come on again in sporadic patches as the building’s backup generators kicked in, so I used my staff to smash the glass protecting the alarm and yanked it down.

Immediately sirens wailed to life, adding to the chorus of cries and shouts. Dean dragged me further up the hall, out of sight of the gate area and into a little nook holding a service door. “What the hell just happened?” he hissed at me, his voice barely audible over the sirens.

“I’m a wizard,” I told him, by way of explanation. “Did you see which way they went?”

“No.” He sounded frustrated, and in the returning light I could see the anger and impatience in his
expression. “Damn place is huge. You go that way, I’ll take this end.”

He started to stalk away, but I grabbed his arm. “Hold on. Is Sam your brother by blood? No secret adoptions or anything?”

He stared at me. “What?”

“Is he?”

“Of course he is,” Dean snapped.

“Good,” I said. “I can track him using something from you, then—”

“Oh.” He produced a knife from somewhere and sliced it across his forearm without blinking, then held out his arm as blood welled in a bright red line on his skin.

My turn to stare at him. “...I could have just used hair,” I said.

He shrugged. I shook my head, then pulled my pentacle necklace over my head and smeared some of his blood onto it. Then I crouched on the floor, pulled a piece of chalk from my pocket, and sketched out a quick circle. I was still tired from fighting the Denarians and Patterson’s demon friends, and moving all that energy to short out the terminal hadn’t helped. It took me longer than usual to do the spell, murmuring under my breath while Dean tied a handkerchief around the cut in his arm, but finally I broke the circle and held out my hand, the pentacle dangling from my fist. It wobbled for a few seconds, then pulled to one side.

I glanced at Dean; he nodded and adjusted his grip on the knife. “Autobots, roll out,” I said, which earned me a surprised grin. I grinned back, and together we headed out into the darkened chaos of the terminal.
Dean stayed close on Dresden’s heels, knife in hand, as they hurried through the terminal, dodging panicked travelers and abandoned luggage. As they got deeper into the terminal, though, the number of people dwindled as the combined effects of the fire alarm and ...whatever it was Dresden had done to the lights chased everyone out of the building. Dean had to hope that Sam had managed to stay on Patterson’s tail, otherwise they’d never be able to track him down in this mess.

Dresden’s spell led them halfway down the terminal before swinging sideways to point out at the tarmac. They’d passed a couple open fire doors; it wasn’t surprising that Patterson had fled outside when he’d realized that he wouldn’t be able to get on his plane. Dean’s hand itched for his gun instead of the little knife, but he’d dropped the gun when Patterson had toad-ified him, and he hadn’t seen it since. Either it was still back at Patterson’s house - and Dean sincerely hoped not, because that meant the cops would’ve found and confiscated it - or else Patterson had had it. Probably in his checked luggage, because he’d gone through the security line, which would make recovering it damn near impossible.

Well, Dean would figure that out later. For now, they needed to worry about finding Patterson himself. Dean nudged Dresden and pointed at the nearest open door; Dresden nodded and led the way through. The door opened onto an airplane boarding ramp, though when they got to the end, they found it hanging out over empty space - no plane in sight. Dean swung down first, then watched the area as Dresden clambered down. It was dark out here, too; most of the tarmac lights had blown out with the rest of the power. But a handful kept working, their light casting deep, bizarre shadows across the ground.

They followed the dangling pentacle along the tarmac, sticking close to the terminal building where the shadows from the boarding ramps were deepest. Dean shifted his grip on the knife, eyes and ears peeled for—

There.

He tapped Dresden’s arm, waited for him to turn, then jerked his chin toward the cluster of baggage carts under a boarding ramp - this one with a plane on the end - where he’d seen a human shadow flicker across the ground. Dresden glanced down at his necklace, which was pointed in the same direction, and nodded. Dean signaled for him to go around the outside of the cluster while Dean would cut through, then scowled in exasperation when Dresden’s expression went baffled. Apparently Hogwarts in this reality didn’t cover military hand signs. He pointed and gestured, exaggerating his movements to make sure Dresden understood.

Finally Dresden nodded and slipped away, his black coat vanishing into the shadows. Dean followed the shadow he’d seen deeper into the cluster of carts. It was even darker down here, and he paused for a second to let his eyes adjust. Patterson had probably gone to ground, hoping they wouldn’t see
Then Dean heard a sound that was as familiar to him as his own voice: the hammer on his gun drawing back. An unsteady voice said, “Drop the knife.”

Dean hesitated, trying to gauge distances. Patterson had got his gun through security somehow; all Dean needed to do was jump him and grab it back. But Patterson was either smart enough or lucky enough to not make the amateur mistake of jabbing the gun into Dean’s back, and Dean couldn’t tell from his voice how far away he was.

Dammit.

Doesn’t matter, the Mark crooned at the back of his mind. Let him shoot you. You’ll be free again, then, and you can do whatever—

He clamped down hard on its voice. He was not going to die again, not going to become a demon again. He wasn’t.

“Drop the knife!” Patterson said, sharper this time, and dammit, Dean didn’t like how nervous the guy sounded. If he wanted to stay breathing - and human - he’d have to play along.

Taking a deep breath, Dean slowly raised his hands and opened his fingers, letting his knife clatter to the ground.

Harry

I heard Patterson’s voice and hurried around the end of a baggage cart in time to see Dean drop his knife to the cement. His expression was murderous in the dim light, but he didn’t seem about to make a move - which was good, because Patterson was standing three feet behind him with a gun pointed at his back.

“So how’d you get that gun through security?” Dean asked, his voice casual despite the anger on his face. He spoke a little louder than necessary, his voice clear, making sure I - or maybe Sam, wherever he was - would hear and know Patterson was armed. “Last I heard they don’t like that kind of thing.”

“I got into this mess by accidentally transforming things,” Patterson said bitterly. “I figured it was about time my stupid power could finally be—” He broke off as he spotted me and skipped a few steps to his left, putting Dean squarely between himself and me.

They were about twenty feet away, surrounded on three sides by baggage carts and trolleys; another airplane boarding ramp with an airplane attached loomed in the shadows beyond them. I held out my hands in the universal “I mean no harm” gesture, although the effect was marred somewhat by the six-foot-long wooden staff I still held. “Doctor Patterson,” I called across the tarmac. “Put the gun down.”

“Why?” he shouted back. “What good will it do me to surrender to you?” His voice cracked and his eyes glittered in the dim light, with tears or madness or maybe both. “The moment I give up and go with you, I’m dead, Warden. I don’t want to die.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. He was right - at this point, no one on the Council would be willing to stand up for him, take him under their wing like I’d done with Molly. Even I wasn’t sure I would - or if I did, that the Council would buy it. It hadn’t been her fault, but Molly hadn’t
exactly turned out a shining example of the benefits of granting the Doom of Damocles. Plus, I was the Winter Knight now, and I doubted Mab would take kindly to me devoting most of my attention to another apprentice.

And if all that wasn’t enough… I had soulgazed Molly, before I’d agreed to plead her case. I’d seen that she still had a chance. I didn’t need to soulgaze Patterson to tell that he’d gone far off the deep end already.

_Dammit_. I didn’t want to kill the guy. I’m not a murderer, no matter what the Winter Mantle might whisper in my ear when I let my guard down. But I didn’t see a way out of this that didn’t end with Patterson’s head rolling in a canvas bag in front of a White Council tribunal.

“You know it, too,” Patterson called, his voice halfway between despair and taunting. “You’re not even trying to argue. I’m a dead man walking, Warden, and my only hope of getting out of this alive is right here.” He jabbed the gun at Dean, who still stood with his hands raised and an increasingly annoyed look on his face. “I’m going to walk away, and you’re not going to follow me.”

“You think I’m gonna go quietly?” Dean asked. “Buddy, I don’t know how much you saw before you ran like a little girl, but I ain’t one to just shut up and take it.”

“You won’t have a choice,” Patterson said. “A frog isn’t much of a fighter.”

“You turn me into a fucking toad again, I swear to God—”

“Shut up!” Patterson screamed. “Shut up and walk backward toward me. Now!”

Backward meant further into the little knot of baggage carts, where I wouldn’t have a clear line of sight - or a clear shot - to them. Dean had tensed, like he was going to do something stupid. I couldn’t let Patterson transform him again, but I couldn’t let him shoot Dean, either.

“Do it!” Patterson screamed again. He’d backed up a couple of steps; any more and he’d be out of my line of sight. I couldn’t risk letting him get far enough away that he’d try turning Dean into a toad again. I had to act now. But Patterson still had the gun on Dean, which meant that if I wasn’t careful, Patterson might just shoot him.

A few years ago, this situation might have given me pause. A few years ago, I hadn’t had Mab’s training from hell to teach me quick thinking, precision action, and focused application of power instead of big flashy explosions. I caught Dean’s gaze for a moment, saw the understanding in his eyes, the tiniest nod of his head. Then I raised my staff and called my will, snapping a shield into place. Patterson jerked around to stare at me - he could probably sense the magic I was working. “Don’t—” he started.

I ignored him. “Infriga!” I shouted, and called ice to form a thick casing around the gun in Patterson’s hand.

A lot of things happened at once.

As fast as I called the ice, one muscle spasm is faster. Patterson’s finger tightened on the trigger and the gun fired, a single sharp bark.

Dean dropped to the ground.

Ice formed around and through the gun, locking the firing mechanism in place after that single shot.

A second shot rang across the tarmac, so close on the heels of the first that it almost sounded like an
And pinkish-red mist sprayed from the side of Patterson’s head. His eyes widened briefly in surprise, then his body went limp and he collapsed, lifeless, to the ground.

For a second all I could do was stare at his body. I hadn’t fired the second shot, and neither had Dean - my plan had been simply to disarm Patterson. Then movement overhead caught my eye, and I looked up in time to see Sam Winchester stand up from where he’d been crouched, gun in hand, in the shadows of a maintenance platform on top of the boarding ramp that loomed off to the side. His expression was utterly cold and empty, but fury lurked in his eyes, and if I hadn’t seen Lucifer get mad I would have thought the devil was the one in control. But no, this distant icy rage was all Sam.

Then he shouted, his voice tight and afraid, “Dean!” and I understood where that anger was coming from, remembered again what Crowley had said: The Winchesters are dangerously tangled up in each other.

Dean rolled over and pushed himself to his feet, dusting his hands on his jeans. “I’m fine, Sammy,” he called. “‘S okay, I’m fine.”

Sam swung down the narrow ladder from the maintenance platform and vaulted the last ten feet to the ground, then hurried over to his brother. “Are you sure?” he demanded, his hands roaming over Dean’s torso worriedly. “He was three feet away, how could he have missed you—”

“He didn’t,” I said. Sam stared at me. I held up a hand and waggled my fingers. “Wizard. I had a shield up to stop the bullet.”

“...Oh,” Sam said. His shoulders sagged in relief. “Um. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” I said, and my voice came out suddenly tired. Patterson’s body lay on the ground behind them, blood spreading in a gleaming red pool across the tarmac. “If I’d been more careful in the first place, gotten Patterson more help—”

“You did what you could,” Sam said. “It’s not your fault he decided to summon a demon instead of asking for help. It’s not your fault he tried to shoot Dean. He made that choice himself.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. I couldn’t look at the body any more. I closed my eyes and turned my back, leaning on my staff. “Still sucks.”

Footsteps on the tarmac and Sam’s hand rested on my shoulder, the same quiet comfort I’d offered him a few hours ago, hours that felt like forever right now. “Yeah,” he agreed.

We stood there in silence for a minute, then Dean said impatiently, “So if you two are done with the chick flick moment—”

“Shut up,” Sam said, but his voice was light; this was familiar banter for them. He squeezed my shoulder once, then let go. “Let’s get out of here.”
The Winchesters cleaned up Patterson’s body with creepy efficiency. It was obvious that this wasn’t the first dead human they’d had to take care of, not by a long shot; I remembered Sam saying back at Murphy’s place that he hunted witches. They wrapped the body in plastic bags Dean dug out of one of the baggage carts, then Sam slung the bundle over his shoulder while Dean used an airplane fuel hose to rinse away the blood. Unless someone knew to look for the faint bloodstain under the pool of gasoline, they’d only see spilled gas.

We made our way back through the terminal, dodging the emergency personnel who’d responded to the alarms. I had to wrap us in a veil to get past the cluster of fire trucks and police cars blocking the front of the terminal, but we made it without incident. Bob found us a few minutes later, as we trudged along the road that circled back to the domestic terminals. The stolen car rumbled to a careful halt and the doors swung open.

Sam, still carrying the wrapped bundle, didn’t react except to thump on the trunk. Dean jumped back with a curse and stared suspiciously at the car as the trunk popped open. “What the fuck?” he demanded.

“It’s just a car, Dean.” Sam’s voice was somewhere between tiredness and fond exasperation.

“Just a car,” Dean muttered. “I’ll show you just a car, bitch.”

“Jerk,” Sam retorted. He finished loading Patterson’s body into the trunk and circled around to the passenger door. “You gonna get in and drive, or are you too scared?”


Sam raised an eyebrow. “You’re still not in the car.”

I tuned out Dean’s retort, and their continued banter, as I climbed into the back seat. The cloud of glowing lights that was Bob swirled tiredly in the footwell, then vanished into the backpack holding his skull home. I picked up the backpack, dropped it in my lap, and sagged against the leather of the seat. The Winchesters sounded calm, almost cheerful, and I knew that as far as they were concerned, this was just another Tuesday. Nothing but a job well done, an evil witch hunted and killed like an animal. It had been easy to forget, traveling with Sam, that he wasn’t a cop or a con artist: he was a hunter first and foremost, and had spent his life killing people.

I, on the other hand, was just a tired, somewhat battered wizard who’d seen my friends nearly killed just a few months ago. Yes, I was also a Warden, and the Winter Knight - but so far, neither of those roles had turned me into a cold-hearted murderer. And, God and all the little fishies help me, never would. Patterson had been just a guy, just like I’d been not that long ago: someone with power he
couldn’t control, who’d just been trying to get out of a bad situation. But unlike me, he hadn’t had someone to pull him back from the brink, help him control his power. He hadn’t deserved what had happened to him.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and rested my forehead against the cool glass of the window, listening to the Winchesters bicker in the front seat as we drove away from the airport. I hadn’t meant to sleep, but it had been a hell of a day, and apparently I dozed off because the next thing I knew, Sam was shaking my knee gently and we were back in Chicago proper. “Hey,” Sam said. “Where to?”

“Saint Mary’s Church,” I said around a yawn. “All those folks Patterson frogified are gonna need someone to help them once I turn them back, and Father Forthill’s a good bet.”

“So you can turn them back?” Dean asked. I could hear the worry under his gruff tone.

“Should be able to.” I patted Bob’s skull through the backpack. I’d need his help to figure out how to undo Patterson’s transformations, but if there was a way to do it, Bob would know.

“Good,” Dean said. “You need us to stick around? We gotta salt ‘n burn the body.”

I raised an eyebrow at Sam, who was still twisted in the seat to look at me; he shrugged a shoulder. “Standard procedure. Make sure he doesn’t come back as a ghost.”

“...Sure,” I said, too tired to argue. Salting and burning a body might have had a mystical effect in their reality but was mostly just a good way of hiding the evidence in this one.

They dropped me and the frogs off at Saint Mary’s, where Father Forthill greeted me with his usual calm warmth. He was a slight man with piercing blue eyes that searched my face as he greeted me. “This is related to that man you sent earlier, isn’t it,” he said.

“Sort of,” I said. “Is he okay?”

“He’s about as well as one can expect for someone who’d just been possessed by, from the sound of it, a quite unusual demon,” Forthill said. “He left about half an hour ago. I suspect he wanted to go home and get drunk enough to forget it ever happened.”

“Can’t blame him,” I said. “Mind if I borrow some space? I need to do a ritual.”

“Of course, Harry.” Forthill led me to the back room where he kept cots for people who might need shelter. I told Forthill what had happened as I got set up, though when I got to the part about Sam killing Patterson, I had to stop and swallow hard.

Forthill rested a hand on my shoulder. “You did what you could for him,” he told me quietly.

“I could’ve done more,” I muttered. “I could’ve helped him, gotten him hooked up with a teacher, someone who could help him control his power—”

“You did what you could,” Forthill repeated, his voice firm. “He made his choices. It’s not your fault they were poor ones.”

I shook my head and didn’t answer. I’d been crouched on the floor, drawing a circle with chalk; now I stood up and crossed the room to where the bowl of frogs sat on a cot beside the backpack that held Bob’s skull. “All right,” I told the frogs, and picked up the bowl. “Let’s see if we can un-frogify you.”
Sam

Dean drove them well outside the city’s limits, south to one of the many little nature preserves that dotted Illinois. There wasn’t much except farmland down here, no one to notice or think anything of two guys buying shovels, lighter fluid, and matches and vanishing off the highway. They didn’t speak as they worked. They didn’t need to - it was hardly the first time they’d disposed of a body.

Sam wasn’t sure why Dean was keeping silent - for that matter, wasn’t sure why he hadn’t exploded at Sam yet, reamed him out for setting Lucifer free again, for ending up in an alternate reality, for fucking up again. Sam had expected a fight, had expected Dean to punch him a few times before being satisfied that Sam had learned his lesson. But Dean said nothing, just watched Sam from the corner of his eye and rubbed a hand over his mouth like he did when he was upset and couldn’t fix the problem.

Still, Sam was grateful for the silence. Emotions roiled through him, relief that Dean was okay, that Patterson’s spell hadn’t done any lasting harm. Anger that Dean had been in danger in the first place. And… something he couldn’t identify, something related to the fact that Lucifer was curled up under Sam’s ribs trying to pretend he wasn’t in intense pain. Mostly it was an ugly sort of gladness, that Lucifer was finally suffering a fraction of the agony he’d put Sam through. But there was something else threaded through it, that almost felt like concern.

Sam knew he shouldn’t be anything but happy Lucifer was hurting, but… when the fire had hit, in that first instant when burning oil had landed on Sam’s skin, Lucifer had grabbed him and shoved him deep down inside himself, away from the flames and the agony, and had kept him there while Lucifer himself had burned. Had kept him there even when Dresden broke the circle and Lucifer fled to a frozen mountaintop to stop the burning, the ice a fresh agony on his vessel’s charred skin that Sam was only distantly aware of. Healing the surface damage to Sam’s body was easy, but whatever mystical energy the holy oil held, it had burned Lucifer’s essence, his Grace, and that took longer to fix. Sam had fully expected Lucifer to stay up there in the cold and the safety until he was recovered, but he hadn’t - he’d taken a breath, bracing himself against the pain of stretching burned wings, and flown back to Patterson’s townhouse in time to intercept Dean.

He hadn’t had to do that. Logically, he shouldn’t have done it, should have stayed to recover his strength. But he had, he’d made sure Sam was there to save Dresden from Dean and Dean from the Mark of Cain, and Sam couldn’t think of any reason why. He could almost convince himself that Lucifer taking control when the fire hit had been self-preservation, that Sam burning would have been more dangerous to Lucifer than the angel taking the damage himself. But it was no skin off Lucifer’s back if Dean killed Dresden, or if Dean gave in to the Mark.

Yet he’d gone to considerable effort to help Sam save them both, and it terrified Sam that he couldn’t understand why. Just like he couldn’t understand why Lucifer was being nice, why he hadn’t destroyed Sam for grabbing his arm back in Pennsylvania, why he was treating Sam like a person instead of a plaything. After almost two hundred years in the Cage - years that Sam only fuzzily remembered, his battered mind doing what little it could to protect itself - he’d thought he knew Lucifer. But this was something far different from anything he’d ever seen. Something that didn’t make sense, and Sam was already barely holding it together. If he couldn’t understand Lucifer anymore, couldn’t know what he’d do or how he’d react…

Sam shuddered. Dean glanced at him from the other side of the burning pyre that had been Terry Patterson’s body, but Dean didn’t say anything and Sam didn’t, either. He knew how well Dean could read him, knew there wasn’t much point in talking about it. Not until Sam figured out what was going on with Lucifer.
Once the fire had burned down to coals that they were confident wouldn’t start a forest fire, Sam and Dean headed back to Chicago. It was early morning by then, the sun just peeking over the horizon, and they passed only a few other cars on the road.

A sudden shrill ringing had them both jumping and grabbing for weapons on reflex.

Sam got his gun out before he recognized the sound as a phone. Not his, either - neither his own, which didn’t work in this reality, nor the one he’d taken from the dead mercenary. Dean scowled and scrabbled at a pocket before pulling out a cheap burner phone. He glared at the number on the screen, then put it on speaker. “Agent Allman,” he snapped.

“Dean Winchester,” a woman answered, and Sam blinked. That was Karrin Murphy’s voice. He raised an eyebrow at Dean, who responded with the jerk of his head that meant *I’ll tell you in a minute*.

“Ms. Murphy,” Dean drawled. “Ain’t it too early for normal people to be awake?”

“Pot, kettle,” Murphy retorted. “I told you I’d call when I heard back from Dresden. I got word just now that he’s back in town.”

“Yeah?” Dean said, and smirked over the phone at Sam. “What makes you think that?”

“Someone apparently blew up a couple buildings,” Murphy said dryly. “Including a townhouse with, quote, ‘Satanic sigils’ scrawled on the floor, and the international terminal at O’Hare.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Dean said, “he didn’t actually blow it up. Just cut the power and pulled the fire alarm.”

Murphy’s voice got even drier. “Yippee. But,” she added, “it sounds like you know more about what happened than I do. You were there?”

“Yup,” Dean said. “Long story.”

“I thought I told you to stay out of trouble.”

Dean just snorted. After a moment in which Sam could picture Murphy rolling her eyes, she continued, “Fine. If you’re with Dresden, let him know that Michael wants to talk to him ASAP.”

“I’ll pass it along,” Dean answered.

“And… you found your brother?”

Dean glanced over at Sam, green eyes unreadable. “Yeah.”

Another pause, this one heavier while Murphy seemed to debate what to say. Finally she went for, “Good. Stay with Dresden for now, and remember to tell him—”

“Michael wants to talk,” Dean interrupted. “Got it.” He ended the call and tucked the phone back in his pocket. To Sam, he said, “Charlie led us to her while we were looking for you. She told us you were out of town and not likely to be back for a few days.”

“So that’s why the witch hunt?” Sam asked.

Dean couldn’t quite hide the glance he threw at the Mark where it lay hidden under his sleeve. “Yeah.”
Calling him on it wouldn’t do any good. Sam looked away, gaze fixing blindly on the suburban scenery rolling past the window. *Soon,* he reminded himself. As soon as Lucifer had recovered and they were back in their own reality. Then Lucifer would remove the Mark and Dean wouldn’t have to sate its bloodlust anymore.

Dean would be okay.

That was all that mattered.
Chapter Summary

In which Sam learns something important about the Mark of Cain, and Dean really can't wait to get back home to Baby.

Sam

They stopped at a Starbucks to pick up enough coffee for everyone before returning to Saint Mary’s. It had been a long night, and if sleep wasn’t likely to happen anytime soon, coffee was the next best thing. With a hot cup in one hand, Sam could almost convince himself he felt normal.

Dean called Charlie’s burner phone while they were waiting in line, to let her know they were on their way and pass along Murphy’s message. When they got to the church, they found Dresden, Cas, Charlie, and Crowley all waiting outside. Sam was glad Dean had parked so that Sam’s side of the car was facing away from them; he’d been able to manage while they were frogs, but he didn’t want to see the expressions on their human faces when they saw him again.

Dean swung out of the car with a tray of coffee cups in hand, and Charlie greeted him with a hug that got aborted in favor of grabbing a cup. “He’s a real wizard named Harry,” she said excitedly. “I mean, I know I looked him up before but he’s a 

wizard

, not a witch, and he did a spell! He has a familiar! He—”

Dresden, behind her, rolled his eyes. “She hasn’t stopped making 

Harry Potter

references since she got human vocal cords back.”

Charlie grinned as she took a sip of coffee. “He’s read enough of the books to recognize them, I think I’m allowed.”

“Self-defense,” Dresden said, snagging a coffee of his own from the tray. “I once got jumped by a gang of Death Eater wannabes. I gotta make sure I know which Dark Lord to threaten them with.”

Dean snorted and moved past him to hand out coffee to Castiel and Crowley. As he did, Dresden came over to where Sam still sat in the front seat of the stolen Accord. Leaning on the side of the car, he asked quietly, “You okay?”

“Fine,” Sam answered automatically, though he couldn’t quite make himself meet Dresden’s eyes.

“They’re not mad at you,” Dresden said, and that startled Sam into looking up at him through the open window. “First thing Castiel asked me when I defroged him was whether Lucifer was hurting you.”

Sam ran his tongue over his teeth, looking away again, down at his lap where his thumb was digging into his palm without any conscious thought on his part. “What did you tell him?”

“The truth,” Dresden said. “You’re hanging in there, which is more than most people could do.”

Sam tried to smile. He wasn’t sure it worked, but Dresden didn’t seem to mind. “How about you?”
he asked. “You were, uh, pretty shook up.”

Dresden’s turn to look away, his expression turning pensive. “I don’t like seeing warlocks executed,” he admitted, his voice soft. “I know why the Laws are what they are, but still…” He shook his head.

Sam winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dresden said. “It wasn’t your fault. If you hadn’t killed him, I’d’ve had to do it, or I’d’ve had to take him back to the White Council and watch them do it. At least this way it was quick and clean.”

“I thought he’d shot Dean,” Sam admitted. “So, uh, thanks for stopping that.”

“You’re welcome,” Dresden said, and flashed a grin that wasn’t any better than Sam’s had been a minute ago. “Ready to figure out how to get back to your reality?”

“Definitely,” Sam agreed, then flinched. “Uh. No offense.”

“None taken,” Dresden said. “Home is home is home. And it’s about time we got you back to yours.”

“So,” Dean’s voice came from behind Dresden, and Sam jumped - he hadn’t noticed Dean come around the back of the car. “What now?”

“Michael’s place,” Dresden answered. “I called him after I got Murph’s message—” he nodded to Charlie “—and he said we could crash there while I figure out how to get you guys home.”

Michael Carpenter.

The house guarded by angels.

Sam swallowed, fighting the urge to slide over to the driver’s seat and just take off. *It’ll be fine*, he told himself firmly. He could just wait outside the house, where the angels wouldn’t attack, where he wouldn’t stain the home of a good man just by being there. It would be fine. It *would*.

Dean, at least, couldn’t see Sam’s face from where he stood beside the rear door. He tossed an annoyed glance at the stolen Accord. “We ain’t all gonna fit in this plastic piece of crap unless some of you get real friendly. Should we call a cab?”

“Nope,” Dresden said. “Father Forthill’s gonna take care of this car for us. Michael offered us a better ride.” He paused and squinted up the street. “In fact, I think that’s it right there.”

Sam followed Dresden’s gaze to where a minivan was just slowing to turn into the church’s parking lot. It pulled up next to the car and the driver’s window rolled down to reveal a young man at the wheel. He had unruly dark hair and a deep dimple in his chin, and looked like a younger version of Michael Carpenter.

“Hey, Harry,” he called. “Dad said you needed a ride?”

“No,” Dean said immediately. “I am *not* getting inside that thing. It’s an abomination. It’s—”

“Just a minivan,” Dresden interrupted, his dark eyes sparkling. “And hey - it’s not even haunted.”

Dean glared at him, then at Sam. “I fucking hate both of you,” he muttered, and scrubbed a hand over his face. Dresden winked at Sam, who couldn’t help smiling a little. “Fine,” Dean muttered. “Let’s get this over with.”
For a wild moment Sam almost did it, almost took off in the stolen car and never mind what the others would think, never mind that Dresden was his only way home unless - until - Lucifer recovered. But then Dean leaned down through the open window and thumped Sam on the shoulder. “C’mon, Sammy, the sooner we get moving the sooner we’re home.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, and that was that. He pushed open the door and followed Dean to the minivan. He curled into one of the bucket seats (selfish, you don’t deserve to even be in a car with them, freak), and Crowley claimed the other, leaving Dean and Castiel in the back seat with Charlie wedged in the middle. Dresden climbed into the front seat next to Michael’s son, and Sam pretended not to see the worried glance he threw Sam’s way.

The van pulled out of the parking lot and Sam leaned his head against the window, ignoring Dean and Charlie and Cas jostling each other good-naturedly behind him. He’d hoped to doze, or at least pretend to doze so he wouldn’t have to talk to anyone, but the moment he closed his eyes he saw Lucifer on the back of his eyelids.

“Ow,” Lucifer said wearily. He stood hunched in the middle of Sam’s mind, his arms wrapped around himself, his wings curling over his shoulders as if to protect him. “No wonder you were able to drag Michael into the Cage with us. This shit hurts.”

Sorry, Sam thought. Even in his own mind his voice sounded tired.

Lucifer looked up to meet his eyes. “You didn’t burn,” he pointed out. There was something strange about his voice, something Sam couldn’t place, and it sent chills down his spine.

Or maybe they were just from the devil lurking under his skin.

Yeah, Sam agreed. Um. Thanks.

Lucifer’s expression went frustrated and he turned away, pivoting sharply on one heel to pace back and forth across Sam’s brain. “I’m going to keep my promise, y’know,” he said abruptly, and this time Sam caught the hint of a pout. “I’m going to take the Mark of Cain off your brother once we’re back home.”

Sam didn’t know what to say to that. He hadn’t ever doubted Lucifer, exactly - Lucifer really had never lied to him, as far as he knew - but neither had he given much thought to the reality of it. He’d made the deal, and either it would work and Lucifer would destroy Earth after Dean died, or Dean would kill Lucifer and Sam with him. Those were the only options, and in neither of them was Sam a relevant player anymore.

“Sure you are,” Lucifer said. “You still need to decide who I transfer the Mark to.”

Time seemed to freeze for a second, Dean and Charlie’s voices fading to white noise in the distance. Sam stared at Lucifer. What?

“You. Need to decide. Who I. Transfer. The Mark. To,” Lucifer repeated, drawing the words out as if Sam was being particularly stupid. “If I’m taking it off dear ol’ Dean, it’s gotta go to a new bearer.”

No, Sam thought, horrified. No, you were going to get rid of it—

“Not how it works, Sammy,” Lucifer said. “The Mark has to exist somewhere, on some lucky duck schmuck, and you—” He grinned, cold and deadly. “—get to pick the schmuck.”

Why? Sam demanded. You said you’d get rid of it!
“I said I’d take it off your brother,” Lucifer corrected him. “But I can’t get rid of it entirely.” He paused, lips pursed as if thinking. “I guess technically I can - I know how to do it - but while I think humans are Dad’s worst idea ever, I like Earth. And the rest of creation. So I won’t.”

*I don’t understand,* Sam said desperately.

Lucifer blew out an exaggerated sigh, his icy wings ruffling in irritation and sending a blast of cold throughout Sam’s body. “Look,” he said. “The Mark isn’t just Dad’s original tramp stamp. It’s got a job to do.”

*A job?* Sam echoed.

Lucifer hesitated, and for a moment that frightening sanity draped over him like a shroud. “Remember I said this reality is contaminated?” Sam nodded, and Lucifer continued, “They don’t have their Mark anymore. Or maybe they never had one. Your witchy playdate’s big boss is doing it the hard way, but she’ll fail, eventually. One way or the other. She’s already failing - if she wasn’t, this reality wouldn’t be contaminated.”

Sam stared at Lucifer in horror. The contamination Lucifer had spoke of two nights ago in Murphy’s spare bedroom had been enough to scare an archangel. To scare *Lucifer.*

*Dean’s what’s holding that back?* he asked, his mental voice little more than a whisper.

“Yup.” Lucifer flashed him another grin, sanity cracking away like ice. “Why do you think I beefed up Cain when I passed it on to him? Dad thinks I fucked it up - he thinks I fucked everything up - but it worked. Cain kept it. Now your big brother’s keeping it. And you have to pick who gets the job next.” He leaned closer, his Grace pulsing through Sam’s body, his teeth very white in the shadows that had fallen around him as he curled icy fingers around Sam’s jaw. “Better pick right, Sammy my boy. Or else…”

Darkness swirled around him, through him, empty hungry fingers that clawed at Sam’s mind and tore shrieking across his soul. The world fell away, engulfed in shrouds of ravenous black smoke, and when Sam lifted his hands to reach out, to do something, *anything,* he found his skin spiderwebbed with thick black veins like demon blood, felt tar bubbling up in his throat, choking him. He clawed at his neck but smoke swirled around his hands, forcing them to spread wide and defenseless. More smoke flowed into his mouth like a demon but a million times hungrier, and something *ripped* deep inside Sam and a glittering light burst out from his mouth. It disappeared into the smoke, devoured by the darkness that roiled around him, leaving him empty and lost and alone in a void of nothing, and—

“The—Sam!”

—and Sam woke up screaming.
In the House of the Angels

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Michael talk, and Lucifer makes a move.

Sam

It took a few seconds for Sam to get himself under control enough to stop screaming, to recognize Harry Dresden’s hands on his shoulders, his wide dark eyes darting across Sam’s face. “Sam,” he was saying, his voice low and worried. “Sam, c’mon, man—”

Then Dean shoved Dresden roughly out of the way, knocking him between the bucket seats into the back of the van, and grabbed Sam’s shoulders himself. “Sam,” he said. “Sammy!”

“F-fine,” Sam choked out. The word stuck in his throat, as if the empty hunger Lucifer’s darkness had left inside him was a black hole that drew everything inexorably into itself. He swallowed, fighting the urge to claw at his chest, to try to shove his own hand through his flesh to make sure his soul was where it belonged. “I’m - I’m fine.”

“Like hell,” Dean growled. He moved one hand up from Sam’s shoulder to his jaw. “You’re freezing.”

“Lucifer,” Dresden said quietly from where he’d pushed himself up to kneel between the seats. Sam nodded numbly, grateful (pathetic, stupid) that Dresden had said it so Sam wouldn’t have to.

“What the fuck does that sicko want?” Dean asked, and the edge to the growl in his voice told Sam that the Mark was getting close to the surface. But thinking about the Mark brought back the awful hunger, the black smoke clawing deep inside him, and for a few seconds all Sam could do was clench his teeth around another scream.

Maybe Dresden was psychic in addition to being a witch, though, because he saved Sam from having to talk again by saying, “I don’t think even Lucifer knows what Lucifer wants.”

That was unexpected enough that Sam almost forgot the black smoke, and he stared at Dresden with a frown. Deep inside him, Lucifer gave a snort that didn’t sound quite as derisive as Sam was pretty sure he’d meant it to be, and grumbled, “I know exactly what I want. Stupid ape. I don’t need to have my head shrunk by a witch who can’t keep his nose out of everyone else’s business—”

Sam tuned him out. Dean was shaking his head in rueful acknowledgement of Dresden’s words, and now he turned his gaze back to Sam. “You good?” he asked.

Sam nodded, and made himself uncurl from the tight knot of limbs he didn’t remember twisting into. Past Dean, he could see the side door of the van standing open, Castiel and Charlie leaning in worriedly. The van was parked in the Carpenter’s driveway, their big apple-pie house standing warm and welcoming beyond. “Go on inside,” Sam said, looking first at Dean and then Dresden. If nothing else, this would be a decent excuse for Sam to stay outside while everyone else went in to figure out how to travel between realities. “I, uh. I just need a few minutes.”
“No,” Dean said immediately. “And how about hell no, while we’re at it. I ain’t leaving you alone __”

“I can handle it, Dean,” Sam said, and tried to smile. “I’ll be fine.”

“Can doesn’t mean should,” Dresden pointed out.

“Lucifer was making a point,” Sam said. His voice came out weary. “Point taken. I just…” He shook his head. “I just… I need to…”

Dresden was watching him again, dark eyes knowing, and when Sam didn’t finish, he said, “Your choice, man. Just come on inside when you’re ready, okay?”

Sam nodded, ignoring Dean’s sputtering as Dresden took him by the arm and pointedly shoved him ahead of himself out of the van. When they’d cleared the doorway, Castiel stuck his head inside.

“Sam—”

“I’m fine,” Sam said. He leaned his head back against the window and closed his eyes. “I promise, Cas, okay?”

Cas didn’t say anything, and Sam could picture him squinting worriedly at him. Sam didn’t say anything, either, and finally he heard Castiel retreat after the others into the house.

For a while Sam just sat there, eyes closed, the glass of the van window cool against the back of his skull, Lucifer grumbling quietly at the edge of his awareness. Maybe it wouldn’t take Dresden long to figure out how to send everyone home. He’d figured out how to reverse Patterson’s polymorph quickly enough and with only the help of a talking skull. With Crowley and Castiel’s assistance as well, he might only need an hour or two. Not long enough for anyone to notice that Sam was still out here, for anyone to get worried over things that—

Uneven footsteps thumped softly up to the still-open door of the van, and Michael Carpenter’s deep voice said, “So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

Sam blinked his eyes open in surprise. Michael stood just outside the van, leaning heavily on a cane, his blue eyes warm. He added, “Harry said you weren’t feeling well. Are you sure you don’t want to come inside? Charity made waffles, and there’s fresh coffee. You might feel better after some food.”

Food sounded incredible, and Sam’s mouth started watering before he could help himself. But he swallowed hard and forced himself back under control. “No, thanks,” he said quietly. “I’m fine out here.”

Michael studied him for a moment. “You don’t want to come inside, do you.”

“It’s not that,” Sam said.

“No,” Michael said, thoughtful. “There’s a reason you don’t want to come inside.”

It wasn’t a question, and Sam sighed. Lucifer was sitting in the bucket seat between Sam and the open door, watching Michael with a curiosity that he didn’t bother to hide. Michael couldn’t see it, couldn’t see the way the devil gripped the arms of the seat as if to keep himself from reaching out. Couldn’t see the angels lurking at the edge of the driveway, their gazes fixed on Lucifer with hateful intensity. Michael couldn’t know what he was asking.

Unless Sam told him.
Sam looked up, though he couldn’t quite look Michael in the eyes. “Dresden didn’t tell you?” he asked.

“Tell me what?”

Sam clenched his jaw. Forced himself to say the words, ignoring Lucifer’s quiet chuckle. “I’m a Denarian. Except my fallen angel is Lucifer. I’m not — I shouldn’t go anywhere near your house.”

Michael inhaled sharply, blue eyes widening. “Mother of God,” he breathed.

Lucifer snorted. Sam fought the urge to look at him, to look at anything other than the shock on Michael’s face. His skin itched and crawled like it had that final night before he’d said yes the first time, when he’d asked Dean not to look. You shouldn’t have said anything, you should have just lied, made an excuse, now he knows you’re a freak—

“That’s—I didn’t know that was possible,” Michael said, sounding a little shell-shocked. “Lucifer? The Morningstar himself?”

Sam nodded miserably. “Sorry,” he whispered, and tried not to see Lucifer rolling his eyes.

Then Michael blew out his breath in something that wasn’t exactly a sigh, his shoulders squaring. Meeting Sam’s eyes, he said gently, “Being a Denarian doesn’t automatically mean you’re unwelcome in my home.”


“It’s not my place to pass judgment,” Michael said. “I don’t know why you made the choice you did, though from what you told Karrin, you’ve had more than your share of hard times. What matters is what you do now. And if you - and your Fallen companion - honor the laws of hospitality, then you are both welcome in my home.”

“Uh,” Sam said, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Lucifer was still staring at Michael with his mouth hanging open; Sam wondered how long it had been since someone told Lucifer he was welcome anywhere. He managed to say, “Are you sure? I mean - you don’t have any reason to trust me.”

“Harry likes you,” Michael answered, smiling, but then the smile turned grim. “And I suspect you are aware of what will happen if you do not abide by the laws of hospitality.”

Sam glanced past him to where the angel guards stood in the yard, their eyes on Lucifer and their hands on their swords. “Yeah.”

Michael nodded. “Then, please,” he said, “come inside.”

For a few seconds, Sam couldn’t remember how to breathe. Lucifer still hadn’t moved, frozen in shock. Michael held out a hand; numbly Sam clasped his wrist and let Michael pull him out of the van. Lucifer’s projected body flickered out of existence as they moved, the archangel apparently forgetting to maintain the illusion.

Michael led Sam through the white picket fence, across the yard, and up the steps to the porch. Sam could feel the guardian angels’ eyes on him as he moved, could see them at the edges of his vision, their hands tightening on their weapons, their wings rustling with tension. If Michael was aware of them, he gave no sign, his limping steps steady.

Sam followed him up to of the house’s front door, then stopped, not quite able to bring himself to
cross the threshold. Michael, a few steps ahead, was already inside; he turned back when he realized Sam had stopped. “I mean it,” he said gently. “Come in and be welcome.”

Bracing himself for… something, Sam stepped over the threshold. The house’s energy - warmth and love and home all wrapped up together - washed over him, and somehow he didn’t shatter into a million pieces. Michael was still waiting for him, patient as stone, and finally Sam followed him into the house, where the others were gathered around a table full of food and laughter and family.

---

**Harry**

Charity Carpenter may not like me very much, but she cooks a mean breakfast, and she doesn’t let personal grudges interfere with her commitment to feeding guests. We tucked into waffles, bacon, sausage, and hash browns, or in other words, pure heaven after more than a year of eating out of cans cooked over a campfire on the island. We sat around the Carpenters’ huge dining room table, all ten of us: the Winchesters and their three friends, Murphy and me, and Michael, Charity, and Daniel Carpenter. The rest of the resident Carpenter kids were at school, and while I missed seeing my daughter Maggie and my dog - now Maggie’s full-time companion - Mouse, I was just as glad that they wouldn’t be anywhere near Crowley or Dean.

“—which was when he told me to speed up,” Murphy was saying, telling a riveted Charlie the story of when she and I had played chicken on her motorcycle with a car full of machine gun-toting thugs behind a vampire’s mansion. “I thought he was nuts, but it wasn’t like we had a lot of options.”

“So what happened?” Dean asked. I hadn’t thought he’d been paying attention - he’d been busy stuffing his face with waffles like he thought he’d never eat again.

Murphy grinned. “We sped up.”

“Force equals mass times acceleration,” I said. “We couldn’t out-mass them, but we could out-accelerate them. Focus all that into a small point—” I made a spear out of my hand and stabbed the air— “and boom!”

“It’s rare that Harry remembers he has a brain,” Murphy said, smirking over her coffee cup, “but every once in a while—”

“Hey!” I protested, as Dean and Charlie snickered, and even Sam - who’d been sitting in a corner of the room trying to be invisible since Michael had convinced him to come inside - cracked a faint smile. I gave an exaggerated sigh. “A guy forgets a holy sword once and you just won’t let it go.”

That was what Michael had wanted to talk to me about - apparently Detectives Rawlins and Stalling had shown up at the Carpenter house in the middle of the night with Amoracchius in its carrying case. They’d responded to the commotion at Patterson’s townhouse, and Rawlins had recognized the Sword from when Murphy’d been holding it while I was mostly dead. He didn’t know exactly what it was, but he’d told her that he remembered her being protective of it and that, given the circumstances, it wouldn’t hurt anything to return it to her off the record.

Hey, don’t look at me like that. Sometimes the White God isn’t especially subtle.

Anyway, Murphy had started to tease me about it when I’d arrived with the Winchesters and company, but had stopped abruptly. I suspected she still felt guilty about Fidelacchius breaking, though I didn’t think she should. It hadn’t exactly been her fault - sometimes the White God is very subtle. But she did feel guilty, which was why I was joking about my own fuck-up. She’d started to
look down, her expression tight, so I caught her eye and smiled. After a moment, she managed a
faint smile of her own, which I decided to count as a victory.

Michael had grinned, too, shaking his head in amusement. “It worked out in the end,” he said, then
pushed himself carefully to his feet and picked up the empty coffee pot from the table.

“Dad, I can—” Daniel started, but Michael waved him down.

“I need to stand up for a bit,” he said, with a rueful gesture to his bad leg. “Finish your breakfast.
You’re helping me with the dishes later.”

Daniel snorted but sat back, and Michael limped through the open archway to the kitchen, his cane
clicking softly against the hardwood floor.

“Okay,” Charlie said to me, reaching across Dean to snag the bowl of strawberries for her waffles.
“Now tell us about the Death Eaters. You said they attacked you?”

“Yep,” I said. “It was my day off, and…” I launched into the story of what had been the most
obnoxious day off of my life, Charlie hanging on to my every word while everyone else finished
breakfast.

I’d just gotten to the part where Darth Wannabe had thrown an honest-to-god smoke bomb through
my window when Dean suddenly said, “Where’s Sam?”

I blinked, my train of thought derailed. “What?”

Dean twisted in his chair, looking around; the rest of us looked as well. The heavy double doors to
the kitchen were closed, blocking line of sight, and I couldn’t see Sam anywhere. Then Charity said,
her voice tight with worry, “Where’s Michael?”

I shoved to my feet, leaning on the table to look through the open archway into the living room, and
something tickled the back of my brain. I turned my head to look at the heavy double doors closing
off the kitchen - solid bone-white things with carvings that made my stomach queasy to look at - and
my heart sank. “Charity,” I said. “When did you guys add doors to your kitchen?”

“We didn’t,” she said, then followed my gaze. Her face went as white as the doors that hadn’t been
there a minute ago, hadn’t been there when Michael had gone alone into the kitchen.

“Sammy!” Dean called, and lunged out of his chair to grab the doors’ handles and yank. But they
didn’t budge, and Dean whipped around to yell, “Cas! A little help!”

But Castiel didn’t get up. “It’s no use,” he said. He was staring at the doors, though his blue eyes
were unfocused in a way that suggested he was looking at something the rest of us couldn’t see.
“Lucifer made them. There’s nothing I can do.”

My heart sank. Lucifer wouldn’t have stuck Michael in the kitchen just for shits and giggles. Which
meant that Michael was trapped in there with Lucifer, and there was nothing we could do about it.
The Good Man

Chapter Summary

In which Lucifer, Sam, and Michael have a conversation.

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to a_diamond for beta’ing this and the following three chapters!

Sam

“I want to talk to him,” Lucifer said. He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking for all the world like a four-year-old begging for a supermarket candy bar.

Lucifer— Sam thought.

“Just talk, Sam, jeez, untwist your panties.” Lucifer rolled his eyes, then immediately went back to watching Michael take the coffee pot into the kitchen. “I promise, okay?”

Sam hesitated. On the one hand, Lucifer’s fascination with the Knights of the Cross, and particularly Michael Carpenter, terrified Sam. He’d been the subject of Lucifer’s attention before - centuries of it - and he still couldn’t even think about it without skidding dangerously close to the edge of insanity. On the other hand, Lucifer was asking, and - for Lucifer - nicely. He didn’t have to ask, could have just shoved Sam aside and done it, but he was asking, and that meant something.

But Sam was afraid to find out what.

Just talk? he thought.

“Just talk,” Lucifer repeated, and held up a hand. “Scout’s honor.”

Not that that meant anything to the devil, but it was the best Sam was going to get. He would just have to hope that the angels guarding the house were on the ball and able to overcome a weakened archangel if necessary. Closing his eyes, Sam slipped down into the depths of his own mind, shivering at the chill as Lucifer brushed past him to take control.

Lucifer stood up, and Sam’s half-formed hope that Dresden or Dean would notice him died as he strolled lightly into the kitchen without anyone at the dining table batting an eye. Lucifer turned to close a set of heavy doors that hadn’t been there a moment ago, and when he turned back around, Michael had set the coffee pot on the counter and was watching him.

“What can I do for you, Sam?” he asked easily.

Lucifer smiled. The kitchen, which had been slightly overwarm from all the cooking, suddenly felt chilly. Curlicues of frost spiraled across the windows. Lucifer said, “Guess again.”
Michael blinked, then his face went pale. But instead of flinching, or cowering, or anything sane, he straightened his shoulders. His voice was a little softer but his tone was the same: “What can I do for you, Lucifer?”

“I want to ask you something,” Lucifer answered. He spread his hands, and while Michael watched the gesture with extra caution, he still didn’t flinch. “Just a question.”

“Of course,” Michael said. “I’ll answer if I can. What do you want to know?”

For a few seconds Lucifer said nothing, his mouth curled in that smirk Sam hated so much, the one that said I am in control, and you are nothing before me. But Sam was the one watching from the inside, now, and just like Lucifer knew everything Sam was thinking, Sam could see Lucifer’s thoughts.

Lucifer was nervous.

Finally he licked his lips and said, in a voice that wasn’t nearly as casual as he’d probably hoped, “I want to know why.”

“Why what?” Michael prompted gently.

“Why the Knights of the Cross,” Lucifer said. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “We don’t have them in our reality. Why are you people so special that God would do that for you?”

Michael’s expression turned pensive. “I won’t pretend to know why He does what He does,” he said. “Not in this reality, or yours. But I do know that in our reality, the thing which sets humans apart from all other sentient creatures is free will.” Lucifer snorted; Michael ignored it and continued, “The purpose of the Knights is to protect free will. To be a balance against the power of those who would take away humans’ choice. To give those coerced by the Fallen a chance to make a different choice.”

Lucifer scowled, turning away to stare out the window over the kitchen sink. “I’m surprised He cares,” he muttered. “At least in our reality, all Daddy dearest cared about were His stupid stories. We defeated darkness itself for Him, and He gave the world to His precious, pathetic humans instead of us.”

He rubbed at his forearm, the motion creepily reminiscent of the way Dean would scratch at the Mark of Cain. In the back of his mind Sam caught glimpses of memories: a terrible battle, anger and fear and jealousy, the hot sting of betrayal. “I called Him out on it, I said He was asking too much after everything He’d done. And for that He threw me in a cage in Hell to rot.” Lucifer threw back his head and laughed, painfully bitter. “Then He fucked off to parts unknown and left His darling hairless monkeys to the tender mercies of the monsters He couldn’t be bothered to kill.”

Michael shook his head. “That must have been…”

“Awful?” Lucifer said, and turned to flash that terrible mad smile at him. “Just a little.”

“I’m sorry,” Michael said quietly. He sounded sincere.

Lucifer paused, startled; tried to cover it with a scowl. “I don’t need your pity,” he snapped.

“It’s not pity,” Michael said. “It’s—”

“Sympathy for the devil?” Lucifer sneered. “Spare me. I don’t need sympathy - or pity - from the guy whose job it is to tell other humans how terrible I am and how they shouldn’t have anything to
do with me.”

Michael tilted his head, his warm blue eyes watching Lucifer thoughtfully. “That’s not what we do, you know,” he said.

“Sure,” Lucifer said. “You just said your purpose is to turn people away from the Fallen—”

“I said,” Michael interrupted gently, “that we give them a chance to make a choice. That’s all. It’s up to each of us to choose whether to hurt others, or to help them. The Knights of the Cross are there only to make sure everyone has the chance to make that choice.”

“Everyone human,” Lucifer said bitterly. More memories flashed past Sam’s awareness: the feeling of being trapped, backed into a corner. Lucifer wearing Sam’s body in Stull Cemetery, facing a fight he never wanted. The archangel Michael wearing Adam Milligan’s body, saying I have no choice. Lucifer answering, let’s just walk off the chessboard.

The frozen scorn in his brother’s reply: I have my orders. You’re a monster, Lucifer.

“No,” the human Michael said softly. “Everyone.” Lucifer looked up at him, startled. Michael met his eyes and said, “If one of the Fallen wanted that chance, we would make sure he got it.”

Lucifer froze. Silence stretched through the room like frost; Sam didn’t think Lucifer was even breathing. Despite being curled up deep inside himself, Sam felt like his own heart had stopped, the weight of Lucifer’s thoughts, his memories, nearly unbearable. And yet…

A memory of Sam’s own, Dean staring down at Sam chained to a cot in Bobby’s panic room: you’re a monster, Sam. You’re nothing to me. Another memory, Sam pressed up against a locked door, telling a stranger, you don’t have to be a monster. And another, riding through the dark in a stolen truck, Dean saying, So screw destiny. Right in the face.

Then Lucifer barked out a harsh laugh. “Hah. As if you could give me a chance. Dad made me what I am. He wanted me to be like this. He needed a scapegoat, needed someone He could throw under the bus.” Lucifer spread his arms. “He loves His stories, after all. I was Daddy’s best little soldier, and isn’t it that much more dramatic when the hero falls? He never cared about me.”

“Maybe,” Michael said. “Maybe not. But why not choose something different?”

He’s right, Sam thought to Lucifer. He wasn’t in control of his physical body but he felt like he was holding his breath anyway. You wanted to walk off the chessboard.

Shut up! Lucifer hissed back. Icy rage battered Sam, left him momentarily stunned.

But Michael Carpenter was still talking. “You can be something other than what you were made to be. You can choose your own path.” He stepped closer, cautious but unwavering.

He’s right, Sam thought. He felt raw, terrified, centuries of agony in the Cage screaming through his soul - but he couldn’t let this chance go. He could see all too clearly what had trapped Lucifer, what kept him locked in this terrible insanity. Lucifer had told the archangel Michael back in the cemetery that God wanted the Devil, had told the human Michael that God made him the way he was. If that was true, then Lucifer wasn’t to blame for what he’d done - God had made him fall and there wasn’t anything he could have done to save himself. But there wasn’t anything he could do to change it, either - he’d be damned forever, with no recourse, no possibility of anything other than hatred and revulsion for his very existence.

But if it wasn’t true, if Lucifer had a choice, then it had been his choice before, as well. His fault that
he’d fallen. He could change, could make a better future for himself - but he would have to accept responsibility for what he’d done.

“I can’t,” Lucifer said, his voice cracking. “I’m not—I’m—”

“You are what you choose to be,” Michael said, so very gently, and held out a hand to Lucifer.

From deep within his own body, Sam reached out as well, his soul brushing Lucifer’s frozen Grace. *It doesn’t matter what God made you to be*, he said. *It only matters what you choose to be. It’s your choice.*

Lucifer stood frozen, caught between Sam and Michael, shaking, his chest heaving as he gasped, as if he couldn’t get enough air even though he didn’t need to breathe at all. Feathers rustled and ice raced across the surface of the kitchen counters, across the windows, the temperature in the room plummeting.

Then Lucifer threw back his head and screamed. The sound started out human, Sam’s own voice, but ratcheted up the scale until Michael fell back against the kitchen counter, hands pressed to his ears, the walls shaking, and the glass of the windows and the tableware exploded, bright glittering shards like fire in the air and Sam yelled *Lucifer—*!

Then Lucifer spread his wings and gathered his power, and they were gone.
“Sympathy for the Devil”

Chapter Summary

In which everyone at the house worries a lot, and Sam and Lucifer continue their talk.

Harry

“Sam!” Dean shouted, and banged again on the doors blocking us from the kitchen. They didn’t so much as rattle, but that didn’t stop him from slamming his fist into them over and over. “Sammy!”

Running footsteps slapped the floor behind us and I turned as Daniel Carpenter skidded to a stop, his socks damp from running outside without shoes. “The kitchen door is blocked, too,” he reported breathlessly. “I couldn’t see inside.”

Charity nodded; she stood beside Dean at the doors, and if she wasn’t pounding on them as well it was only because she had better self-control. She looked up at me and said, “Can you do anything?”

“Doubt it,” I admitted. “Those doors are magical - even if I huffed and puffed, I’d likely take down the rest of the house without touching them or what’s behind them.”

She nodded again and looked away, mouth tightening into a hard line as she considered her options. Dean had finally stopped pounding on the doors only to begin throwing himself bodily at them, shrugging off Castiel’s hand when the angel tried to hold him back. Castiel grimaced at me as if to say he’d not going to stop, so I ignored Dean and tried to think. Michael and Lucifer were locked in the kitchen together. Sam had been wary of the Carpenters’ house both times we’d been here - had he known Lucifer would do something like this? Would Sam be able to do anything to stop him? Would the angelic guardians that protected the house take action?

I had my mouth open to ask Castiel if he could see the guardian angels when Daniel said suddenly, “You guys hear that?”

We all fell silent - even Dean stopped slamming against the door - but the sudden quiet wasn’t necessary. A high-pitched shriek like electronic feedback, like Lucifer’s screams when he’d burned in the ring of holy fire, erupted from within the kitchen and got louder and louder until the walls of the house shook. I clapped my hands over my ears on reflex, distantly aware of the others doing the same as the sound screeched up past painfully loud and into glass-breaking territory. Castiel shouted, “That’s Lucifer!” and Dean, hands still pressed to his ears, slammed his shoulder into the doors one more time—

—just as they, and the awful noise, vanished.

Dean flew into the kitchen and landed hard amidst a shower of broken glass on the floor. Charity and I rushed through the arch behind him, Charity with her fists up ready to punch the devil in the face, me with my staff in hand. But the only person in the room was Michael. He leaned heavily on the counter, rubbing his ears with a pained expression, though he looked otherwise unharmed.

“Michael!” Charity cried, and ran to him.
“Sam!” Dean shouted. He managed to get to his feet without slicing himself open on the glass surrounding him and looked around, green eyes wide and worried. “Sam!”

“They’re gone,” Michael said hoarsely. He wrapped an arm around Charity and took a deep breath. “It’s all right. He wasn’t attacking me—”

“Wasn’t attacking?” Charity demanded. She gestured at the kitchen. The cupboards had rattled open, everything that wasn’t plastic or metal lying in shattered pieces on the counters and floor. The window over the sink and the one set in the back door were broken as well, and frost coated every remaining flat surface.

“He wasn’t,” Michael said firmly. “I said something that upset him. That’s all.”

“Wow,” I said. “I have experience with saying things that upset people, and even I never made anyone explode a kitchen.” I paused. “That I know of.”

“That’s what happens when an angel uses their real voice,” Castiel said. “Our voices are… not meant for mortal ears.”

“I kinda got that,” I said. “What was he saying?”

“Nothing,” Castiel said, and his inhuman blankness cracked to reveal worry underneath. “He was just… screaming.”

I looked at Michael, who said, “We were talking. He wanted to ask me some questions about the Knights of the Cross. I think the answers were hard for him to hear.”

Charity shook her head, muttering something under her breath that made Michael smile fondly at her. Out loud, she asked, “So where did he go?”

“I don’t know,” Michael admitted.

“Awesome,” Dean ground out. He’d been pacing around the kitchen, opening the back door, obviously looking for his brother. “Lucifer’s in the wind again and took Sam with him. Now what?”

“I think he’ll come back,” Michael said. “He just needs some time to think.”

“Well then,” Crowley spoke up from where he’d been lurking in the dining room. “I believe the best thing we can do in the meantime is figure out how to get back. That way when His Lordship gets over his little hissy fit, we’ll be able to get back to our own reality before something else sends him pirouetting off the handle.”

“I hate to say it,” Castiel said, “but Crowley’s right.” Crowley smirked at him and Castiel glared back. “If Lucifer doesn’t want to be found, we won’t find him.”

“Story of the goddamn week,” Dean muttered, and stomped out of the kitchen. Castiel grimaced and followed, and Charlie trailed worriedly after them.

“Go ahead,” Michael said to me. “We’ll clean up in here.”

“Sorry,” I said. It was inadequate and I knew it, but I’d been the one to get the Carpenters involved in this, to bring Lucifer to their house. I should have been more careful, should have stayed at St. Mary’s church where Lucifer having a temper tantrum wouldn’t hurt an innocent family.

But Michael shook his head. “Don’t be, Harry,” he said firmly. “Dishes and windows can be
replaced. But I think Lucifer needed that conversation, even if it upset him.”

“That’s reassuring,” I said, my voice dry. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, really,” he said. “You should go help your friends. They’ve got a lot of work in front of them.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that, so I didn’t try. I nodded to Michael and headed out after Dean.

---

Sam

Sam sat on the edge of a frozen cliff of ice, feet dangling hundreds of yards above a sea that tossed yacht-sized ice floes as if they were plastic bath toys. He should have been freezing, his skin blue and cracked, but the arctic temperature felt like nothing more than a cool morning.

Lucifer stood nearby, his former vessel’s face lined and tired as he stared out over the water. His arms were wrapped around his body as if to ward off a chill deeper than anything even this barren ice land could produce. He hadn’t spoken since he’d fled the Carpenters’ house, hadn’t moved since he’d deposited Sam’s body at the edge of the cliff and relinquished control to go stand off to the side.

Sam hadn’t tried to speak either. He’d said all he could back in Michael Carpenter’s kitchen, and now it was up to Lucifer whether he listened. So he waited in silence and allowed himself the time to enjoy a view few other humans would ever see.

When Lucifer finally spoke, he did so without turning away from the water, though his voice carried perfectly despite the roar of the sea. “Why don’t you love me, Sam?”

“You tortured me,” Sam answered. He kept his own gaze on the waves crashing into the ice below him. “You sent your demons to possess and torture and kill people I cared about. You tried to use me to wipe out humanity.”

“I could make you forget all that,” Lucifer said.

“You could,” Sam said, keeping his voice neutral. “It wouldn’t change the fact that you did it.”

A spray of water lashed at the frozen cliff, the ice beneath Sam creaking ominously. Lucifer snarled, “Then how am I supposed to fix anything, if nothing I do matters?”

“I didn’t say nothing matters,” Sam said. “Just that trying to hide what you did won’t work.”

“What else is there?” Lucifer demanded, but under the anger in his voice Sam heard a desperate pleading. “Even an archangel can’t change the past.”

Sam closed his eyes, remembering Ruby, demon blood, Lilith. Remembering When this is over, I want you to lose my number. And, we all know whose fault the Apocalypse is. And, you think you can flip the switch on the Apocalypse and just walk away?

He felt Lucifer’s gaze on him a moment before the archangel said, his voice oddly soft, “They hated you for that. Didn’t they.”

Sam nodded. “Still do. And they’re right. I fucked up. Big time.”

“But you thought you were doing the right thing,” Lucifer whispered. “It’s not fair!”
Caught off-guard, Sam opened his eyes to stare at Lucifer. “You did, too, didn’t you,” he breathed. The revelation was painfully obvious in hindsight, and yet. “You thought you were doing the right thing, and God punished you for it.”

Lucifer laughed, a bitter sound that cracked shards of ice from the edge of the cliff to plummet down into the water. “It’s what the Mark does. What the corruption does. It makes you believe you’re right, gives you the freedom to act on it. You’re finally free to follow your own rules.”

That certainly lined up with how Dean had behaved ever since he’d taken it. Carefully, Sam asked, “Do you still think you were doing the right thing?”

“Does it matter?” Lucifer turned and met Sam’s eyes. “Right or wrong, I’m still the devil. They’re never not going to hate me.”

“I know,” Sam said quietly. Remembering his confession in the church before starting the last Trial. Remembering if anybody needs a chaperone while doing the heavy lifting, it’s Sam. Remembering you’re a monster, Sam. If I didn’t know you, I would want to hunt you.

Remembering Jess burning. Remembering Mom, dying pinned to the ceiling over Sam’s crib.

His voice was rough when he continued, “But you still try. Because as long as you’re trying, there’s still hope.”

“Hope,” Lucifer repeated tiredly. He sank down to sit on the edge of the cliff beside Sam and gave a derisive snort. “Sure.”

Sam shrugged, looking back out over the water, suddenly tired beyond imagining. “If you don’t have hope, what do you have?”

Lucifer didn’t answer. Sam pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. “Dean’s never going to forgive me,” he said. The words tasted bitter in his mouth. He’d known it, for a long time, but somehow admitting it out loud made it feel more final. “I’ve never been anything but an albatross to him, the kid brother who needs babysitting, the monster who needs to be contained, the fuckup who can’t do anything right. He won’t ever change his mind on that. No matter what I do to try to redeem myself.” Icy wind whipped across his cheeks; he felt tears freeze on his eyelashes.

“So why bother?” Lucifer asked softly.

A letter written in Bobby’s cramped handwriting: You’re a good man, Sam Winchester. One of the best. Harry Dresden saying gently, I don’t blame you. Michael Carpenter saying Come in and be welcome.

“Because others will,” Sam whispered.

Lucifer turned to look at him, too-pale eyes wide. Sam met his gaze, held it until Lucifer looked away again. They sat in silence as the wind howled around them and the waves crashed against the frozen cliff below.
Such Sweet Sorrow

Chapter Summary

In which everyone goes home.

Dean

Sitting in the Carpenters’ living room watching Dresden, Crowley, and Castiel talk magic portals between realities was pretty far down on Dean’s list of ways to have fun. He didn’t know anything about magical resonances, the Nevernever, or protection spells, and he didn’t want to know. What he wanted was to find Sam, kick Lucifer back to Hell, and get on with his life - but even if he knew that he couldn’t do any of that until they got back to their own reality, the waiting and watching still rankled. Worse, the Mark of Cain burned under Dean’s skin, throbbing and whispering and trying to convince him to follow Lucifer’s lead and go on a rampage through the house.

At least that stupid dog-beast wasn’t here. If it had turned up and started jumping and growling and doing whatever dogs did, Dean didn’t think he could’ve stopped himself from killing it.

He sighed, dug his thumb into the Mark again, and tried to pretend he was interested in the argument Dresden and Crowley had been having for the last half an hour. “—telling you, powdered dragon’s blood is your best bet,” Crowley was saying. “It’s substantial enough to act as the framework without having enough residue of its own to disrupt the flow of power. We use that, the rest of this spell is a piece of cake.”

“I’m sure it would be,” Dresden answered irritably, “and maybe it’s easy to get in your reality, but around here, dragons are hard enough to find to begin with, and good luck getting blood off one.”

“Is everyone in this reality such a bloody duffer that you can’t slay a dragon or three?” Crowley snapped. “Even Moose and Squirrel managed it, and they’re worse off in the brains department than Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.”

“Hey!” Dean protested, but they ignored him.

“Look, just assume dragon’s blood is off the table,” Dresden said. “We’re not going to get any—”

“Are you sure about that?”

It was Sam’s voice but not Sam’s tone, not his inflection, and Dean spun around to see Lucifer leaning against the wall by the stairs. He wore the smug smile Dean hated so much and held a small leather pouch in one hand, and a stoppered vial in the other. He tossed them lightly to Dresden, who caught them on reflex, then said, “Powdered dragon’s blood. More than enough for this spell of yours. And Dead Sea brine, since none of you remembered it.”

“Uh,” Dresden said, and stared at the bag and vial as if they might bite him. “Great. Thanks?”

“Where the hell have you been?” Dean demanded.

“Maybe I got bored watching you chucklefucks sit around chewing with your mouths open,” Lucifer
sneered. “Someone’s gotta get us back to our own reality.”

It wasn’t until Castiel’s hand on his arm stopped him that Dean realized he’d started to rise from his seat. He shook his arm free but sat back down. “Yeah,” he growled. “‘Cause being helpful is so very much your thing.”

Lucifer showed teeth in an expression that had nothing to do with a smile. “You have no idea.”

“Oh-kay,” Dresden interrupted. He stood up, putting himself physically between Dean and Lucifer, and met Dean’s eyes for a second. “That’s enough. Gift horses, et cetera.”

Lucifer snickered, then abruptly spun around and pointed at Karrin Murphy where she sat on the couch with her injured leg propped up on an ottoman. “Speaking of gifts,” he said, “I fixed your house.”

Murphy blinked. “I—Sorry?”

“I fixed your house,” Lucifer repeated, smug. He glanced back at Dresden and added, “And before you get all fussy about it, I restored it to exactly the condition it was in when I first saw it.”

“Well, ah, thank you,” Murphy said, her brow furrowing. “May I ask why?”

“Because,” Lucifer said, drawing out the word like a drumroll, “that stuck-up prick Uriel’s been breathing down my neck ever since I got to this stupid reality, just waiting for me to make enough of a move that he can act. So I gave him what he wanted.” He grinned, and Dean could practically see canary feathers in that catlike smirk. Not that Dean had any idea why - Lucifer wasn’t exactly the type to give people what they wanted, so there had to be a catch, but he couldn’t see it—

Then Dresden clapped a hand over his eyes. “Oh, I get it,” he said. “Uriel’s job is to balance. Meaning you do something nice—”

“—he squirms like a stuck bug trying to figure out a way to balance it without giving the Dark Side a leg up,” Lucifer said gleefully. “Better than HBO!”

“Okay, Satan making pop-culture references is really starting to weird me out,” Dresden said, but shook his head and sat back down. “So—”

“Um, Harry?”

It was Michael Carpenter’s voice, and Dean turned in time to see him emerge from the kitchen alongside Charity, both of them looking puzzled and wary. Michael continued, “Did you—”

Then they spotted Lucifer and froze, nearly identical wary poses. Lucifer swung around, still grinning that canary-eating smirk, and said, “Oh, I fixed your kitchen, too.” His voice and expression softened suddenly, until he looked almost sane (almost like Sam doing the puppy-eyes thing, and that was a creepy enough thought that Dean shivered). He said neutrally, “I’m all about making impressions, but wrecking the home of such a gracious host isn’t the kind of impression I prefer.”

Dean stared at him, dimly aware of Castiel, Crowley, and even Dresden likewise staring. That had sounded almost like an apology. Dean hadn’t thought Lucifer even knew what the word meant, much less was capable of making one.

Michael, however, didn’t seem fazed. “It’s all right,” he said. “Thank you for fixing the damage.”

Lucifer gave a small nod, almost to himself, then his eyes closed and he swayed on his feet. When
his eyes opened again, it was Sam behind them, looking exhausted and worn, but also calmer than he had in months. He met Dean’s eyes and gave him the faintest of smiles before sinking down to sit cross-legged on the floor and lean his shoulder tiredly against Dean’s leg.

Dresden watched him, dark eyes intent, but visibly decided not to comment. Instead, he clapped his hands together and looked at Crowley. “So we’ve got powdered dragon’s blood. Anything else?”

“I’ve still got saint’s bone on me,” Crowley said, holding up fingers as he tallied. “You said you’ve got hickory ash and candles on your island, and any one of us can bleed for it.”

“Sounds good,” Dresden agreed. “Let’s get you guys home.”

Harry

Two hours later, the Winchesters, their friends, and I climbed out of the Water Beetle onto Whatsup Dock. I went first onto the island, to let Demonreach know to tone the ominous go-away vibes down a little, but the moment I set foot on the island I knew it had been Crowley who’d stolen Amoracchius for Patterson. Demonreach was furious about it, and it took a few seconds of mental wrestling to convince Alfred not to chuck Crowley into the prison below the island. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t happy about it, but the Sword was safe now, and I didn’t like the idea of locking a powerful demon from an alternate reality in with my already terrifying crop of inmates. Better to send him back to his own reality and let the Winchesters deal with him as they saw fit.

None of which meant I couldn’t let Alfred have a little fun, though. As we headed up the narrow footpath toward the lighthouse at the top of the hill, I saw Crowley stumble and trip as the roots under his feet shifted, then slap wildly at a swarm of mosquitoes buzzing around his head and neck. “You okay up there?” Dean asked from behind him.

“I hate nature,” Crowley hissed back, just as a branch that had brushed aside lightly for Castiel whipped back with bruising force to smack him in the face. “Ow! Bloody hell!”

Sam, walking beside me, snickered under his breath. I winked at him and said, quietly enough that only he would hear, “Someone forgot the whole ‘subtle and quick to anger’ bit.”

He grinned, that genuine smile that made him look so much younger. More British-flavored cursing drifted down the hill from where Crowley had stepped into a hidden shin-deep puddle, and with Castiel, Charlie, and Dean occupied laughing and making half-hearted attempts to help him, I slowed my steps and turned to face Sam. “How’s Lucifer?”

Sam’s smile faded, but into thoughtfulness rather than pain or fear. “He’s…” He shrugged, his eyes darting up the hill to a spot slightly to one side of where Crowley was digging in the puddle for his shoe. “Michael gave him a lot to think about. He doesn’t… uh. He wasn’t expecting to have to think that much, y’know?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Millennia-old beings aren’t big on the whole ‘having to reexamine their worldview’ thing.”

“Not so much.” Sam blew out a breath, puffing his bangs up. “But I think he needed it.”

I nodded. Then, as casually as I could manage, I asked, “How about you? You doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” he answered immediately.
I Spocked a brow at him and said nothing.

“Really,” he insisted.

I kept saying nothing, and finally he looked away, chewing at his lower lip. “I mean… yeah, I’ve got Satan in my head and my brother’s still wearing the Mark of Cain, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Wish I could do more to help,” I said. “That kind of thing’s easier when someone’s got your back. I’ve been there.”

He shot me a startled look from beneath his bangs. “You believed me,” he said. “You believed in me, I mean. You didn’t—” He chewed his lip again, then said softly, “That… helped a lot, actually.”

I nodded, remembering how surprised he’d been when I hadn’t abandoned him, hadn’t hit him, had offered comforting words. Dangerously tangled up in each other the Winchesters might be, but that didn’t automatically translate to care or support. It had obviously been a very long time since Sam had been shown either, and I didn’t like the idea of sending him back to his own reality to be abandoned again. But he couldn’t stay here, either.

Dammit. I hate it when there’s no good answer.

Ahead of us on the path, Crowley had finally extricated himself from the mud puddle and was now squelching angrily up the steps to the lighthouse. The others followed, and Dean called back, “You guys coming?”

“Yeah,” Sam answered. He bumped his shoulder against mine, flashing me a shy smile when I looked down at him, and we headed off after the others.

When we reached the top of the hill, Dean and Castiel sprawled in the grass while Crowley and I began setting up the spell and Sam and Charlie watched us curiously. Most of my attention was on gathering my willpower and focusing my thoughts as I worked, but I heard Sam explaining some of the basics of the spell to Charlie.

Crowley and I had decided to combine what he understood of my mother’s original stored spell, what Dean had remembered about the alternate reality spell he and Sam had used once, and what I knew of opening pathways through the Nevernever. In theory, it wouldn’t actually be that complicated to open a path between my reality and Sam’s, as long as I knew where I wanted it to go. It needed a lot of power, sure, but the actual concept was the same as any other Nevernever portal. It was why we’d come back to Demonreach, so that I could take advantage of the magical link between it - the island above a prison for this reality’s most dangerous creatures - and St. Mary’s Convent in Sam’s reality, which held the door into Lucifer’s Cage.

The bigger problem was protecting everyone on the trip between realities. Crowley’d told me how dangerous it had been when he and the others had come through, and Sam had been weakened as well, even with Lucifer to protect him. We’d decided to use a large pentacle, carved in the dirt, as the central focus. Candles retrieved from my stash in the cabin sat at each of the five points of the pentacle, representing focus and will. To help connect with the ruby-studded pentacle carved in the convent, I removed my mother’s pentacle necklace with the ruby in the middle, and set it at the exact center of the bigger pentacle. Then I gathered hickory branches and lit the ends on fire, and walked the pentacle in a deliberate pattern, tracing the lines with the ashy end of the hickory branches as I went. Hickory was for protection, a ward against the destructive energies that made the crossing so dangerous.

Crowley, meanwhile, mixed the Dead Sea brine Lucifer had provided with the bones of a lesser saint
he’d had from when he’d cast the spell to come here in the first place, to represent Dean’s alternate-reality spell. Then he combined the whole thing with dragon’s blood, which would help channel enough power to tear a hole in my reality big enough and deep enough to reach all the way to the Winchesters’ reality.

It took an hour or so to prepare, but finally we had everything in place. I pushed to my feet with a groan and turned to the others. “We’re good to go.”

“Finally,” Dean said. “I’ve had enough of this reality and its stupid plastic cars and oversized mutts and weird witches.” He flashed me a bright grin. “No offense.”

“None taken,” I answered. “I’ve had enough of weird demons butting into my business.”

He snorted and went to stand in the pentacle with Castiel, Crowley, and Charlie. Sam was about to follow them when I stopped him with a hand on his arm. “It’s been fun,” I said.

“Demon attacks, murderous witches, Satan, and all?” Sam asked, smiling faintly.

“And all,” I agreed. I held out my hand; after a moment of hesitation he clasped it. “Take care of yourself, okay? I’d say keep in touch, but I don’t think ‘neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night’ covers mail delivery to alternate realities.”

“Yeah,” he said. Then he glanced to the side, going silent for a moment as he listened. “Lucifer says you’re one of the most amusing humans he’s met, and that if you don’t deal with the Denarians yourself, he might come back someday and whip them into shape.”

I turned to where he’d been looking. “If you do, I’ll make the popcorn,” I said, and gave Lucifer a jaunty mock salute. Distant laughter rustled underneath a sudden chill wind off the lake.

Turning back to Sam, I clapped him on the shoulder. “I mean it, man. Take care.”

“You too,” he answered, and met my eyes just long enough to smile. Then he joined the others in the circle.

“Do the honors, Moose?” Crowley asked, and handed Sam a slender dagger. Sam held his arm over the bowl in the middle of the pentacle and sliced a shallow cut. Blood welled and dripped into the bowl, and when it did, there was a flash of light and a surge of power. The protective spell had been activated.

I took a deep breath, centered my thoughts and focused my will, and began chanting: “*Inter aditum, quam viam, coniungere simili simile, et aperiunt viam!*”

As the final syllable left my lips, I gathered my power and pushed. Reality split open with a thunderous roar, wind and magic surrounding the Winchesters and their friends in a whirlwind of energy. Power swirled, battering my wizard’s senses, then the rip in reality sewed itself shut once more. When the noise and the wind faded, I was alone on the island.

*             *             *

I stopped at Mac’s pub on the way back from the docks to Murphy’s place. Channeling enough power to open a hole in reality had left me ravenous, and living out on the island hadn’t given me many chances to get a steak sandwich. As I was sitting at the bar chowing down, someone slid onto the stool next to me.

“Well done,” Donar Vadderung said to me.
I eyed him for a minute and took another bite of my sandwich.

“No, I can’t tell you whether or not he’s all right,” Vadderung said, sounding amused. “Even my Sight doesn’t extend that far.”

I put the sandwich down. “I figured. It just sucks, y’know? I send Sam home and, what, that’s it? I never get to know if he’ll be okay? If he deals with Lucifer, un-demon-curses his brother?”

Vadderung nodded. “It is disappointing, I know. But I can tell you this: sometimes ‘helping’ doesn’t mean punching the bad guys until they go away. Sometimes it’s as simple as offering a shoulder for someone to lean on, until they can stand on their own again.”

I grunted. “Doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It might not, but then again, it might make all the difference.” Vadderung clapped me on the shoulder and stood. “I mean it, Harry. You did well.” With that, he left.

I picked up my sandwich again, my shoulders feeling lighter than they had a minute ago. I would probably never know what happened to Sam, but Vadderung was right. I’d had people offer me a hand when I was down, and it had been enough for me to pull myself up, dust myself off, and keep going. Sam was a tough guy. I’d given him a hand, and now it was up to him to keep going. He could do it. I knew he could.

I finished my sandwich, then paid Mac for a few extra bottles of brew and headed to Murphy’s for the weekend of beer and bad TV I’d promised her.
Sam

When the roaring in his ears died down, Sam opened his eyes to see the dusty, battered walls of St. Mary’s Convent. Sunlight streamed through the broken stained-glass windows, painting kaleidoscopes of color on the floor. Dust puffed under his feet and swirled lazily over the indentation on the floor that marked the door of Lucifer’s Cage.

Beside him, Dean took a cautious step forward, then whooped with joy. “We made it!”


“What’s the matter?” Castiel asked, his voice practically dripping sarcasm. “Didn’t you enjoy yourself?”

“No!” Crowley snapped. “A sentient island tried to kill me, I got turned into a bloody frog, and I didn’t even get a soul out of the deal.”

“Poor baby,” Charlie said dryly, then looked up at Sam and Dean. “So, what now?”

“Good question,” Lucifer said, and Sam turned to see him leaning against the broken altar. Talking over Dean, who was telling Charlie they would head back to the Bunker, he said to Sam, “You and I have some unfinished business with Dean.”

Before Sam could react, Lucifer slid into control of his body with a rush of icy air that apparently even the others could feel, because they all stopped talking and turned to stare warily at him. “Dean,” Lucifer said cheerfully. “This whole mess started because Sam and I made a deal. I think it’s about time we cashed in.”

“No,” Dean said immediately. “No, I ain’t letting you—”

“Too late,” Lucifer interrupted. “Deal’s been made.”

*But who are you going to give the Mark to?* Sam thought. *I haven’t picked anyone yet.* He didn’t want to, either - had hoped to wrangle a little more time, enough to figure out a better solution, something that didn’t throw some other innocent person under the bus just to save Dean—

“I know,” Lucifer answered. “And you won’t have to.”

*What?* Sam asked, baffled.
“You said it,” Lucifer told him. “Walk off the chessboard. You were right. So was that Knight of the Cross. I’m sick of playing Dad’s stupid games. And I’m not the only one He’s fucked over.”

Lucifer stepped forward, swift as a striking snake, and grabbed Dean’s arm. The Mark of Cain burned orange on his skin and Dean winced, teeth clenched with pain. Sam cried out wordlessly, soundlessly, but Lucifer just laughed. “Time to break the lock,” he said. “Time to break everything God worked so fucking hard to build and then abandoned on a whim. Let’s see what this does to His precious stories!”

Power surged through Lucifer, through Sam, and drilled down into the Mark on Dean’s arm. Dean cried out in pain, struggling to pull away from Lucifer, but the archangel’s grip was unbreakable. Dean jerked, then went rigid - and as he did, a bolt of white lightning shot out from the Mark and lanced upward, punching a hole in the high arch of the chapel’s ceiling. When the lightning faded, the Mark had vanished. Lucifer let go and Dean collapsed to the floor, gripping his arm, his face white with pain.

For several long seconds, nothing happened. Through Lucifer’s eyes Sam saw Castiel, Charlie, and Crowley staring at him and Dean in shock. Castiel held his angel blade in one hand, though loosely, as if he’d drawn it and then forgotten about it. Charlie said nervously, “Um. Is that all? I mean, is there—”

Lightning cracked and thunder boomed overhead, the sunlight vanishing from the windows as clouds rolled in to cover the sky. The ground beneath them rumbled and shook, sending the others staggering, though Lucifer didn’t so much as wobble. He looked up at the chapel’s ceiling, anticipation thrumming through him, strong enough to make Sam shiver. The lightning flashes outside took on a bloody, reddish tint, and suddenly a thick stream of black smoke shot into the chapel through one of the broken windows. Glass cracked and shattered as more smoke streams smashed their way into the chapel, gathering in a thick angry cloud just under the arch.

Lucifer raised his arms up to the swirling smoke. “Hi there,” he purred. “Long time, no see.”

The smoke above them howled, then the roiling mass crashed down around them like a tsunami wave. Distantly Sam heard Charlie scream, heard Dean yell something, but all he could see even with Lucifer’s angelic senses was darkness, all he could feel was the emptiness of the void. Thunder crashed one final time, then the smoke vanished as quickly as it had come. Bright bars of sunlight reached once more through the windows, revealing Dean still kneeling on the floor, holding his arm, and Charlie and Castiel and Crowley cowering behind the broken altar.

Sam was once more in control of his body, with no memory of how he’d gotten there. Lucifer stood beside him, smirking. “What did you do?” Sam demanded.

“You wanted it gone, Sammy,” he purred. “It’s gone.”

“What’s he saying?” Dean asked.

“He got rid of the Mark of Cain,” Sam said. Ice sat in his belly and it was suddenly hard to swallow. “Except the Mark was holding back something really bad.”

“You mean that big ugly cloud?” Crowley asked, and Sam nodded. “What was it?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, but at the same time, Lucifer said smugly, “The Darkness. The opposite of all creation - the antithesis of everything God built. He created my brothers and me just to help Him lock it up so it wouldn’t destroy everything He made the moment He made it.”
Sam stared at him. “Uh.”

“Bad, huh?” Dean said. He pushed himself to his feet with a groan. “Is that all?”

“It’s enough,” Sam said. He shivered, remembering the fear, the cold sanity in Lucifer’s voice when he’d spoken of the contamination back in Dresden’s reality.

“We’ve deal with bad before,” Dean said. “I think we can handle this.”

Lucifer laughed. Sam ignored him and said, carefully, to Dean, “We?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. He slung an arm around Sam’s shoulders. “You and me, little brother.”

“And us,” Charlie piped up from across the room. “I know you guys have the whole ‘loners together’ thing going on, but we’re here too.”

“Yeah,” Sam said absently. He met Dean’s eyes, searching for any remaining signs of the Mark, any of the awful coldness and cruelty that had been so close to swallowing Dean completely. But all he saw was warmth. Dean might never forgive him for everything he’d done, might never be willing to believe Sam wanted to fix it, was doing everything he could. But maybe, at least, they could be brothers again.

“Well, c’mon, then,” Dean said, and grinned at him, the smile Sam hadn’t seen in nearly two years, the smile he’d thought the Mark had taken for good. “Let’s get going, Sammy. We’ve got work to do.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays! It's hard to believe I've now finished my third novel-length fic in four years. Thank you all so much for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

I also want to say thank you again to my three betas/Crowley-izers/ideas-bouncers, a_diamond, hit_the_books, and Fic_me_senseless. You guys rock!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!