Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

by monicawoe, quickreaver

Summary

sequel to "The Devil’s in the Details"

When Sam opened Lucifer’s Cage, the only thing he found inside was Lucifer’s grace – his grace. With the return of his grace, Sam remembered his past – his war against the Host, his Fall, and his plans to bring about the End.
The thing is...he doesn’t want the Apocalypse anymore. He likes things the way they are, and tries everything to keep his identity a secret- especially from Dean. Of course, the four Horsemen, Hell and Heaven have other ideas.

includes art by quickreaver!
Chapter 1
art by quickreaver

BETWEEN
the
Devil
and
the
DEEP
BLUE
SEA

written by monicaw
“Was it everything you dreamed it would be?” Sam asked, watching the sugar cube dissolve in his coffee. They were sitting outside on the balcony of their ridiculously oversized hotel room having breakfast. Brunch. A very late brunch.

“Better,” Dean said grinning. He was still wearing his sunglasses, and his suit from the night before, the shirt collar of which was smudged in five different places (in two different shades of lipstick). “I’m telling you man, Jersey girls…”

Sam smirked. “Spare me the details, please.” Dean was happy, happier than he’d been in years. Sam was determined to keep him that way. It had been a week since Sam had killed Lilith, releasing Lucifer’s grace — which turned out to be his own grace, along with all of his memories of being an archangel. With a few, minor exceptions he’d been able to keep them off of Hell and Heaven’s radars.

“I told them I was James Bond.”

“Did you?”

“Heh. Yeah. I was pretty convincing, too. Plus I made up names for them all night, like — ”

“So you want to stay another night, or should we take our sixty-six thousand dollars and go?”

“Our sixty-six thousand dollars? Uh uh.” Dean waggled his finger and finished off his orange juice. “Maybe fourteen dollars of that is yours. From that blackjack machine. Also, it’s more like…fifty-nine thousand now.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “You spent seven thousand dollars in one night?”

Dean’s grin faded just a touch. “Turns out renting a Bentley ain’t cheap. Plus, we went to this seafood restaurant. Well actually, we had them deliver to the beach-house. And then once we got to the hot-tub —”

“Yeah, I think we’re done here,” Sam stood up, repressing a laugh.

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Dean fell asleep as soon as they got onto the highway. Luckily Sam was driving. They stopped once in Indiana to get dinner and even though Sam intended to pull over at the next motel they passed he ended up driving straight on until morning. Dean just looked so peaceful sleeping...even if there was a thin stream of drool running down his chin.

When Dean woke up, they were in Springfield, Missouri. He rubbed his eyes for a few seconds, turned to look out the window and then tapped Sam on the shoulder. “Take the next exit.”


“No, well yeah, actually but just — did you not see the sign?”
“What sign?”

“Fantastic Caverns, man!”

Sam stared at Dean as he turned onto the off-ramp. “You hate caves. You hate being underground.”

“No, I hate sewers. Sam, it’s the only drive-thru underground cave system in the country! We’re going!”

“Okay then,” Sam said following the signs to Fantastic Caverns.

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“Well this certainly is…something.”

“Shut up,” Dean mumbled and folded his arms across his chest.

“I mean technically, we are being driven through the caverns…” Sam looked up at the cave ceiling, admiring the stalactites. He could see how they’d formed, how they’d looked centuries ago and how they’d look a thousand years from now. Unfortunately he could also see every single fingerprint, every single smudge of grease, and every dead flake of skin left by all the tourists that had come before them. Being nearly all-seeing was odd.

“We’re in a tram shaped like a bunch of jeeps. Trams don’t count. This isn’t driving, it’s humiliating.”

“Why? Everyone in here is on the tram with us. We're all being humiliated together.”

Dean scoffed and glared to his left, looking out over the dark underground lake they were passing. "That guy isn't."

Sam followed Dean's gaze and saw a hooded figure standing next to a small boat at the edge of the river. "Wait, where are you going?"

Dean had jumped over the bar 'locking' them into the tram and was headed for the ferryman.

Something about the hooded figure put Sam's nerves on edge. "Dean, I don't think we should — "

"Hey buddy, how much for a ride?" Dean said when he neared the boat. "Your tour looks like way more fun than the souped up golf cart we were just on."

The ferryman pulled down his hood and turned his hawk-nosed gaze from Dean to Sam.

Sam's eyes widened as he realized who they were looking at.

Stay calm. I'm just here to talk, the ferryman said into Sam's mind.

Getting into a boat with the physical embodiment of Death wasn't something Sam particularly wanted to do, but he could tell he was outclassed. Ridiculously, incalculably outclassed. The being in front of them could wipe out every living thing on the planet with little more than a thought if it wanted to.
"This boat ride is part of your admission package," the ferryman said gravely. "Please get on board so we can begin."

Dean climbed into the boat behind Death and turned back to Sam grinning. "Come on, Sammy, somebody has to push the boat in."

"He is correct," said Death, moving to stand at the front end of the boat.

"You might want to sit..." Sam started to say, but then realized that in all likelihood Death didn't have to worry about petty little things like gravity. Sam looked down at the murky water as he pushed the boat gently off the rock shore, and it dawned on him that he was going to have to wade through the water to get the boat out of the shallows. "Damn it," he muttered.

"Is there a problem?" Death asked without turning around.

"No," Sam said glaring at the water, which obediently pulled back and away from his feet keeping his legs nice and dry. "No problem at all."

Sam sat down in the back of the boat, (which didn't rock in the slightest) and watched Death pull a long, elegantly curved paddle through the water. They drifted towards the entrance of a tunnel, and just before going in, Death reached out one long, bony finger and pushed a green button embedded in the rock wall.

An aged and crackly speaker system came to life and started to tell them in excruciatingly great detail about the history of the caves and the chemical processes behind stalactite and stalagmite formations. By the time they'd reached the "Hall of Wonder," Dean had started snoring softly.

*You do understand that you can't just sit this one out,* Death spoke into Sam’s mind.

*Why not? I don’t want to fight. I like Earth the way it is.*

*Yes, well that’s all fine and good, but that doesn’t change the fact that you said and did some things in the past that your brethren find unforgivable. They will come after you and yours, and you will defend yourself.*

*Are you on their side?*

The Horseman chuckled. *I don’t take sides. You arrogant sparrows can do whatever you like as far as I’m concerned. It won’t matter in the end.*

*If it doesn’t matter, then why talk to me now?*

*Because you were planning this — your grand return — for eons. You set things in motion centuries ago, and you are the only one who’s had a change of heart. Death steered the boat towards a pier ahead of them. Thanks to you, my brothers are here. They walk the Earth, and they will do what it is in their nature to do.*

*Your brothers... War. Famine. Pestilence. If they were anywhere near as strong as Death, they could pose a serious problem. How do I stop them?*

*You don’t. They will not stop, not even if you ask them nicely.*
Dean let out a loud yawn and his eyes started to flutter open. Sam stood up as Death turned towards him with cold, unblinking eyes. *Please, there has to be something I can do.*

_Famine has wanted to meet you for a long time. You might be able to distract him for a little while. His appetite is all-consuming, and it is also…rather indiscriminate._ Death reached out for a pole along the pier with his paddle which had grown thinner, metallic, and more curved. It looked a whole lot like a scythe. *Pestilence loves his work. Give him something new to play with, something challenging._ The boat drifted next to the pier and came to a stop. *War wants nothing more than to watch as this whole planet soaks itself in blood. He was a big fan of your early work, and he believes that sooner or later you’ll come to your senses, remember how much you hate humanity, and help him._

“No, I won’t—“ Sam said.

Dean sat straight up and turned back to look at Sam. “Won’t what?”

Death stepped off of the boat and stood on the pier looking down at them. “Please exit carefully.”

“That was awesome, dude,” Dean said as he pushed himself up onto the pier, stood and stretched his arms. “Very educational.”

“Thanks for the tour,” Sam said as he followed Dean up the rock stairs and into the gift shop. He turned back to the Horseman, but the pier was empty and the boat was gone.
They spent the night at a nearby motel and left again early the next morning, heading for Arizona.

“In two hours we’ll be at the Grand Canyon, Sammy. We’re not just gonna look over the edge either. I want to head down, see all the different stratospheres and stuff.”
“Striations, not stratospheres.”

“Whatever. The stripes in the canyon. And the Colorado River. Bet you I can skip a stone all the way across.”

Sam nodded absently, and closed his eyes.

“Oh am I boring you? That’s okay. You just get your beauty sleep, princess.”

It wasn’t that Sam was tired, he was never tired anymore. He just needed to concentrate. Ever since their unexpected meeting with Death, he’d started looking for the other three Horsemen — using all of his considerable new skills — but he hadn’t found a trace. They were hidden from him, which meant he had to rely on his far less helpful human senses to find them. Luckily the Winchesters’ powers of deduction had always been borderline superhuman.

He started reviewing all the potentially relevant data he’d gathered from the news media. While Dean had slept the night before he’d searched the entire Internet and every local paper that didn’t have a corresponding website. It had taken him nearly four minutes. The problem wasn’t a lack of potential leads for where the Horsemen might be. Quite the opposite. War, famine and disease were nearly everywhere. He wasn’t going to be able to find the Horsemen without finding a common thread. Something all three shared.

When Dean clapped him on the knee after two hours, Sam opened his eyes again frustrated that he still hadn’t narrowed in on the Horsemen. He’d even started reviewing omens, everything the Book of Revelation associated with them, but aside from several meteors that could have been significant but probably weren’t, he’d come up empty-handed. There were no conveniently color-coded horses near any of the meteors either. Maybe the Horsemen didn’t even ride horses anymore.

“’Bout time,” Dean said as he walked up to the edge of the canyon and looked down. “Tell me this wasn’t worth it?”

Sam looked over the edge, seeing the centuries of rock shifting over each other, each one full of relics from their era. Thousands upon thousands of species were preserved in the rock, some of them smaller than an ant and some larger than the Impala. Endless eons all preserved in an utterly stunning display. “It was worth it.” Sam looked over to the tourist center and the dozens of people mulling around it. “So you want to sign up for a mule tour tomorrow?”

“Not here. We’re gonna head down the North Rim.”

“Can’t take a mule down the North Rim.”

“I don’t want to take a mule! Plus they don’t make mules big enough to carry sasquatches.”

“Ok, guess we’re hiking,” Sam said, holding up his hands in surrender. “But if we’re going down there…” Sam pointed towards the massive canyon, “...we’re staying overnight — and if we’re staying overnight…we need a tent. Or at least sleeping bags.”

“And food.”

“And more water.”

“And beer.”
“Beer? You know it’s not an easy hike, probably better to not drink when you’re —”

Dean turned to Sam and with his best big-brother voice said, “We are going to hike down the Canyon, sit next to the Colorado River and enjoy a nice beer.”

“Then we’d better start shopping.”

Thanks to their current overabundance of cash, they ended up with two brand new backpacks filled to the brim with camping gear: sleeping bags, water canteens, a camp stove and a two room tent. Dean had insisted they didn’t need a tent until Sam reminded him that the Grand Canyon housed several breeds of scorpions and that they liked to sleep near the warmest parts of a human body (and that they stung in their sleep). Not all of it was true, but Dean grudgingly obliged to sleep in a tent if Sam carried it.

They started down the North Rim trail shortly before noon. The air was clean and warm, the sky was a stunning shade of blue and the views were breathtaking. Literally. Sam forgot to breathe for about ten minutes, so caught up in the view and the flicker-flash of images in his mind — the canyon a thousand years ago, five thousand years ago, ten thousand years ago, the shifting of the tectonic plates, and the formation of the great river below them. He accidentally stepped off the path with one foot, but the air caught him before he fell. He stepped back onto the insanely narrow path (seriously — it was narrower than one of his hands), and let out a nervous laugh.

“You okay there, Samantha? Don’t look down if it makes you nervous.”

“Says the guy who’s terrified of airplanes.”

“Airplanes crash!” Dean said, resolutely. He kicked a pebble in front of his foot off the edge and watched it disappear from view as it fell further and further down. “Yeah,” he said swallowing, “…that’s pretty far down.” Dean’s steps were noticeably more careful as he continued down the path.

They took a short break by a waterfall to drink some water and have a snack. Sam took a bite out of an apple that he didn’t remember packing and looked over Dean’s shoulder at the map.

“So where are we again?” Dean asked, chewing on his beef jerky. “North Kebob trail?”

“It’s pronounced Kai-bab.” Sam pointed at a spot on the map. “Here, this is Roaring Springs. We’re about to head into Bright Angel Canyon.” Hopefully there wouldn’t be any actual angels, bright or dim, waiting for them.

“Haven’t really met any bright angels,” Dean said grimly. “Well maybe Cas at first, but…” Dean coughed, took a long drink from his canteen and stood up. “Let’s keep going, we’ve got what…like ten more miles to go before we get to the river?”

“Something like that,” Sam said.

They walked in silence for the next two hours, stopping a few times to watch the wildlife. There were scorpions, and snakes and tiny little salamanders. There were eagles, and goshawks and condors circling above them, but there was something else too, watching them from a dimensional half-step away. Sam could hear their wings, and he could sense their thoughts on the edge of his consciousness. They were hiding, or trying to, but he was stronger than they were, and they knew it.
Dean stopped to stretch his back, and Sam heard wings beating again. He reached out with his mind and flexed his wings — just enough for anything in the immediate area to feel unnerved. If someone was planning an ambush, they’d already failed.

The Colorado River was a soft, white-noise backdrop for nearly half an hour before they saw it, right after turning a corner in the path. Dean grinned. “All right. It’s Miller time.”

“First we get the tents set up. Then—” Sam stepped in front of Dean when he heard the otherworldly wings beat again and demanded, (on all frequencies) “Show yourself.”

“Ladies! Are we ready?” said a loud voice. There was a unified shout, and then another — underneath the shouts there were other words, melodic and chant-like — in an ancient language Sam hadn’t heard spoken aloud in eons.

After a few more steps they saw a man with a handlebar mustache and half a dozen women — really, really tall women. One of them was Sam’s height. She turned and nodded towards Sam and Dean, then she turned back towards the river, her long braid swaying back and forth as she walked, like a pendulum. At the shore, the other women had started inflating two large, yellow rafts.

The mustached man grinned at Sam and said, “Hello fellow campers!” in an incredibly thick and incredibly fake pseudo-European accent. His appearance was as fake as his voice.

Sam narrowed his eyes at the man. Gabriel, what the hell are you doing here?

With a slight twitch of his mustache, the man answered, “You come with us, yes? White water rafting!” The six women behind him held their paddles (swords, spears, battle-axes) in the air and cheered (chanted) again. I’m helping you. Get on the rafts. Water’s my element. We’ll be a lot safer there.

The women flickered in the fading sunlight and Sam saw their horns, wings, and the flash of their mirror-eyes. Valkyries? You brought Valkyries with you?

Nobody brings them anywhere. They’re here because they want to be. Plus…you’re gonna be glad you have back-up in a few minutes, buddy. Trust me.

Dean walked up to the raft on the left and started talking to the three women preparing it. They were all taller than him. “So…where are you ladies from?”

“Valhalla,” said the Valkyrie with two braids (and antlers).

“Oh cool…that’s in Finland, right?” Dean asked and crouched down to look at the raft.

An ambush? Who? Michael? Sam asked Gabriel as he moved to the other raft.

Raphael. Nobody’s heard a peep from Michael. Raphael’s been leading the charge, saying how your ‘very presence defiles the Host,’ and so forth.

If any of them so much as breathe on Dean, it’ll be the last thing they ever do. Sam found himself telling the angel. The sky turned an odd shade of pink and then a deep dark red. The Valkyries on either side of Sam turned to look at him, and in their eyes he saw his own, glowing white with anger.

That’s what they’re counting on. Gabriel put his hand on Sam’s forearm. They want you to draw first
blood. That’s all they need to get their war on.

Sam ground his teeth together. I won’t let them hurt him.

I know you won’t. Just...don’t kill anybody. Okay? Maim them, send them to Time-Out, or the Middle Ages or whatever, but don’t kill anyone.

“Fine.” Sam’s face contorted into a cold, forced smile. “Let’s go.” He dropped his backpack down on the ground, next to Dean’s and walked over to his brother.

“Get your own raft,” Dean said and winked at Sam. “This one’s taken.”

Sam was about to protest, but in reality, he’d be better off in the other raft where he could — if he timed things properly — intervene when needed. Hopefully without Dean even noticing.

Gabriel, Sam and the three remaining Valkyries got into the second raft. They pushed off and drifted downstream at a deceptively relaxed pace for a few minutes. The canyon walls above them glowed bright orange and yellow in the late afternoon sun. It was such a beautiful sight that Sam nearly missed the shadow of large wings spread out just above where Dean’s raft was headed.

The Valkyrie at the front of the raft stood up and cried out in joy (bloodlust), raising her paddle (axe) high above her head. Dean pulled on her arm, trying to get her to sit back down, but she shrugged him off and stayed focused on the hidden angel above them, who waited until the craft had passed and flew after them.

Sam stood ready to tear the angel apart. “Hang on, cowboy,” Gabriel said as he reached into his safety vest and pulled out a slim, golden horn. He brought it to his lips and the sound of it — an eerie, yet strangely beautiful hum — rang through the canyon, echoing off the rock walls until it was coming from all around them. Everything slowed, the water itself froze like a still, three-dimensional photograph, drops of water suspended in midair. Only Gabriel, Sam and the Valkyrie were unaffected.

The angel above Dean’s raft was moving, but just barely. He was trying to turn towards Gabriel, but hadn’t managed to move more than an inch.

“Pretty neat trick, huh?” Gabriel said to Sam, grinning. He gestured at Dean’s raft. “After you.”

Sam took flight, his wings — six blades of light — unfolding into the sky. He grabbed hold of the trapped angel, spun him around, and glared. “Zachariah.”

The angel’s eyes narrowed ever so slowly, as Sam shoved him flat against the canyon wall, and leaned in close.

“Tell me why you’re here. Are you after Dean?”

Zachariah couldn’t answer out loud. The magic of Gabriel’s horn had frozen his vessel as effectively as everything else around them. His mind, however, answered angrily. Dean and I had a nice little chat right before you popped open the Cage. You know he still believed in you...right until the end. And look how that turned out — now his brother is the Devil.

Sam dug his way into Zachariah’s thoughts, seeing bits and pieces of his brother talking to the angel in a gilded room.
Dean knows the Apocalypse is inevitable, even if he’d rather wallow in denial. He knows it’s just a matter of time before Michael comes for you. You may have decided to call off the fight, but that doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen.

“Where’s Michael, then? Are you his messenger boy now?”

Michael will come when the time is right. For now, you’d better worry more about Raphael. His patience has worn out. He’s going to take Dean, and bring him to Michael, and there’s not a damn thing you can do to stop him.

Sam’s wings started to burn white with rage.

Zachariah looked at him defiantly.

Sam pulled his upper wings back and away from the wall and loosened his hold on Zachariah. He turned to look down at Dean’s raft where the Valkyries stood at the ready. No other angels had shown themselves. Not yet, at any rate. Refocusing on Zachariah he said, “Go back to Raphael and tell him Dean’s off-limits. He’s not a part of this, and if any of you lay a finger on him…” Sam’s threat hung in the air, unfinished, but the sky above them had grown a dozen shades darker and the air crackled with energy.

Zachariah tried to keep up his arrogant smirk, but a drop of sweat formed on his brow. He stayed pinned where he was when Sam let go, still stuck in the ethereal molasses of Gabriel’s weapon.

Sam flew up higher, searching for any other angels — for any sign of Raphael, but he couldn’t sense anyone. He willed himself down, next to Gabriel and felt the power of the horn start to fade right before Gabriel’s eyes grew wide in alarm. “He’s here.”

Sam felt Raphael a split second before he appeared, lightning spilling from his shoulders in the form of giant wings. The archangel grabbed a hold of Gabriel and pressed the tip of his sword against his throat.

Gabriel brought his hands up. “Whoa. Hey! How’ve you been, bro? Long time no see.”

“All this time, all this time you were gone…we were worried about you — trying to find you and bring you back home. Is this what you’ve been doing, Gabriel? Playing house with Lucifer?” He dug the tip of the sword in deeper.

Gabriel’s form shifted back into its usual shape, and Sam had to fight back the flare of anger that face brought with it. Gabriel might be his angelic brother, but he’d killed Dean hundreds of times…he’d made Sam exist in a living nightmare back in Broward County. “Let him go,” Sam said to Raphael, keeping his eyes focused on Gabriel and all his other senses focused on Dean. The raft was still close, but time had started moving again…inching forward slowly but surely.

“You think you get to tell me what to do?” Raphael let go of Gabriel and moved closer to Sam. His voice dropped to a low growl. “You, who betrayed us. You abomination. You will face the wrath of Heaven and you will beg us to throw you back in your cage.”

“Is that a fact?” Sam’s hands curled into fists. There was a loud snap in the air as Gabriel’s spell wore off and the water around them roared back to life.
“Sam! We’ve got company,” Gabriel yelled, right before the sky cracked open and two dozen angels dove down towards them.

Sam willed himself to Dean’s raft and stood with his back to his brother, forming a circle around him with the three Valkyries. “Sam?” Dean stared up at his brother. “What are you doing?”

The angels above them moved quickly, headed straight down, but three of them were thrown off course by something too fast to see. A shower of light rained down where Gabriel’s sword clashed against those of his attackers. Five others stopped halfway down, intercepted by Valkyries.

Raphael tried to force his way onto Dean’s raft, but between Sam and the three Valkyries they were strong enough to keep even an archangel away. Dean stood up, or he tried to, but the raft was moving swiftly, and mortal equilibrium just wasn’t enough. He fell back onto the raft and glared up at Sam. “Will somebody please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“We’re under attack.”

“Yeah I can see that. By what?”

“Angels,” Sam snarled as Raphael tried to push himself onto the raft again. This time, Sam reached through the ether and took a hold of him before he could withdraw completely and followed him into the space between realities.

The In-Between was the eye of the storm. The calm in the center of every possible universe. Around them were infinite nows and thens and soon-to-bes. Raphael, surprised by Sam’s tenacity, was attempting to back into another dimension — a near future where Lucifer had been defeated and Raphael himself led the Host. Sam pulled them away, forcing them back towards their own world, but caught a glimpse of so many others. Far too many of them were wrong in one way or another. A broken, scorched Earth, a disease-ravaged future with terrified survivors, a bleeding sky, a life grey and empty where nothing felt real…and a world without Dean. Sam’s rage fed his power and he forced Raphael back out of the In-Between.

They landed on the shore of the Colorado River, where Raphael immediately drew his sword and tried to stab Sam with it. Sam slipped out from under him and knocked the sword from his hand, sending it clattering onto the rocky ground. Energy gathered in his hands as Sam got ready to fight back, but two angels grabbed him from behind, holding his arms back while Raphael grinned.

“We will bring you to Michael, and you will face justice.” Raphael’s grin vanished when Gabriel appeared beside him, brandishing his sword.

Sam let the energy he’d gathered go — throwing off the two angels trying to restrain him. He saw the Valkyries on Dean’s raft fighting off four angels. Dean had his Colt drawn and aimed at the angel closest to him — Zachariah. He fired and the angel didn’t even flinch. Instead he lunged forward and wrapped his hand around Dean’s throat.

Faster than he could think, Sam moved to the raft, grabbed a hold of Zachariah’s arms and sent all of his rage into him. Distantly, Sam heard Gabriel yelling at him, begging him to stop, but he didn’t want to stop, he couldn’t stop. Zachariah lit up with white flame, fire and light poured out of his eyes and mouth, and his wings turned to ash as the Morningstar’s fury burned him whole.

Beside Sam, one of the Valkyries had impaled the angel across from her on her spear. The angel was still alive, but in agony, and he couldn’t break free no matter how much he struggled. She pulled him
in close, and her sister brought her axe crashing down on the angel’s neck, severing his head. The other two angels focused their attack on Dean, or tried to, but they too turned to ash as Valkyrie-blade and Lucifer’s raw power struck them down.

Raphael’s rage echoed through the canyon as he broke free from Gabriel’s hold, lit up the entire sky with lightning and vanished.

At a look from Sam, the water current of the Colorado shrugged off the laws of nature and switched course, sending the two rafts speeding back onto the riverbank. The Valkyries left the rafts, turned towards the canyon wall, and spoke as one, “Ófriður.” Then they vanished, leaving behind Dean, Sam and one very exhausted Gabriel.

“Sam,” Dean said quietly, as he climbed out of the raft. “You want to explain yourself?”

Sam nodded, and was about to answer when he heard somebody clapping. There was a man in a suit standing by the river’s edge. He had grey hair, small, rectangular glasses, and he was applauding slowly.

“Nicely done. I knew you still had it in you,” said the man, smirking at Sam. He walked to Sam and Dean, throwing a sideways glance down at Gabriel, who was clutching a wound in his side. There was something familiar about the newcomer, something that made Sam think of underground caverns and a ferryman.

“You’re War,” Sam said. “The Horseman.”

“Horseman?” Dean asked, “As in…”

“Yup, that’s me,” said War. He took off his glasses, folded them up and slipped them into his suit pocket. “I’ve gotta say Luci, my brothers were worried for a few days there. They thought maybe you’d really had a change of heart. I never doubted you though. I mean…you having second-thoughts about annihilating humanity?” He laughed, “No way. Not you.”

Dean looked like he was about to say something, but instead he slammed his mouth shut, turning away from the Horseman and Sam angrily. He walked over to Gabriel and crouched down to inspect the archangel’s wound.

“I’m not going to annihilate humanity,” Sam said, through clenched teeth. “I like humanity.”

“As much as you like angels?” War asked, grinning. “You killed three of them today. Angel on angel violence? Sounds like the Apocalypse to me…”

“They were after Dean. I was protecting him.”

War nodded, “Just like you were protecting him every time you drank demon blood, every time you killed an innocent host along with a demon?”

Sam’s jaw twitched, but he stayed silent.

“You were made for this. You are going to help us bathe this world in blood, and you’ll love every second of it.”

“No.”
War shook his head, “You want to keep lying to yourself? Fine. Have fun with that. The next time Raphael or one of the other pigeons decides to peck Dean’s eyes out, I’ll be there. And next time? I won’t just watch from the sidelines. Next time, I’ll take all that rage you’ve got bundled up inside of you and I’ll set it free. You won’t stop, you won’t be able to stop until everything around you is dead.” The Horseman put his glasses back on and pushed them up the bridge of his nose. “So you go have fun hiking and picking flowers and petting puppies. Whatever. I’ll see you again soon.” He clicked his tongue, winked at Sam and vanished.

Sam walked to where Dean was sitting next to Gabriel. Dean had taken off his flannel over-shirt and had it pressed against Gabriel’s side. The angel looked up at Sam and groaned, “A little help here?”

“Why haven’t you healed?” Sam asked Gabriel. He looked at Dean out of the corner of his eye, expecting anger, or a look of betrayal, or hurt…something along the lines of: ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were the Devil?’ but Dean was pointedly ignoring him.

“Because I can’t heal, genius,” Gabriel said. “Raphael stabbed me with his sword. An archangel’s blade, like the one you used to cull the Host during the First War. You remember that, Morningstar, or did you forget how they work?”

“I didn’t forget,” Sam said, laying his hands over the wound in Gabriel’s side. Gabriel closed his eyes and his blood started glowing bright blue-white with grace. His skin knit itself back together within seconds. Sam sat back on his heels and let out a heavy breath. “What now?”

“Oh, you mean, now that you’ve started the war?” Gabriel glared at him. “We wait! Maybe a few minutes or hours…however long it takes Raphael to come back with reinforcements.”

“Can we get more…reinforcements of our own? Would the Valkyries — “

Gabriel laughed angrily. “Sure! If they feel like coming back they will. Then again, they all saw War — they felt him before you did. I’m not sure they’re even our allies anymore.”

“Valkyries, huh?” Dean shook his head, stood up and started walking down-river where they’d left their tent and gear.

In all the years they’d spent hunting all kinds of things, often in the woods, often over the span of days, Sam had never taken the time to appreciate how quickly Dean could set up camp. He had the tent assembled within minutes and a fire going a few minutes after that.

“You’re just gonna…stay?” Gabriel asked incredulously, watching Sam watch Dean. “Yeah, cause that’s smart.”

Sam was going to protest, but when he started thinking about it, he decided here was just as good a place as any. “We’re staying here.”

“Fine. You two chuckleheads want to stay out here? Don’t let me stop you.” Gabriel stood up and rolled his shoulders back, “I’m gonna go disappear. Good luck with everything. You’ll need it.”

“Gabriel —“ Sam said, but the archangel was gone. Turning toward his brother, he walked back up the edge of the river, watching the sunset turn the canyon walls even more spectacular shades of orange and red.
“We’ve got…’Spicy Black Bean’ or ‘Chicken Vegetable with Barley’. Barley? Seriously?” Dean rolled his eyes at the offending cup of soup mix and adjusted the flame on the camp-stove. “Guess that’s what I get for letting you pick some of the food.”

“Dean…I—"

“Can we just skip past this?” Dean flicked his eyes up to Sam for a split-second and then focused on the pot of boiling water again. “What could you possibly say that would make this better in any way?”

Sam nodded, “You’re right. There’s nothing I can say. I should’ve told you, but I just…” He didn’t say I just wanted things to stay the same or I just wanted you to be happy, even though both statements were true. For just a moment, he contemplated wiping Dean’s memory of the last half-hour, but dismissed the thought. In a way, it was a relief. At least he didn’t have to hide what he could do anymore.

Dean opened the ‘Spicy Black Bean’ container and sniffed at it suspiciously before pouring some of the boiling water into it.

“You want to get out of here? If you want, I could — I mean, we could go anywhere for dinner. You want steak?”

Dean blew over the spoonful of soup he was holding, but didn’t answer.

“Or if you want to stay here I could bring the steak to us…”

Dean swallowed the spoonful of soup and made a face. He reached his spoon back into the cup.

“If you don’t want steak I could get pizza instead, or burgers, or — “

After one more spoonful, the soup cup was emptied unceremoniously onto the ground. Dean stood up, stretched his back and went into the tent, zipping it shut behind him.

Sam stayed behind, staring at the overturned cup of rehydrated soup — watching its contents run into the grooves of the rock ground. He looked up the canyon walls, and realized that if he were to slip free from his body, let himself manifest in his true form, the top of the canyon walls would come roughly to the height of his knees. And yet, somehow, Dean could still make him feel like a four foot tall, scrawny eight-year-old. He sat down on the rock and stared at the water of the Colorado.

There was no way he was going to leave Dean alone here. It didn’t matter if he stayed in the tent all night, Sam could tell he was there, and he could keep him safe. But he had to do something. Sam closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, searching for any signs of angels, or the Horsemen.

********
After nearly three hours, Sam had narrowed his focus down to Oklahoma. There had been an outbreak of swine flu, which wasn’t all that unusual in and of itself, but the rate at which it was spreading was ridiculous. The hospitals’ waiting rooms were so full, that the lines had started to spill out into the street.

Sam pulled his mind back a bit, and started a new sweep, looking for anyone in Oklahoma that might be the Horseman he was looking for. It would have been helpful if they’d embraced the cliche a bit more and actually taken to riding conveniently color-coded horses, but sadly that didn’t seem to be the case.

There was a man in Tulsa who was sick. Disgustingly, repulsively congested. Sam wouldn’t have noticed his particular phlegminess amidst the rest of the phlegmy residents except for one thing: whenever the man was by himself, the phlegm lifted off of him like mist and turned into a swarm of flies.

“Gotcha,” Sam said, smiling to himself. Dean slept for three more hours, during which Sam kept watching Pestilence.

There was an advantage to being nearly all-seeing, Sam thought. It was easy to make sure Dean was safe. Then again, knowing what Dean was doing all the time made it that much more obvious that he was still giving Sam the cold shoulder. The sun was well on its way up the sky when Dean finally unzipped the tent again. He’d been awake for two hours, most of which had been spent sharpening his knives, and snacking on the various trail mixes and M&Ms in his bag.

“So. Want to zap us to a motel room with a shower?” Dean asked, staring out at the water.

Sam stood up and looked at Dean — who met his gaze with a lopsided smile. “Sure. Oklahoma okay?”

“What’s in Oklahoma?”

“Pestilence.”

“Naturally.”

“You sure you don’t want to hike back up? Take the scenic route?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Dean rolled his eyes. “My thighs are killing me, alright?”
Sam huffed a small, stifled laugh. “Okay then. Don’t use up all the hot water.” He turned away from Dean as reality shifted around them settling into a motel 20 miles out from Tulsa.

“Dude,” Dean said. “That was…”

“Something wrong?” Sam asked, looking back at his brother.

“No, I just. That was very, uh…low turbulence or whatever.”

Sam could feel his eyebrow creeping up in confusion.

“I didn’t feel like I was getting torn through space.”

“You weren’t. We just kinda side-stepped.”

“A thousand miles? That’s a hell of a side-step.”

Sam smirked. “I’ve got really long legs.”

Dean nodded, and opened his bag, pulling out a change of clothes. He started to head for the bathroom but stopped just short of the door. “What you can do…is it all from the demon blood, or just…the whole Lucifer thing?”

For a fraction of a second, Sam considered expanding on ’the whole Lucifer thing,’ but then he thought better of it. “It’s not the blood. Well, not entirely. I haven’t had any…not intentionally, anyway, since the night I killed Lilith.”

Dean nodded and walked into the bathroom without another word.

The shower turned on a few seconds later and Sam sighed. Dean was dealing far better than expected, but it was hard to imagine things ever going back to normal. With a flick of his fingers, Sam swapped out the sheets on the beds. He hadn’t thought to check them when he’d looked for a suitable motel near Tulsa, but the ones that had been on the beds had looked…crunchy.

The door buzzer rang and Sam glared at the peephole. “What now?” he muttered, walking to the door.

He knew there were demons outside, he could sense them. He was expecting black eyes on the other side of the door. What he hadn’t expected however, was thirty sets of black eyes all staring at him with unabashed adoration.

The one closest to the door, wearing a teenager with green hair and a nose ring, fell to his knees when Sam opened the door. “My lord, we have heard your call to arms! We felt the deaths of those foolish enough to oppose you.” He held up something that looked a whole lot like a fruit basket and added, “We await your command.”

Sam took the fruit basket, looked out at the demons and said, “Go home.”

The green-haired demon looked crestfallen. “Your very presence makes us strong. We wish only to serve. We’ll do anything you ask of us.”

“Okay, good. Go home.”
“My lord—”

Sam lowered his voice and repeated himself one last time. “Go. Home.” The sidewalk and asphalt beneath the demons’ feet turned the color of glowing embers and Hell swallowed the demons back down, leaving behind thirty extremely disoriented people. “You should probably go home too,” Sam added, closing the door as all of them vanished.

He put the basket on the motel table and sat down in one of the two chairs, staring at the plastic, purple wrapping paper.

A few minutes later, Dean came out of the shower, took one look at Sam staring at the basket and asked, “Demons or Horsemen?”

“Demons.”

“What’s in it?”

Sam shook his head, “You don’t want to know.”

“So…not chocolate covered strawberries then?”

“Well…technically there is chocolate. No strawberries though.”

Dean gave him a look. “If there’s chocolate, it can’t possibly be that bad.”

“No, it — Dean!”

As Dean opened the plastic wrapping and recoiled, the smell of decay, stale blood and dark chocolate filled the air.

“I told you.”

“That’s just…unsanitary.”

Sam snapped his fingers, sending the basket just outside their window, where it burned to ash within seconds.

“I was gonna suggest lunch, but now that I’ve lost my appetite, permanently, maybe we should just hit the road?”

“Yeah. Okay. Pestilence is still in Tulsa. You want to drive, or…?”

“Take the angel-express?” Dean shook his head, “I’m driving. You still need to fill me in on what you know. We need a plan, don’t we?”

*******

Sam told Dean everything he knew about Pestilence, and the other Horsemen, which wasn’t much. In the back of his mind, amongst the other memories of his former life (the ones he wasn’t that proud of), he knew that if he’d gone through with his original plans, the Horsemen wouldn’t be a problem. He’d had rituals in place to enslave all of them. There’d been a catch of course, there always was
when dealing with beings as powerful as them — the ritual he’d created would have bound their
power into rings, but those rings could re-open his Cage.

He hadn’t bound them, so they were a far greater threat, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t protect
himself or Dean. Out of the four of them only Death could kill him, that much he knew. The other
three could still influence him though, and he didn’t know to what extent.

“So do we know how to kill him?” Dean asked as they pulled into the over-full parking lot of Tulsa
General Hospital.

“The Horsemen can’t be killed.”

“That’s nice. So, what’s our plan exactly?”

Sam sighed. “Talk to him.”

“Seriously?” Dean scoffed.

“‘Fraid so.” They walked to the main doors of the hospital passing by dozens of people waiting in
line outside. Most of them had given up on standing, and were sitting, or lying down. A few were
sprawled out in positions that looked so uncomfortable it seemed more likely they’d just collapsed.

As they passed a man who was coughing weakly into the asphalt, something occurred to Sam. “Be
healed,” he said quietly. The man at his feet stopped coughing and pushed himself up to his knees.
He blinked wearily up at Sam and Dean, stood up and yawned. “I feel a lot better,” the man
mumbled. Then he left the line of people and wandered out into the parking lot.

Dean looked at Sam curiously.

“Well…I am an angel.” Sam shrugged. “Figured it couldn’t hurt to try.” He closed his eyes and
concentrated on the dozens of people around them. When he opened his eyes again, nearly all of
them were standing. They looked dazed, but better, and started walking away.

“That’s a neat trick,” Dean said.

“Yeah, but something tells me it isn’t going to stay this easy,” Sam said as they walked through the
hospital doors. He could sense Pestilence — this close, it was hard to not sense him. The Horseman’s
presence permeated the air and was so strong, that by the time they got out of the waiting area and
deep into the hospital, Sam was having a difficult time narrowing down which direction they had to
go.

They were working their way up the stairs to the second floor when Dean made a not-good sound,
staggered and dropped to his knees, coughing violently. Sam pulled his brother back to his feet,
healing him again. He’d been trying to keep Dean protected since they walked in, but it was difficult
— it wasn’t just one disease attacking Dean, it was all of them. There were viruses attacking Dean’s
system that Sam didn’t even have a name for — one was a hybrid of malaria, chicken pox and
conjunctivitis. Sam himself stayed unaffected, protected by his grace, but he could feel Pestilence’s
aura prickling at his skin — like thousands of tiny insect legs. Sam scratched absently at his forearm
and gave Dean another once-over before pointing at a door ahead of them. “He’s there. He has to
be.”

Dean nodded, looked like he was going to throw up while cholera passed through his system, and
then gave Sam a weak thumbs-up a half-second later when he’d been healed.

Sam opened the door labeled *Dr. Green*, and they both stepped through.

Pestilence was sitting at a small pine desk, writing in a notebook. He didn’t look up when they entered.

“I’ll be with you momentarily. Just finishing up my notes.” The Horseman turned a page in his notebook and kept writing. His face was narrow and long, and his shrewd eyes moved across the paper as quickly as his pen.

On the love-seat against the wall was a woman. Or rather, what used to be a woman. The corpse was horribly disfigured with ruptured pustules and large jagged patches of necrosis, and its left arm was still oozing slowly.

“Poor Mrs. Poole,” said the Horseman. “Her suffering was quite long. Exquisite assortment of symptoms. I really outdid myself.”

“Wow. You must be your number one fan,” Dean said, stepping closer to the desk.

“Ha! You must be Dean.” Pestilence stood up and held out his hand. “Put her there!”

Dean swallowed nervously and took a half-step back. “No thanks, I’ll pass.”

“How about you, Star of the Morning?” the Horseman said, sneering at Sam. “You too good to shake my hand, too?”

Sam smirked and clasped both of his hands around the Horseman’s, giving his hand a firm shake. “Nice to meet you. Your brother says you take a great deal of pride in your work.”

“That I do, my friend.” He pulled out an ampule of yellow liquid and held it up to Sam. “Croatoan virus, batch delta. Ten times as fast acting, and completely incurable.” He grinned. “Even by your kind.”

Dean’s nervousness was palpable, Sam could hear his brother’s heart thumping louder at just the memories of their last encounter with the virus.

“Would you like to see a demonstration?” Pestilence asked, leering at Dean.

The ampule in the Horseman’s hand lit up with Hellfire and disintegrated.

“Ow!” Pestilence yelled, shaking his hand out. He brought his singed fingertip to his mouth and glared at Sam.

“Threaten my brother again, and I’ll feed you to my hounds.”

Pestilence frowned, “You *do* know that you have zero control over my actions, don’t you? You didn’t complete your little spell. I’m under no compulsion to obey you.”

“And yet here you are…following my last standing orders,” Sam scoffed. “How very innovative.”

Rage flickered across the Horseman’s face, and for just a second he wasn’t even remotely human. A
thousand eyes in a seething mass of pulsing, green energy stared at Sam and looked inside of him, searching for weaknesses.

“So you make humans sick. Big whoop.” Dean said.

Pestilence refocused on Dean and hissed, “What did you say, you little sack of pus and bone?”

“I said, big deal. Humans get sick all the damn time. We’re weak.” Dean’s eyes flicked to Sam. “If my brother wanted us all gone, he could wipe us out in a few hours.”

Sam almost corrected Dean, because he’d really only need about twenty minutes tops, but then thought better of it.

“All I’m saying is…humans are easy targets. You ever infected anything immortal? Ever given a vampire the flu? Can you give a werewolf chicken pox?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I can. Monsters are just mutated humans. Mutation’s a…specialty of mine.”

“Really?” Dean raised his eyebrows. “So I guess you can infect demons too, right? I mean they were human once. And ghosts? What about ghosts?”

“Do you have a point, little bug?” the Horseman said angrily.

Sam took a step towards his brother as he cured him of syphilis, the Ebola virus and rabies.

“I just think, if you were really good at what you do — as good as you think you are — you’d have stepped up your game a bit.” Dean said smirking, and coughed once as he suffered from a half-second bout of pneumonia. “No wonder the angels think you’re a joke.”

“What did you say?” Pestilence growled. The air in the room started to grow humid, heavy and faintly green.

“They don’t have to worry about you. I mean they don’t care about humans. You’re just doing their dirty work for them. For free, even! And after you’re done, they’ll have Earth to themselves. It’s not like you can infect them.”

“Dean!” Sam whispered. Knock it off. He’s getting pissed.

Don’t talk into my brain. I hate that.

Stop goading him!

Pestilence walked out from behind his desk, raised a long finger and pointed it at Dean’s nose. “I can too.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, whatever dude.” He turned his back on the Horseman and patted Sam on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go.”

Sam looked from Pestilence who had gone oddly silent, to his brother, and then followed Dean out the door.
They drove back to the motel, lost in their own thoughts. Sam tried to look for a common thread that would help him locate the Horsemen more easily. They were all immensely powerful, but short of that, they didn’t give off a particularly unique energy pattern, or anything else to make it easy for them to track.

He sighed, wishing not for the first time, that he’d at least gone ahead with the binding part of the spell he’d planned to use on the Four. He hadn’t because the spell weaved in all of his now-abandoned plans for destroying humanity. If he’d bound them though, he would have been able to track them, and summon them at will.
Dean pulled into the motel parking lot and they went back into their room, both of them pointedly ignoring the two gift baskets by the door. Sam cracked his knuckles once they were inside, incinerating the offerings. He sat down at the table, and tapped his fingers against the "wood”, trying to think of how to find Famine.

“You hungry?” Dean asked. “We totally missed lunch. And late lunch.”

“What are you in the mood for?” Sam asked, not really up for take-out of any sort. He was thirsty though. Really thirsty. He suddenly realized what he was craving, and felt the side of his jaw twitch.

“I don’t even care. Chinese I guess? Or there was this ‘Burgers & Beer’ place we passed. That’d hit the spot. Man, I’m starving.” Dean pulled off his shirt and swapped it for a new one from his duffle. As an afterthought, he pulled out his flask and took a sip. Then he took another, longer sip, and then another.

Sam watched his brother, remembering his own flask, and what he’d carried in it for a while. “Okay sure, let’s go.” They’d get a nice normal dinner, and then he could stop thinking about the color red and the faint smell of sulfur.

Dean drove them to ‘Burgers & Beer’ faster than should have been possible. Sam might have had something to do with that. He was glad Dean had decided to drive though, because if Sam had transported them, they might have ended up somewhere with far fewer burgers and far more demons. Tasty, tasty demons.

Sam clenched his eyes shut as they pulled into the parking lot, trying to block out the voices and smells of all the demons on Earth. Nearly all of them were wearing humans, and all those humans had blood, pints and pints of demon —

“You getting out or you gonna stay in the car looking constipated?” Dean asked.

Sam ground his teeth together and followed Dean into the restaurant. It was only four in the afternoon, so the place wasn’t too busy. A waiter took their drink order right away, and came back three minutes later with a pitcher of beer and onion rings.

Dean ordered some kind of deluxe cheeseburger with bacon and everything else you could possibly pile onto a cheeseburger. Sam ordered a salad with grilled chicken, and an iced tea. Dean poured himself a glass of beer from the pitcher, and downed it.

“Take it easy there, cowboy,” Sam mumbled as his eyes landed on a couple seated a few booths away. They were sitting next to each other, and they were both staring right at him. Demons.

Come near us and I’ll wipe you from existence, Sam told them. The demons kept staring at him with unblinking, black eyes.

Dean had worked his way through half of the pitcher when his burger arrived. He peered down at it over the rim of his glass. The door to the restaurant opened, and an old, withered man in a wheelchair entered, pushed by another demon.

Three things happened at once. The old man, Famine, smiled wide when he saw Sam; the two demons in the booth stabbed themselves in the throat with their forks; and Sam called to Castiel for help right before he lunged for the two demons.
Castiel appeared, looked from Famine, to Sam, to Dean, to Dean’s burger, grabbed a hold of Dean with his left hand and Dean’s burger with his right and vanished, taking Dean with him.

“It’s so good to meet you, Sam,” said the Horseman.

Sam heard the words, but only barely. He had his mouth wrapped around the wound in the female demon’s neck and it was growing wider as he drew more and more blood from it. For a brief moment he wondered how Famine could affect him so strongly, when he’d been immune to Pestilence.

Famine heard his thought, and answered, “Because hunger doesn’t just come from the body, it comes from the soul. And your soul…” he laughed — a dry rasping sound “…your soul is ravenous.”

My brother— Sam struggled to keep his thoughts together as he finished draining the first demon and switched to the second, you infected him.

“I woke his hunger and his thirst. He’ll drink himself to death in a matter of hours.”

No. Sam drained the demon faster and faster.

“Your little angel pet won’t be able to help him. He’s discovered red meat.”

The second demon slumped forward when Sam let go of him. He wiped his hand across the back of his mouth, staining it red and glared at the Horseman. “They got away.”

Famine chuckled again. “Distance doesn’t matter. That counts for you too, of course. It doesn’t matter where you go, as long as I walk the Earth, your hunger will grow and grow. The difference of course, is that you won’t die. It’s all going exactly according to plan.”

“No,” Sam shook his head, “there is no plan. There is no war, no Apocalypse. Just… just go back to where you came from.”

“Why would I do that, when everything I want is right here?” The Horseman held his hand out and Sam took a step back reflexively. The bloodless demons’ eyes flickered as Famine pulled their souls out of their bodies and into his open mouth.

Sam watched the black smoke flow down into the old man and suddenly felt a spark of rage. “They’re mine.”

Famine closed his mouth, breathed contentedly and asked, “Since when do you care about demons? Canon-fodder. Fuel for my vessel. Isn’t that what you said, Morningstar? You said I could feast on their souls as long as you got their blood. That was our arrangement.”

The demon standing guard behind the Horseman flinched, just a little, when Sam looked at him. “Come here,” Sam said, and watched the demon walk around Famine’s wheelchair until he was standing right in front of Sam. The demon dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

Flesh opened under Sam’s tongue as he bit down on the demon’s throat. The blood ran down his throat, making his brain hum happily. The power boost he gained from it was a drop in the bucket now, all things considered, but somehow that didn’t change how badly he wanted more.
“You can have every drop, Lucifer, but their souls are mine. You promised me the souls of Earth and the souls of Hell that wander Earth. That was our deal.”

As he drank down the last drop of the demon’s blood, Sam finished scanning the Horseman’s mind and found what he was looking for. Sam’s mouth curved into a smile as he swallowed down the demon’s soul, looked back at Famine and announced, “Deal’s off.”

The Horseman seemed to expand in all directions as he screamed in fury, a giant, cavernous maw, eager to devour everything. It snapped at Sam, crashing against his defenses with a thunderous noise.

“Hell is mine,” Sam took a step towards the old man, “Earth is mine. You don’t get a single soul.”

Famine glared up at Sam, who nearly doubled over at the pulse of hunger that ran through him. He was starving. He wanted to fall to the floor, tear open Hell and drink it all down. Instead, he gritted out. “You don’t feed on the souls themselves though. You feed on their hunger.”

“We had a deal, Morningstar. I don’t care that you called off your war. I want what was promised me.”

“I promised you a feast…and you’ll have one.”

The old man cocked a thin, grey eyebrow at him, and licked his lips. “You are honorable after all.”

Sam smiled, stiffly, fighting the urge to devour with every ounce of his willpower. “Of all the beings that have ever existed, which ones had the greatest hunger?”

The Horseman frowned and said, “You can’t possibly be suggesting—”

“Purgatory.” Sam leaned down close to Famine’s ear and added, “Filled to the brim with things driven solely by their appetites. It was made for you. Together, you and I can open the door.”

“My older brother says that Purgatory is sealed for a reason.” Famine mused, but a thin stream of drool slipped out between his lips and ran down his chin.

Sam kept his face carefully neutral. “Do you always obey your brother?”

“He is older than time.”

“So that means you have to always do what he says?”

The Horseman frowned, licked his chapped lips and said, “No.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?”

********
The ritual to open Purgatory was fairly straightforward. The blood had been easy enough to obtain, but the eclipse...neither Sam nor Famine could have brought on an eclipse by themselves. Together, however, their power was great enough. They painted the sigil on the back of an old barn, and watched as Purgatory started to tear open with a flash of brilliant light. Famine looked into it eagerly, then turned back to Sam and snarled, “All of this is mine. If you try to take even one from me, I will call all three of my brothers and they will—”

“What the hell are you doing?” said a voice from behind them.

Famine ignored the voice, shed his skin and expanded, opening his jaw wider and wider, ready to catch anything trying to escape through the dimensional portal.

Sam turned and saw War glaring back at him. “What does it look like we’re doing?”

The gray-haired man laughed sharply and said, “It looks like you two decided to open Purgatory, like a couple of morons. And here I thought your brother was the dumb one. He certainly hasn’t been any help.”

Sam took a step towards War, and bared his teeth. “What are you saying?”

“Thanks to my brother’s talents, Dean and his little angel friend came with me willingly. All I had to do was hold out a bag of cheeseburgers and a bottle of Jack.” War chuckled. “I brought them both to Raphael.”

Sam’s anger brought lightning crashing down around them, singeing the dried grass, and War grinned even wider.

“Why?” Sam growled, grabbing War by the throat. “Take me to Dean. Right. Now.”

“Or what?” War said, voice steady despite the pressure of Sam’s grip.

Sam tightened his grip, and flames licked around his fingers, spilling out onto War’s flesh.

“You can’t kill War. Plus...you really think touching me is a good idea? With all that rage you’ve got going?”

“Where. Is. Dean.”

The Horseman rolled his eyes. “Where do you think he is?”

“Heaven,” Sam said. “Raphael wanted to bring Dean to Michael.” His fury grew and more lightning crashed down around them.

“That’s right,” War said slowly, “So what are you gonna do about it?”

Sam’s rage reached out wide as he unfurled his wings and looked skyward. “I’ll storm heaven. I’ll
break down the gate and I’ll tear them all to shreds.”

War laughed louder and louder, as blood started to rain down from the sky. “I knew you wouldn’t disappoint me. That’s the spirit. Kill them all. They won’t stand a chance against you — not with Michael gone.”

“Michael…” Sam clenched his eyes shut, trying to think, trying to calm himself, trying to remember why he’d chosen a new path in the first place. Michael wasn’t gone, he couldn’t be…but every time Sam thought of Michael he thought of Dean, and his anger came flooding back. He took a deep breath, trying to focus on his human soul, buried as it was under the Devil’s rage. The lightning slowed and then stopped, as did the rain. His grip on War’s throat loosened just a bit.

“Come on Sam, let’s go,” said the Horseman.

Sam shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. He’d forgotten something important, and it was right there, just out of reach…on the edge of his mind.
“I’ll storm heaven. I’ll break down the gate and I’ll tear them all to shreds.”
“Raphael.” Sam let go of War and turned to face the archangel. He’d come with ten of his soldiers, four of whom were standing guard around Dean and Castiel. Dean was unconscious, but alive. Castiel had a cheeseburger in each hand — he took a bite out of one, then the other, and chewed — seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. Sam walked closer to them and crouched down to get a closer look at Dean. “Which one of you did this?”


“Castiel?” Sam repeated, trying to meet the angel’s eyes. He had finished off one of the cheeseburgers and was about to unwrap another from a white paper bag that had manifested out of nowhere. Sam grabbed his arm. “Castiel. What did you do to Dean?”

Castiel tried to tug his arm free from Sam’s grip and then looked up at his eyes. “Dean? Oh.” His eyes focused back on the white paper bag, which opened as one of the cheeseburgers floated out of it, unwrapping itself as it went, heading for Castiel’s mouth. Sam glared at it, turning it to ash.

Castiel’s eyes widened and started to fill with tears. “Don’t…don’t do that.”

“Tell me what you did to my brother,” Sam repeated.

“He tried to take one of my burgers, so I put him to sleep.”

Sam stared at the angel. “Because he tried to take one of your burgers?”

“Yes. I need them. He was about to drink himself to death anyway. It was for the best.”

There was an impossibly loud hiss from the portal to Purgatory, and Sam turned just in time to see Famine close his huge jaws around what looked like a giant serpent.

“Leviathan,” War said quietly. He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is going to end so badly.” He folded his arms over his chest and watched as Famine and the serpent fought each other, wrapping themselves tighter together until the Leviathan’s own razor-filled mouth was locked onto Famine. They twisted faster and faster, devouring each other, and didn’t even notice when the eclipse ended and Purgatory started to close again. The portal pulled everything near it back down, grabbing hold of the few straggling souls that had made it out and past Famine’s maw. They were all drawn back down, screaming and roaring in fury, and then — far too occupied with their own struggle — Famine and the Leviathan tumbled through the gate right before the portal snapped shut again.

Sam stared at War and raised an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you help your brother?”

War turned from the blood-stained barn wall back to Sam and eyed him thoughtfully for a moment before saying, “Who says I didn’t?”

Castiel coughed up a mouthful of half-chewed burger and blinked twice. Then he looked from Sam down to Dean and shook his head, saying, “I’m sorry.” He laid his hand on Dean’s forehead, and after a few seconds, Dean sat up and yawned wide.

“Man, my head…” Dean groaned as he looked up at Sam, blearily.

Sam held his hand out to Dean and pulled him up to his feet.

Dean rolled his head, cracking his neck and asked, “What did I miss?”

“Not too much,” Sam said with a smirk. “You okay?”
Dean looked over his shoulder at Raphael, and said, “Yeah. I’m fine. Raphael’s all talk.”

Raphael bristled. “We showed you mercy because Michael wanted you unharmed.

“Michael?” Dean asked. “Is that a fact?” He walked towards the assembled angels and looked from one to another. “You know, you guys talk about Michael all the time, but I’m starting to think none of you have actually talked to the guy.”

Sam cocked his head to the side, looking at Dean curiously. The memory evading him was flickering into existence. “You’re right.” He locked eyes with Raphael. “You use his name, because the Host respects him above all other angels, but…you don’t even know where he is.”

“You’re still a fool, Lucifer. You always have been.” Raphael’s face turned to a sneer. “Just because your brother has hidden himself from you since you betrayed us all, doesn’t mean he hides himself from us.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean scoffed. “When was the last time you talked to him. Hm? Or got a memo, or a phone call or a text message or whatever it is you guys do?”

Sam stared at his brother as the elusive memory became crystal clear for just a fraction of a second.

“You haven’t heard a word from him since he left. And you won’t ever hear from him again,” Dean said.

“Blasphemy!” Raphael snarled.

“Nope. Just fact. Michael’s gone.” Dean looked at Sam and flashed him a lop-sided grin. “I’m all that’s left.”

Raphael’s eyes widened and the angels behind him all stared from Dean to Sam and back. “No. That’s not possible.”

“Of course it is. I fell.” Dean cleared his throat and looked from one angel to the next. “I don’t remember all of it. Only bits and pieces. I remember you,” he looked at Raphael, “and Gabriel…and I remember Lucifer.” He looked at Sam and smiled, then continued. “That’s about it. The human mind can only hold so much, I guess.”

An angel to the left of Raphael took an angry step forward and said, “Michael would never —”

“I would. I did. I did what our Father asked me to do. I threw my brother into Hell. I watched him for a thousand years, and then one day…I just couldn’t live with myself, you know?” Dean sighed and shrugged, “So I fell. I tore out my grace and…” he smiled, “…now I’m me.”

Sam swallowed as he watched his brother speak, suddenly overcome with emotion. All those centuries he’d spent convinced that Michael would hate him until the end of time, all the anger, all the hate…all of it started to fade away as he listened to his brother, his brother, speak.

Raphael radiated fury. He stepped towards Dean and spoke — low and dangerous. "We will find your grace, and you will stop this madness. Tell us where it is."

"Don't know. Don't care." Dean grinned.

For a moment, it looked like Raphael was going to speak again, but then his face twisted — his nose scrunched up, his eyes clenched shut, and he sneezed.
"Ha HA!" yelled Pestilence, manifesting next to War. "Behold my work and tremble, Host of Heaven, for I have given you the common cold."

War slapped his hand to his forehead.

The angel furthest to the right rubbed at his nose and sniffled.

Pestilence threw his arms into the air jubilantly and stuck his tongue out at Dean.

"Wow. You really did." Dean raised his eyebrows. "I'm impressed. 'Course that doesn't change anything. We're not fighting each other. We're not going to fight each other."

Pestilence's face crumpled, and War put his arm around his brother, patting him on the shoulder.

"You can't just disobey the will of Heaven," Raphael said to Dean, his voice soft with disbelief. "We are the agents of fate. If we disobey, everything will fall apart."

"Maybe." Dean nodded, "Or maybe fate's overrated."

"It totally is," Sam said, watching the angels behind Raphael start to leave.

Raphael frowned, and then looked at Dean curiously. "Have you seen him? Do you know where Father is?"

Dean shook his head.

"Why did he...abandon us? What are we supposed to do?" Raphael asked, and there was genuine sorrow in his voice. "This war was what we were told was going to come to pass."

"It's not. Plans have changed," Dean smirked, "You should try taking a vacation. It did wonders for us, didn't it Sammy?"

Sam scoffed. "Yeah, hell of a vacation."

"I am the instrument of God the almighty! I give and take life by his Word! I do not vacation," Raphael said, anger tinting his voice again.

"Suit yourself," Dean turned to Sam. "Ready to get out of here?"

"Yeah," Sam watched Raphael's wings twitch unhappily as he tried to decide what to do. "We're your brothers, Raphael, whether you agree with us or not. You're family. If you need us, we'll answer."

Raphael shook his head, "I'm the only archangel left in Heaven. Gabriel still won't come home, and neither will you."

"So we like it better down here, that doesn't mean we're shutting you out." Dean said.

"But—"

"Vacation. Seriously." Turning back to Sam, Dean added, "Pizza? Or no wait — pie! A diner that has good pie."

"I'll see what I can do," Sam smirked, taking a hold of Dean's shoulder as he stepped through the folds of space and out into…Central Park.
"Huh," Dean looked around at the lake, the joggers running past them, and the small chess-tables. "I don't see any pie."

"This isn't—" Sam looked around, confused. "This isn't where I wanted to take us. I don't—"

"Sometimes, a single step will lead you to the most unexpected places," said a quiet, but powerful voice. Death smiled up at Sam and Dean, holding a black pawn. He placed it back down on the chessboard table. "Check-mate in 2 moves."

"Oh come on!" said Death's opponent. "Again? That's like...the third time today!"

Dean walked closer to the table and stared at the small, curly haired man across from Death. "Chuck?"

Chuck blinked up at Dean. "Uhh...yeah. Hi, Dean. Sam."

"What the hell are you doing hanging out with Death!" Dean raved, "What'd you—"

"It's you," Sam said quietly. "Isn't it?"

Chuck raised his eyebrow as he picked up his white queen and took Death's bishop. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"You're—" Sam's nostrils flared angrily. "This is what you've been doing? Sitting here, playing chess while everybody debates your existence!"

"Oh," Dean said, pursing his lips.

Sam continued, angrily, "Do you have any idea—"

"Yes," Chuck said. "Yes I do. I have all the ideas, but it's better this way."

"How could you possibly think that?" Sam yelled. "What gives you the right to just abandon everything? Tell me why!"

The prophet's face softened. "Because of you. Both of you...you proved me wrong. You went off-script."

"Yeah, well, your script sucked," Dean said.

Death chuckled as he picked up his rook.

Chuck nodded, "You're not wrong."

Sam shook his head in disbelief. "So...what now?"

"I don't know," Chuck said, grinning. "Isn't that awesome?"

Sam was about to rattle off an epically long list of why it was in fact not awesome, when a sharp whistle from a few tables away caught his attention.

Dean was already heading towards the whistler, and Sam jogged a few steps to catch up with him.

"Man, all the cool kids hang out here, huh?" Dean scoffed, looking down at Gabriel, who was playing with a stack of checkers.
Gabriel looked at him oddly, “Pretty sure I’m the coolest one here dudes, sorry to burst your bubble.”

Sam turned over his shoulder to point at the chess-table housing the Beginning and the End but the table was empty.

“I’m glad you’re both okay,” Gabriel said. “Sorry I didn’t come by for round two, but I had to lay low.” His voice dropped into a whisper. “Hildr and I kinda…had a falling out, and trust me you do not want to be on her bad side.”

“Hildr?” Dean raised an eyebrow.

“The Valkyrie with the really nice…” he raised his hands up to his head and cupped them above his ears, “…buns. She saved your sorry ass. And mine, more times than I can count.”

“What’d you do?” Sam asked.

Gabriel gave him a withering look. “Like I’m gonna tell you.”

Dean gave Gabriel a grin and sat down across from him, and nodded towards the checkers. “So we gonna play or what?”

Gabriel smirked and the checkers slid into their spots on the board.

Sam shook his head and turned away from them. He looked out at the quiet lake nearby, closed his eyes and listened. The sun was warm, the wind was cool, and the only flutter of wings he heard were those of birds.

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