An Occasional Matter of Family

by dare_to_do_our_duty

Summary

In which Tony Stark is related to Sam and Dean Winchester and they drop in on occasion when nobody is busy saving the world. And sometimes when everyone is busy saving the world.

Based off of a post I saw about J. D. Morgan and RDJ looking alike.
Dean came out of the bathroom toweling water out of his hair to find Sam sprawled on one of the motel beds intently studying John Winchester’s journal. He still had his shoes on, feet hanging off the atrociously patterned bedspread.

“You’re up for the shower.” Dean smacked Sam’s legs with the towel, flopping down on the other bed in the room. Sam just hummed in his general direction, toed his shoes off without moving from his position, and kept looking at the journal. He broke the silence a few seconds later, rolling over to face his brother.

“Do you know anything about a hunter named ‘Tony’?”

Dean’s eyebrows shot up. “Friend of Dad’s?”

“Yeah. In his little ‘contacts’ section, look.” Sam held out the journal, the familiar handwriting knotting Dean’s stomach for a moment as he took the leather book. Sure enough, just under the inked names “Bobby Singer” and “Ellen Harvelle” was written “Tony, California” followed by an unfamiliar telephone number.

“Do you know it?” Sam asked. His brother frowned and shook his head.

“Nope. Dad never mentioned anyone named Tony. But you know how tight he is about information.” Dean looked down, handing back the journal. The “is” hung painfully in the air for a moment, neither brother wanting to correct it.

“It’s right there under Ellen, but why wouldn’t Dad have mentioned him before? Plus, why no last name?” Sam looked doubtful as to the accuracy of the name and number; Dean just shrugged.

“Never gave out anything he didn’t need to. Not until it was important,” he added as he flipped onto his back. “Which it must not be. Don’t worry about it. We can ask Bobby sometime, see if he knows.”

“Fine.” Sam stood, closing the journal and stowing it in his bag before levering himself up off the bed and heading to the shower.

“Hurry up, man. I’m starving.”

But despite Dean’s words, Sam didn’t forget about the name and number, and after they got back to the motel at two in the morning, dappled with salt and smelling like smoke, he quietly flipped open his phone and added “Hunter(?) Tony” to his contacts anyway.

Two weeks later, he was glad he had.

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The demon slammed Dean backwards into the shattered tombstone, the hunter grunting as the air was forced from his lungs and the broken stone edges slashed deep into his thigh and side. Perilously close to the open grave and the fire within, Dean tried to roll sideways but was stopped by the stocky man.

“Dean!” Sam lunged forward at the demon standing over his brother, slashing downward with the container of holy water and sending the creature reeling momentarily. “Exorcizamus te, omnis…” the younger hunter started chancing. The demon rushed him; Sam sent another wave of holy water flying, but the demon’s momentum carried it forward despite the burning skin, slamming him into Sam and crushing him against the ground. “Omnis congregatio,” Sam wheezed against the weight, “et secta diabolica…” The demon hit him across the jaw and Sam struggled to keep chanting.

Dean tackled the demon off of him, landing on its chest and punching once, twice, before it managed to reach up, stabbing its fingers into the deep cuts in Dean’s side and pulling. Dean yelled, twisting away, the sound ripped from his throat by the agony of already torn skin and muscle stretching further apart. But the noise was almost drowned out by Sam’s rushed chanting through shaky breaths as he finished the exorcism.

The demon released its hold on Dean’s leg and threw its head back, the familiar cloud of black smoke pouring from its mouth. The body crumpled to the ground and Sam slid over to check the man’s pulse. There was none.

“Sam.” Dean’s tight voice cut off his examination.

The younger brother’s eyes widened as he took in his sibling’s appearance. Blood was soaking Dean’s jeans and jacket despite the hands clamped over the gashes, some of the cuts visible through the slashes in the fabric. “Let me see,” Sam demanded.

He peeled up the edges of Dean’s t-shirt, frown deepening as the cuts came into view. “We’re going to need more medical supplies than we’ve got in the Impala. There’s no way you’re getting away without a lot of stitches.” He glanced at Dean’s leg to find it in worse shape than his side. “Can you walk?”

Dean rolled his eyes at him. “Of course I can walk, Sammy.”

But when Sam slipped a shoulder under his arm and helped pull Dean to his feet, the rest of the color drained from Dean’s face and he almost fell over.

“So that’s a no for walking,” Sam muttered. He yanked off his jacket and shirt, ignoring his twinging ribs (which were rapidly changing colors) and put the jacket back on, ripping the bottom off the shirt and wadding up the rest into a pad before tying it to Dean’s leg as best he could in the light of the burning grave. But it wasn’t going to be enough.

“Dean? Dean, look at me.” Somewhere in the last minute, Dean’s eyes had drifted shut. He blinked them open enough to glare mulishly at Sam. “Keep as much pressure on this as you can. I’m going to call an ambulance. There’s no way I can get you into the Impala.”

Dean frowned. “We can’t pay for that. Besides, what are you going to say? We were out digging up a grave because there was a ghost but apparently there was a demon we didn’t know about and it tried to kill us and that’s why there’s a dead body and a skeleton on fire?” His voice lacked some of its usual sarcasm and beligerence, but the point was sound.

“I could come up with something.” But Sam couldn’t deny that Dean was right-- they didn’t have money for an ambulance ride, much less a hospital after that. And calling authorities to the place they
were burning a body wasn’t a great idea either. “Fine. Let me call Bobby, see if he knows anyone in
the area who can get here quick. Hold onto this, okay?” Dean flipped him the bird, then clamped
the hand onto the padding folded onto his leg and side. Sam rocked back on his heels and pulled out his
phone.

He dialed. It rang three, four, five times. “C’mon, Bobby… pick up.” Voicemail. “Damn.” He dialed
again, this time Ellen’s number. No answer.

“Sam.” He looked over and a fresh wave of urgency washed over him as Dean lifted one hand
weakly. It was covered in blood– the shirt was already soaked through and Dean was getting paler
by the minute.

“Oh God.” Sam reached out and added pressure to Dean’s leg, ignoring his usually-stoic brother’s
grunt of pain. Frantically, he scrolled through his phone contacts with his other hand.

There. “Hunter(?) Tony” and a subnote of “California.” Beyond caring if he knew who he was
calling, Sam hit the call icon. The number rang… and the call connected.

“Um… hello?” The voice on the other end answered, probably wondering who the hell was calling
him at two in the morning.

“This is Sam Winchester. Your name was in our father John’s journal. I don’t know who you are.
We don’t know anything about you, but my brother needs help. We can’t go to a hospital and if you
really know our father, you know why.”

There was silence on the end of the line. Dean, injured and blood-deprived as he was, still managed
to pull a hand off his bloody side and make a throat-cutting “end call” gesture. Sam snatched his
hand and shoved it back to the cuts, listening for a response.

“Listen, Dean is bleeding out on the ground so you need to figure out--”

“Where are you?” Tony interrupted. “Do you have a car?”

“Just north of Malibu, Larkhill Cemetery. And yes, but there’s no way Dean’s getting to it without
more help.”

“Right. Be ready to move, I’ll be there in three minutes.”

“Wait, did you say three--” the line clicked off. Sam shoved the phone in his pocket. “Be ready to
move. Three minutes.”

“Three?” Dean repeated.

Apparently.” Sam reached out and retrieved the holy water flask, throwing it in the nearby bag
along with a knife and Dean’s shotgun. Carefully, he took a cheap knife from their bag, stabbing the
dead man with a twinge of regret and arranging the corpse’s hand on the knife handle so it looked
self-inflicted. It wouldn’t fool any high level investigator-- the person who had been possessed
probably had been dead much longer than the evidence showed and had fresh bruises where he
had clearly been punched-- but it would probably work for a local investigator. He flicked the
flashlight towards the Impala, listening for car tires. “Where are your keys?”

“Other pocket.” The younger Winchester reached into the non-shredded jacket pocket, grabbing the
car keys and stuffing them into his jeans.

“Shhhh.” Dean went still under his hands.
Sam stopped moving and could hear it, too; a faint roar, rapidly growing louder with each second. But instead of coming from the old road to the cemetery, it was coming from the sky above the palm trees.

“Shit. Shit.” Sam didn’t know what it was, but it wasn’t something he recognized. Dean could see his brother’s face go from “worried” to “a little worried but mostly dead focused” in half a second. Keeping one hand over the biggest cut, Dean scrambled to find a pistol.

By the time the source of the noise cleared the trees, Dean was leaning heavily against a tombstone, white as a sheet but with a handgun in a steady palm and Sam was standing over him, shotgun cocked and ready.

Not much shocked Sam anymore, but a second later Sam almost dropped the shotgun in surprise because Iron Man was coming to a landing ten yards away. Dean kept the pistol trained on the metal head; Sam glanced at him. “It won’t do any good.”

“No, it won’t.” The faceplate of the armour slid up and both brothers immediately aimed at the human beneath the metal. Iron Man raised his hands in surrender. “Woah, there. Are you Sam and Dean Winchester?”

Sam cocked the shotgun.

“You called me three minutes ago. Your dad is John Winchester, husband of the late Mary Winchester. They lived in Lawrence, Kansas, which is where both of you were born.”

Dean dropped his gun, but one look at him told Sam that it was probably more from the blood loss than an overwhelming trust of the man. “Christo.”

Tony raised his eyebrows but didn’t react otherwise. Sam clicked the safety on and stowed the shotgun and Dean’s handgun back in the bag. Accepting for the moment the weirdness that was their life, Sam raised his own eyebrows at Iron Man. “Gonna help or not?”

The fancy suit hovered over, landing next to him. “I’ll carry him to the car. You get the door.” Sam nodded, scooping up the weapons bag and wincing in sympathy as Dean let out a groan as Iron Man picked him up, the metal of the suit pressing into the gashes.

“This is humiliating,” Dean mumbled under his breath. Sam had to stifle a smile, despite the severity of the situation; Dean looked almost tiny in the arms of the suit. Sam opened the back door and carefully helped Tony lay Dean across the back seat. A moment later, his mouth was open in awe as the Iron Man suit peeled off of Tony and into a small suitcase which the genius set on the floor by Dean’s feet.

“Right.” Sam got into the driver’s seat, gesturing to the passenger’s side. Tony slid in, clearly admiring the car, and immediately turned around in the seat, ignoring the seatbelt in favor of putting pressure on Dean’s side with one hand. The other whipped out a phone, which he held to his ear.

“Jarvis, we’re going to be at the house in ten minutes. I need prep for a transfusion of-- what’s your blood type?”

“AB,” Sam answered for Dean.

“Type AB or O, that’s universal, right? Get the nurse from last time, she was good. Tell her to bring a good suture kit.” He gestured as the car reached the road and they sped off, Sam pushing the speed limit anytime he looked in the rearview mirror at Dean. Sam wasn’t sure where the line was between “bleeding a lot” and “bleeding out” but between the blood on his own hands, Tony’s hands, and
coating Dean they had to be getting pretty close to crossing it. “Turn left,” Tony threw in Sam’s direction before returning to Dean and the phone call. “Jarvis, we’re coming up on the main entrance. Black Chevy Impala.”

A set of large (and heavily but subtly fortified) gates loomed, sliding open as Sam drove up. There wasn’t time to ask questions; he continued through just as Tony announced “He’s out.” Sam craned around to look at his brother, who was now an unhealthy shade of grey and completely unconscious.

“Dean? DEAN?” Sam pressed harder on the gas pedal, the car speeding up the long driveway and coming to a halt where Tony indicated in an area that looked like a closed entrance to the world’s most expensive parking garage. Hands shaking, he turned off the car, flinging open the door and running back to the rear of the car. “Dean? Come on, wake up.” He gave his brother’s shoulders a little shake, looking frantically up at Tony.

“Let’s get him in the house, a doctor should be here any minute.” Sure enough, headlights were approaching in the distance and Sam caved.

“Okay. Grab his other side.” Carefully, they slid Dean out of the car, Sam supporting him as Tony activated the Iron Man armour and became fully encased in the suit. He scooped up Dean and hovered towards the mansion, the unconscious man in his arms.

Sam snatched the weapons bag and hurried behind him, ignoring the fancy house in favor of keeping his eyes on his brother. To his mild surprise, however, they entered through the garage. The huge door opened in front of them within a second, Tony entering and laying Dean on an out of place dentist-looking chair off to the side, then landing on a platform which peeled the armour off of him, stowing in in the floor.

Dropping the bag on the floor, Sam grabbed Dean’s hand, the frown on his face becoming deeper as he felt how cold the skin was. “Can you make it warmer? He’s freezing.”

“Jarvis.” Tony waved in a vague manner and Sam raised his eyebrows, but a moment later he could hear the air swish on, noticeably warmer.

“Okay then,” he muttered, only to be interrupted by the arrival of a petite young lady with a medical kit.

She took one look at Dean and immediately started an IV of fluids and a blood transfusion, running the lines into the arm on his non-mangled side. Sam helped her carefully peel off the layers of blood-crusted fabric on his side and leg, the dried blood flaking off and the semi-wet t-shirt leaving stains on their hands. The Doctor pulled out a pair of shears and cut off the remains of Dean’s t-shirt (Sam winced; it was one of Dean’s favorites), leaving him topless except for the amulet, hanging on its leather cord. Tony brought over a biohazard bag, dumping the soiled cloth in it and holding it open for the wipes as the doctor gingerly began to clean around the slashes in Dean’s side.

Thirty minutes into the transfusion, Dean’s hand was warming up in Sam’s and the frown lines in his forehead were beginning to feel less permanent. The doctor (who introduced herself halfway through the stitches as Dr Avery Talita) had just exchanged IV bags, pumping Dean full of warmed blood and antibiotics.

“So, Sam,” she looked at him with raised eyebrows. “What exactly took this big chunk out of your brother here?”

“We were doing a night climb on one of the cliffs,” Sam lied smoothly. “Closer to Mr Stark’s mansion than we thought, luckily. Dean’s rope slipped and he got gashed on some rocks. I would
have had to climb up to get my phone but Mr Stark had apparently been monitoring us since we accidentally got closer to his house and he figured out there was a problem and came to the rescue. He cut Dean out of the harness, called you, got us to the top.”

Tony nodded. Apparently he was willing to back Sam up, probably because he didn’t want to explain how he came to rescue a pair of brothers from a graveyard. “Well, he certainly hit the wrong rocks on the way down. You should double check all your equipment next time.” Dr Talita reprimanded. She finished the last stitch, wiping the area with another cloth before covering the still-unconscious Dean with a blanket and handing a plastic prescription container to Sam. “You seem to be responsible, despite the nighttime rock climbing. He needs two of these every twelve hours to help prevent infection. Call if it gets worse.” Sam nodded.

“Thanks,” Tony shook the Doctor’s hand. “I’ll transfer the payment, per usual.” She scooped up her bag and headed towards the door.

Sam took Dean’s hand again-- it was warming up nicely-- before letting him be and turning to Tony. “Got another blanket? I’d like to take this off and my clothing’s in the car.” The genius nodded, turning to cross the room and pull another fleece from a cabinet near a mini kitchen. The moment he turned, Sam sat and dropped one hand in to the duffel at his feet, pulling out another container of holy water and unscrewed it, holding it behind his leg where it couldn’t be seen. Tony patted-- was that a robot?-- on the head and held the blanket out to Sam.

As soon as his arm was extended, Sam’s hand flashed out, gripping Tony’s wrist and pouring a splash of holy water over the exposed skin of his arm. The other yanked his hand back, but it was in surprise, not pain. “What the hell?!”

“Sorry,” Sam screwed the lid back on the flask and dropped it into the bag. “Had to check.”

“Check what? Does this have anything to do with you burning a corpse and calling me for help from a graveyard in the middle of the night?” The younger Winchester looked up in surprise.

“Check for possession. You know the drill, right?”

“Um, no?”

Sam’s guard went back up.

“You’re not a hunter?” Tony opened his mouth, but Sam cut him off. “Actually, start at the beginning. How do you know our dad? Why is your name in his journal?”

It was Tony’s turn for surprise. “You don’t know?”

Sam just raised his eyebrows and made a “continue” gesture before stripping off his blood crusted jacket and shirt. He heard Tony hiss lightly at the sight of his ribs, which were now a brilliant purple, but Sam ignored him in favor of wrapping the blanket around his shoulders.

Tony sighed. “I’m your cousin.”

“Excuse me?!” Out of all the things Sam would have been expecting to hear, that had not been among them.

“Your dad is my cousin, actually. You’re like, my first cousin once removed or something.” Tony took in Sam’s confused face. “Your grandmother Millie Winchester, your dad’s mom, was my dad’s sister. She was a Stark before she married Henry Winchester.” Tony laughed. “You should see some of the pictures of John and I at the same age- we looked a lot alike.”
Tony stood, crossing the room again to grab two bottles of water, handing one to Sam before sitting back down. “We were as close as we could be for two kids so far apart in age; John’s fifteen years older than I am so he was more like an older brother. My dad was a crappy parent when he was at home but he wasn’t home most of the time, especially when I was younger. The family butler, Jarvis, would sneak me out of the house and take me on weekends to see your dad.”

He shrugged. “But soon Howard was home more and more and wanted his son to be putting his brain to use building things instead of visiting relatives that we were only related to by marriage, not blood. John and I sort of fell apart and John pretty much disappeared. I didn’t look for him; right about then my parents and Jarvis died in a car accident and I just…” Tony shook his head. Something in his voice told Sam he didn’t care very much for his father, but his mother and Jarvis were another story.

“But John showed up at the house where I was living in New York twenty-and-a-few years ago. You must have been one or two, Dean a few years older… five maybe. I couldn’t get much out of John except that Mary had died in a fire. He was talking crazy, about a demon he was hunting. You all stayed with me for a day, repacked the car, and then vanished again after asking me not to keep track of him.”

Tony shook his head. “If I had been the person I am now, I might have offered to take you two from him. I’m never going to be a good parent, if that ever happens, but he seemed a little obsessed and not particularly parent-y either and maybe I could have helped. Then again, what do I know?” He took a deep breath and a sip of water. “I don’t know what happened to him. John had always been pretty level headed but that night… uh-uh.”

The genius looked at Sam for a moment, as if expecting an explanation, but none was forthcoming. Internally, Sam was reeling. They were related to Tony Stark-- they, Sam and Dean Winchester, who spent their days hunting down monsters and hustling pool to make enough money for motel rooms and diner food, were related to Tony Stark, who was owner of a huge corporation and was Iron Man in his free time. And who apparently had a childhood friendship with older cousin John Winchester.

Tony, apparently oblivious to Sam’s mental struggle, went ahead with the story. “So I stayed away and the rest is history. John apparently raised you two without killing either of you. I pretty much became an alcoholic, took over Stark Industries, got kidnapped, shrapnel, Iron Man, the whole thing.” He tapped the shining power source in his chest, which Sam didn’t know very much about. “Never thought I’d hear from John again and I’m surprised he even told you about me. Where is he, anyway?”

Sam took a deep breath. This was only the third or fourth time he’d had to tell someone, but it wasn’t getting any easier. “He’s dead. Three weeks ago.”

Tony winced, setting his water on the workbench nearby and looking down. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What happened? If you don’t mind me asking.”

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The younger Winchester reached up to rub his temple, hesitating. Tony studied the young man for a moment. He was tall, taller than Tony was. The brown hair was long on his neck and curled around his ears and there were lines and bags around his eyes, evidence of a lot of sleepless nights. A necklace hanging on a leather cord held a circular metal amulet inscribed with a five-pointed star surrounded by flames. Sam opened his mouth to talk, but Tony held up a hand.

“You know what? Never mind. I never thought I’d say this, but forget I asked, for now. You need to sleep, so tell me in the morning.” A readout flashed near Tony; it was almost 3:30 am. “Later in the morning,” Tony amended.
“Look, we can’t stay here.” Sam wanted nothing more than to sleep for eight or ten hours on one of Tony’s (probably excellent) beds. But they hadn’t been expecting that demon in the graveyard and anytime they didn’t expect one, there were probably several more working together and gunning to get them for some reason or the other. “It’s not safe.”

Tony laughed out loud at that. “Kid, I’m Iron Man. There’s an AI watching the whole house. I think you’ll be fine to sleep for a while. Right, Jarvis?”

Sam didn’t jump when a metallic voice responded. “Of course, Sir.” He couldn’t argue with Tony’s logic, just nodded, scooping up his jacket and the duffle, swinging it over his shoulder and standing.

“Can we move him? To a bed?” Sam asked, gesturing at Dean. Tony considered for a second, then nodded. Sam reached out and shook Dean’s shoulder and to his mild surprise his brother’s eyes fluttered open. Apparently Dean had moved from unconscious to just sleeping at some point during his and Tony’s conversation. “Hey, Dean. Can you help us out a little? We want you in a real bed.”

“We?” Dean’s eyes flicked around, homing in on Tony and making his whole body tense.

“Relax, I checked him,” Sam soothed. “Dean. It’s fine. I’ll explain later.” He added when Dean didn’t move.

Dean’s shoulders remained tense, but a slight tremor in his hands betrayed how tired he really was. Tony held up his hands, wiggling the fingers in a “I come in peace” gesture before reaching forward and deftly removing the empty transfusion lines from Dean’s arms, attaching a cotton ball to the punctures with a few strips of medical tape.

The older Winchester swung his legs off the dentist chair and stood. “Woah.” Sam quickly pushed a shoulder under Dean’s arm and Tony took the side he had just removed the line from, steadying the man as he swayed on his feet.

“This way.” Tony guided them towards a glass wall, the smooth glass door sliding open as they approached. Sam frowned at the long, winding staircase, but Tony moved the trio past them and to a small recessed elevator. It was a short ride from there to the floor above. Sam paused a moment to take in the modern but comfortable looking furniture, the floor to ceiling windows, the edges of a fancy kitchen around the corner, the huge wallscreen that probably cost more than he and Dean could make in several months.

Dean tugged on his arm and he started moving again, Tony leading down the hall to a guest room with two beds. They settled Dean on the one closest to the window, Sam kneeling to pull off his brother’s boots. Tony produced another bottle of water and the container of medication, which Sam had forgotten, handing two pills to Dean. To Sam’s surprise, he took them without much protest. “Thank you,” Sam said to Tony, sitting on the other bed. “We’ll be out of your hair tomorrow.”

“We’ll see about that,” Tony grinned and winked. “You owe me a story.”

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Dean Winchester opened his eyes and groaned. His mouth was dry. His side hurt. And he was hungry.

“Sam?” He rolled over to look at where he had left his brother and shot upright, then went back down to his elbow, clutching his side. “Sammy?” This was definitely not the room in the motel. The walls were white and painted with tasteful accents. The bedding was clean and not atrociously patterned. One wall was floor to ceiling windows and looked out over the ocean.
“Good morning, Mr Winchester. The time is 11:34 am.”

“What the hell?” Dean scanned the room again, hoping beyond hope that this was some weird dream. “Sam?” he repeated. His side twinged again and he patted at it, feeling a layer of bandages he didn’t remember before.

He tossed his legs to the side and stood, taking a step and almost tripping on Sam’s duffle bag and the weapons duffle. Dean swore a blue streak but it was mixed with relief- the bag meant Sam was here somewhere. Carefully, he reached down and unzipped the top, pulling out a handgun and flicking off the safety.

“Mr Winchester, your brother requests your presence in the dining room.” The voice spoke again.

“Who are you.” It wasn’t a question.

“I am Jarvis, Mr Stark’s personal assistant.”

“Cut the crap and come out where I can see you,” Dean hissed.

“I’m afraid that is quite impossible; I am an AI created by Sir and have no physical form.”

An AI? Dean’s head was spinning, but he nodded, keeping his doubts to himself.

“Where am I going?”

“To the left and down the hall, Mr Winchester.”

One hand still gripping the handgun, the other pressed on his aching side, Dean made his way down the hall. He stopped about ten yards from what looked like an open living area, relief washing over him as he caught the sound of Sam’s voice.

“...and he told me to shoot him and kill him and the demon, but I, uh, couldn’t. And so the demon left and we were headed to go find it again when we got hit by an eighteen wheeler. Ended up in the hospital, all of us, but I was best off, then Dad, then Dean. Dean wouldn’t even wake up; Dad went off to run some errands and then back to his room. Dean woke up, I went to get a cup of coffee and came back to find Dad on the floor.”

Dean could hear the pain rising in Sam’s voice and cut in before he could go any further. “Sam?” he called, his voice rasping as he raised it. Continuing down the hallway, he looked up when the light at the end grew dim, only to see Sam and the other man (Tony Stark? Really?) standing there.

Dean lifted the pistol, hand steady from years of practice, aiming it at Stark. “Dean, no!” Sam lifted his hands in a placating gesture. “I checked him, he’s fine.”

“You sure?” Dean growled at the pair. Stark simply lifted his hands and his eyebrows, apparently not very perturbed by the gun being pointed at his head.

“Dean.” Sam’s voice was serious, if a little exasperated. “Tony’s good.”

Stark dropped his hands as Dean lowered the handgun. “Thanks, Sammy,” he said, tone amused.

“Only Dean gets to call me that.”

“I’m the only one who calls him that.”

The brothers spoke in unison, then exchanged a glance.
“Woah there, no need to get testy.” Stark flashed a hundred watt smile. “Why don’t you shower, Dean, while Sam fills you in. I’ll make breakfast-- or lunch -- and then we can sit and have a Q and A session.”

It wasn’t really a question at all but Dean nodded, turning where he stood and heading back down the hallway. He waited until the door shut behind Sam before snapping, eyes wide. “What’s going on?”

“Well.” Sam looked at him for a second. “We were digging up a grave and a demon came out of nowhere and attacked us. We finished the salt-and-burn and both got thrown around while I was trying to exorcise it. You were bleeding out on the ground but refused to let me call an ambulance, so I called people until someone answered and that someone happened to be the “Tony” in Dad’s journal and Tony happens to be Tony Stark, aka Iron Man.” The younger hunter said it all in one breath, preventing Dean from interjecting. “You passed out, we brought you back here, I checked him for demonic possession. He filled me in a little while you got stitched up. Get this; turns out we’re related to one of the richest guys on the planet.”

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“Hold on.” Dean squinted at Sam. “Did you just say we’re related to Tony Stark?”

Sam shrugged. “I’ll get you the details while you’re in the shower but long story short, he’s dad’s cousin. I told him we’re leaving today -- no sense hanging out here if there’re demons but we don’t know why -- and I’m filling him in on what’s going on.”

“Does he hunt? Does he know anything about hunting at all?”

“Um, no.” Sam rubbed the back of his head with one hand. “He actually thought Dad was raving mad when he showed up at Stark’s house not long after Mom died. But he saw the cemetery last night and I’ve given him an overview. He seems to accept it, but you know…”

Dean nodded. “There’s a whole different level between thinking you understand and seeing it for yourself, right.” He turned, carefully peeling off his ripped jeans and heading for the (very nice) shower. “I just hope he doesn’t have to see it.”

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Unfortunately, they were not that lucky; Sam and Dean were only on their third plate of pancakes when the shit hit the fan.

Having cleaned up, changed, and subtly armed themselves (like always) the brothers had joined Tony back in the kitchen/dining room, where the billionaire had managed to make quite the stack of pancakes.

“Help yourself,” he nodded at the plates. And they hadn’t hesitated. Tony sat down with a cup of coffee and looked at Dean.

“So. Sam filled you in?”

“Yeah.” Dean swallowed his mouthful, then set down his fork and held out a hand. “And I guess we haven’t been properly introduced. Dean Winchester.”

“Tony Stark.” They shook hands, Dean noting the calluses, scars, and rough edges of Tony’s hands. A billionaire he may have been, but a sissy keep-your-hands-clean man he surely wasn’t.

“Sam told me about your dad. I’m sorry to hear it. We hadn’t talked in years, but he always was good to me when we were kids.” Dean nodded his thanks, mouth full again, and Tony took a gulp of
coffee before pulling a tablet across the table and clicking it on and sliding it to Dean. “Here’s this, by the way. I knew I had this photo somewhere.” Dean’s throat tightened a little around the pancakes because the picture was undoubtedly John Winchester and Tony Stark. His father’s face was younger and his hair was dark and not streaked by the grey that Dean had always known. He had to have been a few years older than Dean was now; his early thirties, perhaps. Tony was young, seventeen or so, and he grinned up at John as if he could move the world.

Dean knew the expression well, could feel it forming on his young face as he shot perfect bullseyes in a row of bottles years before everything had gone to hell in a handbasket.

“What were you doing last night? Some…” Tony’s forehead creased. “Otherworldly thing?”

Sam grinned at the genius’ phrasing. “Trust me, if you were us it would be a whole lot believable.”

“Which is why we’re not staying more than a few hours,” Dean tacked on. “That demon last night? We weren’t expecting him. And where there’s one unexpected demon, there’s probably going to be a whole bunch trying to kill us and we’re not exactly miles and miles from the cemetery, right?”

Tony nodded slowly. “Do you need help? I’m Iron Man, that has to count for something?”

The older Winchester shook his head. “No.” Sam opened his mouth, probably to argue. “No, Sam. I get that this is Tony Stark and that he’s Iron Man. Hell, I even understand that he’s our cousin, which is weird enough. And that’s saying something. But he doesn’t know anything about hunting and I’m sure as hell not going to drag him into it, too.”

“Too late for that, Dean.” Dean’s heart plummeted as he whipped around to find a petite redheaded woman standing in the doorway.

“Pepper?” There was quite a bit of confusion in Tony’s voice and it rapidly turned to fear as the redhead “Pepper” looked at him, her eyes sliding into blackness in a way that was utterly familiar to the Winchesters.

“You know her?” Dean asked, sliding one hand into a pocket.

The genius nodded. “My CEO. And girlfriend.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean swore.

“Dean?” Sam looked at his brother for the plan.

“Stay back, Tony.” He slid the container of holy water out of his pocket, unscrewing the lid and holding it at the ready. Addressing the demon, he kept his voice level. “What do you want?”

“Why, Dean,” the demon exclaimed in a teasing tone. “We want you, of course. And your brother. And maybe now your new friend, whoever he is.”

“Why?” Sam asked suddenly. “Why now?”

“We’ve always wanted you boys.” She grinned, a feral expression for what appeared to be a rather kind face. “But now that daddy dearest is out of the way…” Pepper stepped forwards. “It’s just easier.” She reached out to him, as if to take his hand.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean saw Sam grab Tony’s wrist and slink out of the room, down the hallway to where they had spent the night.
“Well, you know what?” Dean took his own step. “You ain’t going to get us.”

He splashed her outstretched arm with holy water and she hissed, flailing backwards. Dean took the time to run down the hallway, charging through the door and over the salt line, only to dodge a swipe of Sam’s knife.

“What the hell!”

“Sorry, sorry! I can’t find the spray paint!”

Dean looked around frantically. There was nothing in the weapons bag and they were running out of time. He snatched the salt container from Tony, who was holding it with wide, lost, eyes and used it to draw a large circle on the floor by the foot of the bed.

“Get in the circle!” he barked at Tony, who complied quickly.

“Got something!” Sam had finally found a permanent marker in the bottom of the bag and began drawing a devil’s trap on the hardwood floor. He finished marking the familiar lines just as the Pepper demon appeared, gliding through the doorway where Dean had scattered the salt in his frantic dodge of Sam’s knife.

Somehow, they lucked out; focused on Dean, Sam, and Tony as she was, the demon didn’t look down and stepped right into the circle, smirk fading from her pretty face when she realized she was trapped. “Tricky, boys. I should have remembered that Daddy would have taught you everything.”

Sam stepped out of the salt circle, but pushed Tony back when he tried to join the hunter. “Stay there.”

She leveled a glare at Sam. “Why do you want us?” He asked, knife in one hand, holy water in the other as he stepped in front of Tony.

“Well, it’s not you so much, Sammy,” she practically purred, flicking her eyes over him. “It’s more Dean. He should have been ours, you know. Except John had to step in and make a bargain. Not that he was worth it. Neither of you were really worth much, you know. Your soul, his,” she made a throw away gesture. “Worthless. Couldn’t trade them for more than a few minutes of life. That’s not something you knew, was it Dean? That your soul isn’t worth any more to Hell than his. But that your Daddy is paying for your life in Hell anyway?”

“Shut up.” Dean’s voice was barely more than a whisper. His hands, which had been so steady through his massive blood loss the night before, were now shaking lightly, the tremors amplified by the silver knife he was clutching so tightly his knuckles were white.

“It is too bad, really it is.” She shook her head and tsked. “He would be here, alive and trying to kill Azazel and get his revenge instead of smouldering in the pit. You’d be dead, but who would miss you, Dean, really?”

“SHUT UP!” Sam roared. And then Sam and Dean’s voices were overlapping, chanting the latin exorcism at the top of their lungs.

Pepper threw her arms and head back, black smoke flowing from her mouth and into the ceiling before she collapsed on the floor. “Not yet.” Sam shoved Tony back again as he tried to leave the circle, holding him until Dean checked the woman.

But it wasn’t necessary; even as the older Winchester knelt to see if she had a pulse, Pepper began to stir. Sam let go of Tony and an instant later, he was on the floor next to the woman, scooping her up
“Dean?” His brother didn’t react, lines of tension still wrapping his shoulders and arms. “Dean.”

Sam reached out and grabbed Dean’s arm. “Dean. Look at me.” His brother turned his head, eyes empty. “Dean. She was a demon. She doesn’t know. She was lying. It’s not true, any of it.”

“Dad’s not here, Sam. And I am. That’s real enough.” Dean reared back and for an instant Sam wasn’t sure where the knife was going to end up. A second later, it was quivering in the wall opposite, Tony’s head had snapped up with such speed that Sam hadn’t even blinked, and Dean was gone from the room.

Sam groaned and crouched, running his hands over his head and gripping his hair in frustration. “Damn it.”

“How’s Pepper?” Tony asked quietly. “Is Pepper going to be okay?”

The hunter exhaled. “Yeah, she should be. She’s alive, she wasn’t possessed very long, and she didn’t kill anyone or anything crazy while she was under.”

Sam stood and walked over to get a better look at the woman slowly waking up on the bed. She was at least ten inches shorter than him, but then again so were most people, Tony included. Her hair, although he had been calling it “red,” was more of a strawberry blonde. The neat skirt and suit jacket she was wearing were mussed and damp from the salt and holy water but still looked good on her frame.

“We’ll have to explain everything to her; she’ll remember being possessed and it’ll be weird.” Sam shrugged. “Don’t worry, it’ll be okay.”

Tony looked up at him. “What about Dean? Will he be okay.”

The younger Winchester brother frowned. “I don’t know that one.”

“Tony?” A new voice interrupted their conversation and Sam looked down to find Pepper looking up at them. “What happened to me?”

“Don’t worry, Pep.” Tony picked up one of her hands, lifting it gently to his lips. “We’ve got it well in hand.”

To Sam’s relief, the CEO sat up slowly and rolled her eyes. “That’s worrying when you say it. Who’s ‘we’?” In response, Sam took a step forward and held out a hand to shake.

“Sam Winchester, Ma’am. Nice to meet you. My brother Dean is… around, also.”

“Nice to meet you too, Sam. Call me Pepper.” Her handshake was firm. “Did you get rid of…” Lifting one hand to her forehead, she tapped it twice. “Whatever it was?”

“Yes. I’m impressed; you’re not freaking out as much as most people after they get possessed.”

“Possessed?” At that, Pepper’s voice seemed to rise an octave.

“I’ll let Tony explain it. I need to find Dean so we can get out of here.”

“You’re not going anywhere until after dinner.” Tony said firmly. “Feeding you boys another good meal is the least we can do.”
“Look, Tony. I know you’re Iron Man and all but you’re all in danger while we’re here. You heard her, they want Dean and me and they want us bad.”

“I get it, Sam. But another few hours aren’t going to kill us and you’re going to need it to figure out what to do with Dean anyway.”

Sam hesitated.

“May I also remind you that it has been three hours past the recommended time to change the older Mr Winchester’s bandages and that he will soon require another dose of painkillers?” Jarvis chimed in.

“Fine. We’ll stay for dinner, but then we’re out of here.” Sam glanced at the floor marred by the devil’s trap. “Sorry about that. I’ll give you some tips before we head out.” He pushed off the edge of the bed and took a few steps towards the door before turning to retrieve Dean’s thrown knife.

“And Tony?”

The billionaire raised his eyebrows.

“Dean likes pie.”

There wasn’t a request, but Tony grinned and snapped a salute in Sam’s direction. “Understood.”

Sam wandered out to the living room to find Dean sitting on a large balcony overhanging the ocean, beer in hand. He sighed mentally; painkillers and alcohol weren’t exactly what Dean needed right now. “Hey.”

“Hey, Sammy.”

Dean didn’t even look at his brother, just kept his eyes on the ocean.

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

Sam sighed, out loud this time. “Okay. Can I look at your side?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Dean rolled his eyes and pulled off his shirt, balling it up in one hand while Sam started picking at the medical tape holding the gauze to Dean’s side.

Five hours later, Dean was still on the balcony.

Sam had decided to just try and wait it out and had taken Pepper up on her offer of the laundry machine for their dirty clothing and Tony up on a tour of the house. (He had to admit that even though he didn’t know too much about machines Tony’s workshop was amazing. And yes, maybe he had stared at the Iron Man suit more than was strictly necessary.)

Now he was cleaning and organizing their weapons collection from the night before on Tony’s fancy coffee table (what the hell, this is Tony Stark’s coffee table) while Tony bombarded him with questions about the supernatural as fast as he could think of them.
“So they emit an electromagnetic frequency? But only ghosts?” Sam nodded.

“We don’t know why. Power varies with anger and proximity of ghost, more or less.” He ran a cloth down the barrel of his favorite shotgun and laid it down with the others.

“Food’s here!” Pepper called from the entryway, entering the room laden with pizza boxes and pastry containers. She started stacking them on the coffee table as Sam hastily cleared it of weapons and looked over his shoulder outside.

“Dean, food,” he called.

“Not hungry.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “That’s a load of bullshit, Dean. You eat more than I do half the time.”

“Sam. I’m not hungry.” The younger Winchester threw his hands in the air.

“Fine,” he threw his hands in the air. “I give.”

Tony looked at him. “How much do you guys eat, anyway?”

“A lot. Hunting’s a hungry business.” Sam loaded his plate with pizza. “You’d be amazed how many small town diners there are across the United States.”

“How do you pay to eat?” The billionaire asked. “Hunting is probably not the highest income business?”

Sam snorted and looked down. He wasn’t always a big fan of the levels he and Dean stooped to in order to eat. Especially when he was sitting across from Tony Stark. “Credit card scams. Pool hustling. Usually works out okay.”

Pepper had been watching the exchange quietly but suddenly stood, stacking pizza on a plate and walking out to join Dean, sliding the porch door closed behind her. She set one plate on the table by the young man’s hand, settling with her own plate on her lap. Dean looked at her and smiled, but she could see how fake it was.

“So.” She kept her voice light, knowing it wouldn’t carry through the door and into the house. “You think you’re not worth anything.” Dean didn’t answer, didn’t even react. “Do you think Sam is worth it?” At that, his head snapped up. “Do you think that Sam would sell his soul for you? Make a deal?”

“Probably.” Dean’s voice was rough. “But it looks like that’s what Dad did a few weeks ago and now he’s burning in Hell for me. And Sam deserves better than that.”

“But you don’t?”

They sat for a few moments, Dean finally reaching out and half-heartedly snagging a slice of pizza.

Pepper sighed. “I got permission from Tony to tell you a few things. And he doesn’t tell anyone these things so you know he trusts you.” Dean snorted. Pepper ignored him. “When Tony was in Afghanistan, he was being held with a man named Yinsen. During their escape, Yinsen went ahead to buy Tony more time. He was shot, several times, and died in Tony’s arms.”

She reached out to cup the younger man’s cheek, gently forcing him to look at her. “He told Tony not to waste his life. Tony’s life meant something to Yinsen and since then Tony’s been making an
effort to turn it around to repay some of that debt. I don’t know your whole story or even half the parts, but I know that your father would want you to use your life well, Dean Winchester.”

The CEO stood, leaving Dean looking at her, mouth slightly open. “Now stop worrying your brother by feeling inadequate and sorry for yourself and come eat more pizza and some pie.” She swept back into the house without waiting.

“Huh.” Dean glared at his pizza for a moment then ran a hand over his face, shivering slightly as a cool breeze came off the ocean.

Sam watched from inside the house as his brother sat for a few more moments and almost melted into the couch from relief when Dean finally stood, mindful of his side, and strode back into his house. His eyes were still slightly more shadowed than Sam would have liked, but low self esteem was verging on a family hallmark now and there was no helping that.

“Pie?”

Sam rolled his eyes. Dean was clearly feeling better. “Not until you eat more.”

Dean rolled his own eyes in return. “Bitch.”

“Jerk,” Sam grinned.

Tony’s eyebrow inched up but he didn’t comment, just handed over the pizza box in front of Pepper, who was smiling unashamedly in Dean’s direction.

(They ended up staying until the next morning and when they got to their new motel the following night, neither Sam nor Dean were particularly surprised that both of their wallets now contained Stark Industries credit cards with notes telling them not to bother worrying about the limit (within reason) or that their phones had been seriously upgraded and now contained “Tony, the coolest cousin ever (also Iron Man)” and “Pepper Potts” along with a second note reminding them to pop in sometime when they were in the area.)

Chapter End Notes

This is the beginning of a string of stories taking place in between Supernatural episodes. It's actually minimally cannon-intrusive. But it will go at least through Supernatural Season 7 (I haven't watched further) and through The Avengers: Age of Ultron. Please feel free to message me or leave me a review if you have ideas or comments!

There's a picture somewhere that I based this off of pointing out how Jeffery Dean Morgan looks like RDJ, but I couldn't get it to show up here. Sorry. If you go to my tumblr (sassmasterjarvis) I've posted that and a family tree that goes with this.
It was very early Saturday morning when Tony got the text, his phone humming and falling off the workbench.

“Sir, I believe this message requires your immediate attention.”

Tony looked up from the suit gauntlet, screwdriver in his mouth, having completely missed the vibrating phone falling. “What?”

“Your phone, Sir. I believe you will want to see it.”

Tony hopped off the stool, dropping the screwdriver and swearing as it skittered across the floor as he bent down to retrieve the phone. He opened the message and almost dropped it again in surprise when he saw the name of the sender: Sam Winchester.

Need a place to crash for a day or two.

There wasn’t a formal request or a reason, just the bare bones sentence, but Tony didn’t hesitate. I’m at the Malibu house. I’ll have beds ready and Jarvis will open the gate.

Two minutes later the phone buzzed again.

Thanks. Will be there in about a day.

Tony grinned. Looked like he was expecting guests.

The mud was seeping through the knees of Sam’s jeans but he didn’t even care; it was a small penance, a small price to pay for the guilt of his brother going to hell in his place. The full downpour had tapered off to a drizzle, leaving Sam totally soaked on the ground of the small clearing outside Pontiac, Illinois.

He wasn’t sure why he had sent Tony the text message; wasn’t sure why he was going to Tony’s house instead of going hunting. Hell, he wasn’t even a hundred percent sure why he had picked Pontiac, Illinois, to bury his brother. It was secluded, it was beautiful in a desolate way. It was where Bobby had finally pulled the truck even with him and started yelling through the window for him to stop the car and calm down. It was where they had argued about Dean’s body, the shredded and mangled body of his brother who was dead, and what to do with him. Bobby wanted to give him a hunter’s funeral and Sam couldn’t argue with that; after all, if anyone deserved the honor, certainly Dean did.

But if he could do anything about it, Dean wouldn’t be dead long. And that meant no pyre.

At any rate, he needed a place to go and Bobby’s wasn’t going to cut it; Bobby helped him clean Dean up and dig the hole, but he had said some things he didn’t mean and Bobby had driven off, leaving Sam to cover his brother with dirt.

And to kneel on the ground in the mud, clutching the amulet he had given Dean all those years ago.
in a hand speckled with earth and his brother’s blood. The other hand had his cell phone, holding onto his last family member, no matter how distant, with every last fiber of his being.

Malibu. It should take thirty or thirty one hours to drive.

But he could probably do it in twenty four.

Twenty hours later, he was rip roaring drunk and staggering towards a crossroads, box in hand and ready to summon.

“Come on. Where the hell are you?”

He looked around, slowly rotating on the spot.

Finally, the man appeared.

“I was wondering whether to come or not. I mean, you shot one of my co-workers recently. Don't take this the wrong way, Sam, but you don't look so hot, buddy. I guess burying your brother didn’t agree with you.”

“Well?”

“Well, let's see that special little knife of yours first.”

Sam took out the knife and slammed it down on the nearby table.

“No devil's traps, either. I'm not here to play games.”

The demon sneered. “Well, let me guess. You want to make a deal. And 'round and 'round the Winchesters go. I'm sorry, Sam. That's not gonna happen.”

Sam snarled and faster than could easily be seen by man or demon, scooped up the knife and stabbed the demon in the hand.

“I don't want ten years. I don't want one year. I don't want candy! I want to trade places with Dean.”

There was a beat, then a smile full of false sympathy.

“No.”

Twenty eight hours after burying his brother, Sam Winchester pulled into the long and winding driveway of Tony Stark’s Malibu home. The sun was shining hot and bright and wrong because the weather in Illinois had seemed to understand what California didn’t: Dean Winchester was dead and the world shouldn’t be so bright anymore.

The silence of the place when the engine cut off seemed just as rude as the sunlight; only the waves broke the quiet as Sam opened the door and stood looking at the white mansion.

“Sam!” Tony came jogging out of the house and towards him, grinning and arms wide. “Hey! How’s it going? My friend Rhodey is here, but he'll be gone in a few minutes, I just need to finish downloading some new stuff for the War Machine armour. Sam--” Tony stopped abruptly.
Sam could only imagine what he looked like; fading cuts and bruises, clothing covered in mud and blood. It hadn’t seemed all that important to change them at the time, but Sam supposed he was probably a disaster. Eyes haunted, hair tangled. A mess.

Tony sniffed and frowned. “Sam, have you been drinking? And driving? Cause I used to do that and I can tell you right now that’s a very bad decision to make. Are you drunk?”

Sam grimaced. “Was earlier. Not anymore.”

If anything, this only made Tony look more alarmed. “What’s going on? Where’s Dean?” He looked into the car as if Dean was still there. The youngest and last Winchester couldn’t bring himself to say it. But Tony must have seen something was wrong because he took a few hasty steps forward and gripped Sam’s arm. “Sam. Come sit down. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

Sam let his shorter cousin pull and nudge him into the house, pushing him down on a leather sofa despite his disgusting clothing. “Sam. Sam, look at me.” Tony knelt in front of Sam.

Jarvis interrupted quietly. “I have informed Colonel Rhodes of the current situation and he is coming upstairs to say goodbye before leaving, Mr Stark.”

“Got it, J.”

Sam didn’t look up as Tony’s footsteps hurried away and there was a brief exchange of words. The feet returned, a pair of beat up sneakers entering his field of vision. “Sam. Hey, I need you to talk to me. Where’s Dean? Are you hurt? When’s the last time you slept? Let me call Pepper.”

One of Tony’s hands landed on Sam’s shoulder and he fought off a flinch. Dean. Dean always did that. “We, uh. Dean--”

His conversation with the demon the previous night began to run through his head again, intertwined with the somewhat panicked chat Tony was having with Pepper on his phone.

“Hey Pepper, Sam’s here, but, uh… we’ve got a problem…”

“I guess burying your brother didn’t agree with you.”

“Yeah, just him, no Dean.”

“And round and round the Winchesters go.”

“He’s not really responding to me and he looks terrible.”

“No.”

“Great. I’m going to try to get him cleaned up.”

“No.”

“Okay. See you soon. I’m not good at this.”

“No.”

“Sam.” A hand was touching his face, his chin.

“Please.” Sam’s voice was quiet, speaking to the demon in his memory. “Please.”
“Sam, look. I’m not good with this stuff, especially when I don’t have any information. I need you to give me something, kid.” Tony frowned as he ran a thumb along Sam’s dirty jawline. “Start at the beginning. Where’s Dean.”

A laugh, of all things, bubbled up in Sam, spilling out and probably making him sound a little hysterical because he shouldn’t be laughing it was just that where Dean was, what had happened to his brother was so far, so damn far from the beginning of the story. Throat tight, Sam whispered. “Dean’s dead.”

“What?” Tony asked. Sam wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t hear or if it was in surprise but he forced himself to say it again.

“Dean’s dead.”

“He’s dead? Oh my god. Sam, what happened?” Tony gripped Sam’s arm, fingers digging into his skin. “You know what, never mind. Let’s get you into a shower and get some food into you and then we’ll talk.”

“Okay,” Sam mumbled.

Half an hour later, Sam was sitting at the kitchen island in a pair of sweatpants and a clean t-shirt, poking at a plate of eggs and bacon without eating any of it. Pepper rubbed his arm, getting his attention.

“Sam, you need to eat something.” Pepper said quietly. “Trust me, you’ll feel much better.” Sam sighed and nibbled a bit of egg off the tip of his fork. “When was the last time you had an actual meal and a full night sleep?”

Sam didn’t meet her eyes. “A few days ago.”

“Kid. Eat.” Tony commanded, sliding Sam a glass of juice across the table.

Hesitantly, Sam took an actual bite of food and another and was soon scarfing down food like he hadn’t eaten in ages, which he hadn’t, really. It was good food, hot and not from a diner, another rarity for them -- him. Just him.

He pushed the plate away, nodding at Pepper. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Sam.” She smiled at him, taking the plate and popping it in the dishwasher while Sam looked over the room. It didn’t look too different from his memory of the room a year and a half ago. Really, not much had changed; the paintings had been swapped and the furniture moved but the walls and space and large glass windows were the same as they had been when he and Tony had carried a half-asleep Dean across to the bedroom.

“Hey, Sam.” Tony’s voice cut through Sam’s memory and he turned to see that the billionaire and his girlfriend had picked up their own coffee cups and were moving to the couch. Sam followed, running a hand through his damp hair and dropping listlessly onto the nice sofa. He looked at Pepper and Tony across from him, leaning into each other. Tony had his standard jeans and a band t-shirt that Dean probably would have recognized. Pepper had a pretty blouse tucked into jeans and was barefoot.

“Look, if you don’t want to tell us details, don’t. But we need to know what’s going on so we can help figure this out, okay?”
“Okay.” It came out as a whisper and he cleared his throat. The beginning. “Okay. Um, so. We came to visit the second time a little after New Year’s, remember? A few months after we left here that time, I was fighting this guy. I knocked him out, I thought. But, uh, he was awake and just when Dean and Bobby got there he, um. Stabbed me. Through the.” He made a vague gesture towards the center of his back. “Not even a monster, just a stupid human.”

He looked up to find both Pepper and Tony with wide eyes. Tony was holding the handle of the coffee cup so tightly Sam was surprised it hadn’t broken. “I died, don’t really remember. Dean only lasted two days before he went to the crossroads.” Tony inhaled sharply.

“He made a deal, I woke up and we’ve spent the last year hunting demons and trying to track a demon named Lilith, the absolute bitch who held Dean’s deal.”

Sam swallowed. “The Trickster told me that I wasn’t going to be able to stop Dean from dying I guess he was right.”

He took a deep breath. “Earlier this week Bobby found a last minute way to try and track Lilith so we could kill her before Dean’s deal was up. We got there, fought our way into the house. But we didn’t… it was midnight and we tried to kill Lilith but she got the door open and the hellhounds… they… I tried to stop her but… his chest was…”

Sam broke off. Pepper had moved from one couch to the other at some point and she reached out to hold one of his massive hands in her own small ones. “Bobby and I took him out and I drove… we ended up in Pontiac, Illinois. Buried him there.” He reached up to clench the amulet he had given Dean, the edges digging into this palm. “And then I drove.”

Sam looked up at Tony and the genius could see the depths of pain in Sam’s eyes threatening to swallow him whole. “And you drove until you got here? What happened to Bobby?”

“We, uh. Argued. About what to do with Dean. Bobby wanted to give Dean a funeral pyre. The Hunter way. But I wouldn’t let him. So he helped me clean Dean up, laid him in the hole, and went home. Said I should call him when I was done.”

“Did you?”

“No.” Sam shook his head. “I can’t, not now.”

Pepper looked sympathetic. “Why not?”

“Because…” Sam hesitated, debating whether to tell Tony and Pepper about the previous night’s attempt at a deal. To hell with it, he decided. “I wanted him buried instead of burned so I could bring him back. And I tried, god, I tried.” Tears were pricking at the corner of his eyes but Sam refused to let them fall. “I tried to make a deal but they won’t let me, they want Dean in hell.”

By now, Pepper was crying outright and it was clear that Sam was barely holding himself together at the edges. “I should go.” His voice cracked in the middle.

“You should sleep,” Tony said firmly. “Go to bed, Sam. You can make decisions in the morning, but for now you need to rest.”

Sam opened his mouth again, but Tony didn’t let him get the words out. “Bed.” Sam closed his mouth, shoulders tensing and the line of his jaw becoming more pronounced, but he didn’t argue, just stood and left, Pepper’s hand sliding out of his own as he got up from the couch walked down the hall.
Tony switched couches, pulling Pepper into his arms and resting his chin on top of her head while she cried, silently mourning the loss of Dean Winchester.

The next morning, Tony stumbled into the kitchen, hair tumbled and smelling like motor oil, only to find Sam considerably more put together than he had been. He was talking on the phone with a pistol next to his breakfast plate while Pepper drank a cup of coffee, expression nervous.

“I know, Charles. Look, it has to be a ghost if it-- no, Charles, calm down. Are you a hunter or not? Work with me. Did you try the iron? Try it. I’ll be there in a few hours, try not to die. Iron and salt, Charles.”

Sam rolled his eyes and ended the call, scooping up the gun and neatly wiping down the barrel before sliding it through the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back. “Got a hunt,” he told his cousin, somewhat unnecessarily. “Acquaintance of mine in northern California. He needs some help ganking what may or may not be a particularly vicious ghost.”

Tony nodded.

“I’ll. Um,” Sam fidgeted with his fork, the highly assured mask of the hunter slipping a little bit, “stay in touch,” he finished. He wouldn’t, probably, Tony thought. But he could see the haunted look seeping back into the young man’s eyes so he didn’t press.

“Good. Stay safe, Sam.” Tony reached out and gathered his much taller cousin into a hug, surprising Sam. After a moment, however, Sam reciprocated awkwardly and briefly wrapped his arms around Tony. Pepper stood and clicked around the table in her heels, giving Sam a hug of her own before aiming a pointed look at Tony.

“You need to clean up by this afternoon. Don’t forget the board meeting.” Sam’s lips quirked into a faint smile at her scolding and he raised his eyebrows at Tony before bending down to scoop up his duffle bag. He clapped Tony on the shoulder one more time and headed for the door.

Tony watched from the window as Sam climbed into the long black car, sparing only a brief glance at the empty passenger seat as the engine roared to life and he drove away.

Chapter End Notes

A small portion of this is taken directly from the transcript of Supernatural, season 4 episode 9. I do not own or have any rights to Supernatural or the Avengers.
He Lives

Note: This takes place near the beginning of Season 4, around episode 4 or 5.

Tony Stark was bored out of his mind.

In the thirty minutes that he had been in the morning board meeting, he had mentally designed one suit upgrade, two changes to the projector system Mr Badly-Cut-Suit was using to show camera footage from the new reactor in Taiwan, a better window opacity setting to cut glare without reducing the meagre late September heat absorption, and a new coffee machine. He clued in briefly as the executive next to him leaned in and pointed out that their cost profit something or the other needed a new upgrade and that was boring so he didn't pay much attention to that either.

His phone rang, causing Suit to give him a look from across the room, but Tony just grinned back cheekily and looked down to send the call to voicemail.

And then he saw the caller ID.

Dean Winchester.

He answered, ignoring the amused and slightly annoyed looks he was getting for interrupting the debrief yet again. “Look,” he hissed into the phone, drawing concerned looks from the people around him and making Suit stop talking in the front of the room. “I don’t know who you are or how you got the phone you’re on, but this isn’t funny.” He ended the call, facing forwards and putting on a face of extreme concentration until Suit stopped staring at him and resumed talking.

And then the phone rang again.

Caller ID. Dean Winchester.

“No! It’s not!” Tony stood up, knocking his chair back from the table in his haste, raising his voice, almost shouting into the phone at his ear. “Dean is dead. Stop calling me. Destroy this phone. Or I will find you.” This time, silence echoed around the room as he hung up, settling heavily onto everything like a thick dust. It was overwhelming.

And it was shattered as the phone rang again.

Caller ID: Sam Winchester.

“How?” Tony’s voice was hoarse. “How? You said that he…” he cut off and shook his head. “A few weeks ago? And is he… okay? I mean, if he was in Hell, that can’t be good in the long…” Tony trailed off again, then grinned. “Well, he’s back. That’s great, Sam. Can I tell Pepper?”

‘Sam’, whoever that was, must have agreed because Tony’s smile grew brighter. “Awesome! We’re in New York, but don’t forget we can always fly out to the Malibu house or have Jarvis let you in
remotely if you need a change from the seedy motels and what not. You need to stop by sometime so I can smack your brother for making me comfort you back in May. He knows I’m not good with that emotional crap.” Tony laughed and listened for a second. “Oh! Did he find the ipod dock?”

Tony quickly wrapped up the call and immediately looked at Jarvis’ nearest camera. “J, get Pepper up here, now!”

“Mr Stark, what’s going on?” Suit asked, bewildered by the entire conversation. Hell? Someone was dead, but apparently it wasn’t a problem and he was calling Tony?

“Family business,” Tony shot back immediately, but there was no malice to his words and he was still smiling like someone had hung the moon for him. At that moment, the doors opened and Pepper flew in with an expression on her face that everyone who worked in the Tower had come to associate as “trauma mode.”

“Tony! What’s wrong? Jarvis said to come up now, that you’d gotten a phone call from Sam--”

Tony cut her off by scooping her up and spinning her in a circle.

“Dean’s alive!” the genius whooped.

Pepper gasped and clapped one hand over her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. “How? I mean, Sam said that the deal?” she broke off. “He’s really alive?”

“He’s really alive. He called me, but I didn’t believe it so I hung up and Sam called and you know Sam wouldn’t lie about this.”

“He’s not dead?”

“This calls for some celebration!” Tony grabbed Pepper’s hand, pulling her out of the room and down the hall towards the elevators that lead to the rooftop bar and lounge area. The CEO didn’t even object that he was leaving a meeting. “Jarvis, make us dinner reservations….”

His voice trailed off as the door slid shut, leaving behind a rather confused group of executives.

Everyone looked at Suit. He shrugged. “It’s Mr. Stark.” he said, as if that was all the explanation anyone should have needed.

Which it was, really.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Note: This takes place after Season 4, Episode 16 “On the Head of a Pin”

The Impala drove up the long driveway to the white clifftop mansion, engine roaring. It cut off in front of the building and two men got out, one taller than the other.

Tony winced as he sped closer to the house, the figures coming into view. Dean looked like someone had beat him half to death and Sam looked exhausted. Both of them looked haunted, shoulders hunched slightly. They stood for a moment, each leaning against the classic car and watching each other’s backs.

He could see the moment the repulsor sound registered and he became visible against the blue sky. Both dropped hands back towards their pockets and Dean also reached for a flask sitting on the dashboard before recognition took hold of the duo. Dean kept the flask but released his grip on whatever weapon he had been holding. Sam kept his hand inside his jacket.

Tony swooped over the edge of the cliff and hovered down to land in his usual kneel about ten yards from the car and the two brothers. “Winchesters.” The metallic voice greeted them as Iron Man turned into Tony, the faceplate sliding up on the metal suit and revealing the familiar goatee and smile of the genius. “What’s up, guys? Didn’t know you were coming.”

Dean gave him a half shrug. “Neither did we. Got a call, headed this direction, but another hunter took care of it. So.” He shrugged again, as if to say “what are you going to do?”

“Go on in the house, I’ll meet you there in a second. Gotta take the armour off.” Tony tilted his head in the direction of the garage the Winchesters knew opened into the workshop. Sam nodded and Tony took off, leaving them to unburden themselves of some of their weaponry before walking to the front door.

Jarvis let them in and they were only a few steps inside when a deep voice spoke from in front of them. “Well, you’re not the person I expected to see.”

A second later, Dean was half a step in front of Sam, pistol in hand, and Sam had the demon-killing knife out and ready on the side Dean wasn’t covering. “Who are you?” Dean growled.

The man held up his hands. He was bald, tall (only a few inches short of ‘Sam tall’), and wearing a leather eye patch and long black coat. “Director Nick Fury of SHIELD. I just came to talk to Stark, didn’t expect him to have the Winchesters visiting him.” Both brothers tensed further at the use of their real names.

Before Dean could respond with something rude and probably snarky, Tony’s voice rang through the space. “Nick! I thought we agreed you would stop breaking into my house?” Sam and Dean relaxed a little; the genius seemed amiable enough. Both dropped their weapons, but they remained in hand. “It’s okay, guys. I did some redecorating after your first visit.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Doesn’t explain how he knows who we are.”

“Sam and Dean Winchester, experts on the Occult, black magic, the unnatural,” the man rattled off. “We don’t know much about your personal lives, if that helps.”
“We?” Sam asked, looking between Tony and Fury.

“SHIELD,” Fury responded. “Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division. We take care of the big stuff; the spies, the assassins, Thor’s visit to New Mexico, the international assassins.”

“But not the ‘big stuff’ like the demons and ghosts and whatnot?” Dean asked.

“You and your brother seem to be doing a good enough job, along with the rest of the hunters. No need for us to interfere when we don’t need to. Although, I am interested to know why two rather infamous hunters are here at the home of Tony Stark, the biggest thorn in my side.” Both brothers looked at Tony, who smirked at the comment.

“They helped me out with a demon problem a while ago,” the inventor half lied.

Dean nodded. “We’re here today just because we were in the area on a hunt that got finished before we arrived and just thought we’d check in. Just because you got one demon, doesn’t mean you ganked them all.”

Fortunately for all involved, Fury seemed to accept the lie. Dean sure as hell didn’t want him knowing anything more about them and that included the fact that they were related to Tony Stark, who he seemed to have a working relationship with.

“Well.” Director Fury nodded at both of them. “Nice to put faces to the names.” He turned away from the brothers to face Tony directly. “I brought you some information about the Initiative. And the helicarrier designs for the panels you had in mind. Call if you have questions.” Without waiting for a response, the man swept from the house and an engine was heard a moment later, taking him away.

“Friend of yours?” Dean asked, stowing the pistol and stepping forward.

“Acquaintance. We don’t get along.” Tony’s words were belied by his grin. “Mostly we just annoy each other.”

“You ‘redecorated’?” Sam asked.

“Devil’s traps under the floorboards at every exit, entrance, and a few other places just to be safe.” Tony shrugged. “Least us non-hunters can do.” He stepped forwards and gave Dean a rough half-hug, surprising the younger man. “How are you guys doing? It’s been a while. Glad to see you alive.”

Sam sprawled on one of the fancy couches. “We’re in once piece. More or less.”

Dean nodded but didn’t say anything, Tony noticed. He didn’t comment. “Well, I’m ordering dinner. Anything you want?”

Three hours later, they were halfway through the Lord of the Rings. The table was stacked with pizza boxes and the glass walls reflected the bright stars of the clear California night. Dean was asleep on the couch, head on Sam’s legs and Sam was buried in a blanket, tracking the large screen as Orcs chased the Fellowship through the Mines of Moria. The movie was loud, the soundtrack roaring under the yells of the monsters, but Dean didn’t wake up.

It was also loud enough that Sam didn’t notice anything was wrong until Dean shifted against his legs. Half a second later, he was up off the couch, pulling his legs from Dean’s head and kneeling next to him. “Dean. Dean, wake up.”
Tony stopped the movie and slowly brought the lights up. “Dean. DEAN.” Dean’s entire body shuddered and his eyes flashed open, one callused hand shooting out to grip the front of Sam’s shirt. “Hey, hey, you’re awake, we’re at Tony’s house in Malibu. Dean, look at me.”

The green eyes roved over the paused television, the anxious billionaire, and the otherwise empty room, lingering on the spot where the devil’s traps were hidden under floorboards before setting on Sam’s eyes. Dean blinked once before taking a deep breath and letting go of his brother’s shirt and running a lightly trembling hand over his eyes.

“Hell?” Sam asked. He knew the answer, of course, but it had become routine to ask.

“Hell,” Dean confirmed, hauling himself into a sitting position. “I’m fine.”

He cracked open another bottle of beer and neither Sam nor Tony argued.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the reviews!
Looks like we're meeting Bruce soon!
Checking In

Chapter Summary

Maybe a few weeks before and then immediately after “Jump the Shark” 4.19

(In summary of events: Jump the Shark is when the brothers meet up with Adam, their illegitimate half brother. They argue a lot, divided over what they should and shouldn't teach Adam about The Life. At the end, it is revealed that Adam and his mother are both ghouls; Dean discovers the real Adam and Mrs Milligan's dead bodies and the two ghouls tie up and torture Sam, slitting his arms deeply, before Dean shows up and kills them.)

By the time Sam and Dean found out about the attack on Manhattan, it was already over. They had been driving across the country, heading to a ghost hunt. Dean was listening to one of his cassette tapes, Sam had been asleep. So they didn’t even know aliens, of all things, had attacked New York until they got to the motel and Dean had flicked on the television to find reports on the aftermath.

“Huh. Something weird happened to someone other than us.” Dean commented, watching footage of Captain freaking America. Sam leaned in.

“Is that the Thor they’re talking about? Pagan God? Son of Odin?” Sam turned to grab his bag and dig for the journal but looked back as Dean started swearing. Footage played of the Iron Man suit falling from a hole in the sky.

“Shit. Shit, shit, this is not good.”

“Shut up, Dean! I can’t hear.” They listened until the newscaster said that Iron Man had been seen since and was apparently uninjured. Dean breathed a sigh of relief but Sam grabbed his phone, put it on speaker, and dialed.

“Hey, guys.” Tony answered. He sounded tired.

“Hey, Tony,” Sam said. “We wanted to check you were okay.”

“Yeah, you may have beat us out on the weirdness factor this time,” Dean added.

Tony snorted at that. “You think? I’ve got a guy who turns into a gamma-fueled behemoth and is also a brilliant physicist living with me right now.”

“But you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Little sore. Tired. But okay. Living in the New York building for now, even while it’s under repairs, so stop by if you’re in the area, like usual.”

“Will do.” Dean said and they wrapped up the call.

“Man,” Dean said, rolling over on the bed. “Can you imagine going to live ‘in your other home’?”
Sam shook his head, looking around the seedy motel room.

Several weeks later, Dean looked down at the smouldering pile of ash that used to be their half brother Adam Milligan. “I think we need to take a visit.”

Sam glanced sidelong at his older brother. “To see who? Bobby?” His eyebrows creased.

“The other other part of the family. Just to check in.” The eyebrows went up.

“Got it.” Sam felt it too, the needing to know that Tony was alright, that he was actually Tony. Fifteen minutes later, they were back in the car and headed to New York.

It was almost nine at night and Tony was just lowering the container of liquid nitrogen into the steel chamber when his phone rang. He swore and both he and Bruce’s hands jerked, almost dropping the fragile container. He took a few seconds to carefully set the container down and stepped to the side, stripping off his gloves and fishing in his pocket for his cell phone.

“Damn it, Dean.” Tony said, without any preamble.”You almost made me blow up the lab.”

“Sorry.” Dean replied, voice slightly tinny over the phone. Tony could tell he had a smirk on his face. “Look, we’re in town and need to check a few things with you. Where should we leave the car?”

“By ‘in town’, do you mean New York?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. In town.” Dean answered, as if it were obvious. “We can see the tower, I need a place for the car and we can walk.”

Sam had spent most of the car ride into New York City craning his neck to look out the windows. He was entitled-- they didn’t really spend a lot of time in the big cities of the United States-- they were small town sort of guys. Besides, his arms and side hurt where the two ghouls had sliced them open and he was exhausted and the skyscrapers were a nice enough distraction. Tony directed them via phone to the base of the building and then to an underground parking garage filled with classic cars Sam suspected were Tony’s own. They took the elevator up; it was large enough to fit both of them and their duffel bags of clothing and weapons with room to spare.

They stepped out just in time to hear a man say “WHAT are real? Did you just say demons are real?” Sam sighed and Dean looked a little like he wanted to slam his head into the nearest solid surface, of which there were plenty; the entire floor seemed to be made of glass and steel and looked pretty good, considering it had been mildly destroyed by aliens only a month or so prior.

“Did you really think right now was a good time to start telling the person you’re living with about that?” Sam called out and Tony whipped around and bounded across the room to them. The other followed, face covered in amusement, confusion, and exasperation. Tony clasped hands with both boys, not missing (Sam was sure) Sam’s slight wince.

“Good to see you both in one piece,” he said, his standard greeting, although he lingered on Sam with one raised eyebrow. Sam just shrugged.

“The usual.” Dean snorted, but Sam ignored him in favor of holding out a hand to Doctor Banner,
who looked mildly surprised at the gesture. “Nice work with the aliens.”

“Hey!”

“You too, Tony.” Dean shook hands with the physicist. “Dr Banner, I’m guessing?”

“Bruce, please.” The man was considerably shorter than Sam, with dark curly hair and wire framed glasses that sat in a slightly crooked fashion on his nose. “You’re Sam and Dean?” They nodded.

“Sam,” the younger Winchester introduced himself and stifled a yawn with one had before he gestured at his brother. “And Dean. Winchester.”

“You don’t seemed too concerned about my… ability.” Bruce said frankly.

“We spend most of our time with things trying to kill us. Usually they can’t be controlled. So someone who has themselves taken care of and didn’t get their powers by selling their soul is a nice change,” Dean said, shrugging. “Besides, Tony and Pepper apparently trust you.”

“Right.” Bruce didn’t really seem to know how to respond to that, not that Sam could blame him.

“So how do you two know Tony, exactly?”

“Tony! Didn’t you tell him anything?” Sam asked.

“Um. No?” he responded. “Names, I guess? Bruce, Sam and Dean are cousins of mine. Their Dad was my cousin, actually, so they’re cousins once removed or whatever.”

Bruce’s eyebrows shot up at that. “So you knew that your cousins who hunt demons were probably coming to visit at some point while I, a person who turns into a large green monster when my heart rate gets too high, was living with you? And you didn’t think to warn me first?”

“We also hunt other things,” Dean chimed in unhelpfully, instead of commenting on the rest of the statement. “Ghosts, werewolves, vampires, wendigos. That sort of thing.”

Sam cut the verbal exchange. “Can we give Bruce the entire run down in the morning? Dean, you need to sleep more than I do, at least I napped in the car.”

“Fine.” Dean agreed reluctantly, which told Tony how exhausted they must have been. He looked at Tony. “Did you ‘redecorate’ here when you remodeled?”

Tony nodded. “Same as the Malibu house. Traps under windows, doors, and other locations. Just the residential floors, though.”

“Salt?”

“In the kitchen.” Tony led them across the open floor to a large kitchen that was bigger than any cooking space Sam had seen outside a restaurant. He opened a lower cabinet to reveal a dozen large containers of salt.

“Great. Can’t be too careful.” Dean nodded his approval and Sam stashed one of their bags of weapons behind the couch, yawning again as he hefted the other to take to their rooms and headed towards the door. “Woah there, Sandman, you promised you’d let me check your arms and side when we got here.”

“I’ll take the bags.” Bruce scooped up the clothing duffels and headed off down the hallway.

“Knew it. What happened this time?” Tony immediately regretted his question when both brother’s
faces darkened.

“About that. Mind if we do some checks?” It was phrased as a question, but the way Sam’s hand went inside the edge of his jacket said otherwise.

“Go ahead. The usual?”

Dean nodded. Tony stepped forwards, nicked himself with a silver knife, took a sip of holy water, and held a handful of salt for a few seconds. “And, um.” Dean held out a notebook they had scrawled the sigil on. “I need you to touch this.”

Tony raised an eyebrow but complied, settling his hand on the page for a second before pulling back and bringing out a first aid kit to get a bandaid for the nick. “What was that one?”

“Let us know if you’re a ghoul or not.” Dean’s voice was flat. “Apparently the ordinary tricks don’t work, so short of trying to fatally shoot you and seeing if you die or not this is the only thing we have at the moment.”

“Ah. And you’re not going to check Bruce?”

Sam frowned at the door the physicist had gone out of. “I don’t know if he can even become a ghost or anything. So no.”

“What would it do if I was a ghoul?” Tony asked.

“You would have been knocked on your ass long enough for us to find something to kill you with,” Dean responded.

“So ghouls are what happened?” Tony repeated. “What do they do?”

“They change how they look,” Sam replied tersely, seating himself at the kitchen table. “Generally, they eat dead people, but not always. Side first.” The last was directed at Dean, who was examining Tony’s first aid kit from his position in the chair next to Sam.

“Jacket off,” Dean shot back, pulling out wads of gauze, wipes, and scissors out of the kit.

Carefully, Sam peeled off his jacket and the plaid shirt underneath it, leaving him in just his under t-shirt. Tony took another seat across from him. He winced when the extent of the bandaging on Sam’s forearms was clear. Sam pulled up the side of his shirt and Dean carefully peeled off the medical tape and bandage covering the gash in his brother’s side. “Pretty good.” Dean cleaned it off quickly and retaped a new layer of gauze over it. “Arms.”

Sam obediently held out the nearest arm, his left, to Dean so he could start unraveling layers of bandages. Bruce chose that moment to walk back in and gasped at the deep cuts. Tony’s face was dark; he abruptly stood and went to pour a drink. “Hey! Make me one,” Dean called.

“Sam?”

“Nah. I’ll take a water, though. I’m on some painkillers--”

“-- Not that that’s ever stopped us.” Dean cut in.

Sam shrugged. “For once, might as well try to survive the night without copious amounts of alcohol and drugs.”

“Your loss, dude,” Dean took a swallow of the drink Tony had poured him. “This is good stuff.”
“Of course it is, I’m a billionaire.” Tony tossed a bottle of water to Bruce, who was standing and watching the banter with a bemused expression, and unscrewed the top of another to slide to Sam. Sam raised an eyebrow at Bruce, who was now standing next to them, examining the slashes in Sam’s arm and the stitching holding the skin together over them.

“I don’t get drunk,” the physicist responded. “Probably not a good idea to lose enough control the Other Guy comes out to play.” He nodded at Sam’s arm. “Who did the stitching? Hospital?

“We tend to not spend a lot of time in hospitals. Dean did it.” Sam winced as Dean poked a particularly tender spot while cleaning the dried blood away from the cut.

“It’s very neat. Nice job.” Bruce said. “I did a lot of field medicine in third world countries and you could probably give me a run for my money.”

Dean smirked. “Despite the fact you’ve got to be Tony’s age and thus at least fifteen years or whatever older than me, I would be willing to bet all the money I have and the Impala-- since all the money I have isn’t really more than a few hundred bucks at the moment-- that I’ve been doing stitches for much longer than you have.”

Bruce looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, speaking over Tony, who was complaining that they wouldn’t be so broke if they used the credit card he had given them. “Guess you probably didn’t have a normal childhood either?”

It was Dean’s turn to look askance at Bruce. Sam poked him with the still bandaged right arm. “Dean. Work.”

“Where did that come from?” Dean asked, finishing wrapping Sam’s left arm and starting on the other.

“Trust me, nobody around here’s had a normal childhood. You’ll fit right in if you ever meet the rest of the Avengers.” Bruce grimaced, tilting his head to get a better look at Sam’s right arm. This one had not only a long gash down the center, but a secondary cut slicing across higher, near the elbow. “If I didn’t know better, I would say it looks like you--” he cut himself off.

“Tried to kill myself?” Sam finished dryly. “Don’t worry, we’ve got too many things trying to do it for us. I would hate to make their lives easier.”

“Plus, death isn’t always exactly a pleasure trip.” Dean growled, looking intently at Sam’s arm, cleaning off the gash and stitches before scooping a new piece of gauze off the table and rewrapping him. Bruce raised his eyebrows and didn’t comment. Apparently, nothing fazed him. He’d known the Winchesters for all of an hour and didn’t seem as shocked as most people did, just curious.

Sam took another sip of his water and stood, putting the plaid shirt back on but just picking up the jacket. “Well, it’s been fun but I’m going to bed.”

“Whatever, dude.” Dean rolled his eyes. “Pain meds are in the bag.”

“Dean.” Sam looked at him meaningfully, the “you need to sleep” going unsaid but not unseen.

“I’m fine, Sammy. Go to bed.”

That was a Winchester ‘fine’ if ever Tony had heard one, but Sam sighed and looked at Tony, who directed him down the hall towards the rooms they were staying in.

“Sorry about that,” Dean said to the scientists. “It’s been a long… few years. And the last couple
“Please,” Bruce waved him away. “I know the feeling.”

“Dean?” Tony asked. “What happened?”

“Well. We got a call on one of Dad’s burner phones. Kid named Adam Milligan. Turns out he was our illegitimate half brother.” Tony winced. Dean drained the rest of the glass, holding it out for Tony to refill it silently. “Only, the ghouls got there first. You heard Sam. Dad killed a ghoul, its kids wanted revenge. They killed Adam’s mom and Adam, took the kid’s shape and called us.”

Dean looked like he wanted to throw something. “And we fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. They split us up, divided us over Adam, then tied Sam up and started to bleed him out. I found Adam’s body and what was left of a few other people in a crypt, escaped and got to Sam, took out the ghouls and stopped the bleeding.”

There was a moment of heavy silence. “We gave Adam a hunter’s funeral pyre. The kid deserved it. He got out of the life. He was never in it, really. Pre-med.” Dean snorted. “Dad took him to baseball games on his birthday.” The hunter shook his head and stood. “And he got dragged into it anyway.” He looked over at Tony, who was stony faced and slumped in his chair. “Came to check on you. You might be an Avenger and all that, but the crap out there sure won’t care. We’ll probably only be here a few days, max.”

“I understand.” Tony nodded. Dean looked over at Bruce.

“Nice to meet you, Bruce. Sorry you had to get caught up in this.”

And he stalked off to bed.

Sam and Dean ended up spending three days at the Tower. They cleaned weapons, ate a lot, and had several hushed conversations about stopping Lilith and the Seals. Unfortunately, Pepper was on a business trip, but Tony promised to say hello to her from the boys.

But Sam also spent quite a bit of time with Bruce “nerding out” about this and that, as Dean put it. A little math (which apparently Sam had been pretty good at in school), a little biology, quite a bit of overseas lore (which Bruce had picked up a surprising amount of during his self-imposed exile). Dean and Tony put in a few hours in the garage, talking about the cars and touching up the Impala with Tony’s high class equipment. Fury had showed up one day and spent nearly a half hour trading insults with Dean and Tony until Sam dragged his brother away and let Fury get some work done.

The second night had been bad. The first night, exhausted and full of alcohol and painkillers, both brothers had slept fairly well, if not long enough for Bruce’s liking (Tony, of course, often didn’t sleep that much either, so he didn’t think it was that bad). The second night there had been plenty of snacks but very little liquor, somehow, and Bruce and Sam had decided Sam was healed enough that he didn’t need to be medicated. Bruce and Tony had both been woken by Dean’s yelling, running into the room almost simultaneously to find that Sam was already there and shaking his brother awake, looking like he hadn’t slept well either. Nobody else slept much that night.

The next morning, Sam figured Bruce was in deep enough they might as well not bother trying to keep secrets anymore and drank his morning coffee out of the “My Brother’s Been to Hell” mug Dean had gotten him as a slightly inappropriate gag gift at Christmas. Bruce had looked at the mug, looked at Sam, looked at Dean, thrown his hands in the air, and poured another cup without asking any questions. Sam later spent a handful of minutes out of Dean’s earshot to briefly explain the circumstances of Dean’s trip downstairs to Bruce, who was much more willing to let them drink
copious amounts of alcohol that night.

“Can I ask…?” Bruce said out of the blue during their pre-movie preparations that third evening. Tony was making popcorn, Bruce was throwing around pillows and blankets, Sam and Dean were carrying trays of drinks.

“You can ask whatever, but there’s no guarantee you’ll get an answer,” Dean replied, voice level.

“What’s the mark on your arm from?” Dean’s hand twitched and Sam could see the quick mental strain that kept him from reaching up to touch where the handprint lay under layers of clothing. Bruce must have caught a glimpse of it at some point.

Dean swallowed. “It’s from when Cas pulled me out of hell.”

Bruce’s eyebrows shot up at the implications of that sentence. “Ah.”

Apparently, Dean felt compelled to explain further. “It was a burn. It’s healed, but… kinda doubt it’s going to go away all together.”

“Who’s Cas?”

“Technically, he’s Castiel. An angel. Friend of ours.”

Bruce’s eyebrows went higher. “An angel.” He set down the pillow he was holding and turned to glance at Sam, as if to confirm that they were talking about an angel of the literal sort.

“He sort of rebelled against heaven because his brother Uriel--”

“Bastard,” Dean muttered.

“--was killing people and other angels and let out a demon. From a devil’s trap we had him in. Castiel’s been a little disillusioned.”

“Wow.” Bruce blinked at them.

“And that’s interesting and all, but I’d like to watch the movie now.” Tony piped up.

Much to both brother’s relief, Bruce didn’t press, just let them drink up as they watched the movie and headed to bed. He didn’t ask for information the next morning, just made plenty of breakfast and watched the Winchesters eat and discuss their drive.

“Where are you going?” Tony asked, voice curious, as they crossed the underground garage to the impala, Sam and Dean loading their bags into the back.

“Meeting Cas. Hopefully he has some information about the Seals for us.”

Tony nodded. He reached out and gripped Dean’s forearm, pulling him into a hug. Mindful of Sam’s arms, he did the same with Sam. “Be careful. Like always.”

Sam chuckled. “Will do. Stay in touch.” The younger Winchester extended a hand and firmly shook hands with Bruce. “Nice to meet you, Bruce. Hope to see you again.”

“Nice to meet you two as well. Especially considering I didn’t know you existed until you got here.”

Dean grinned, shaking hands as well. “That’s how it is with these crazy billionaire types.”
“Hey!”

Sam shook his head at Tony’s indignation and popped the door, sliding into the shotgun seat of the car. Dean did the same and started up the car, the low rumble of the engine filling the cement garage. They backed up and then pulled away, the low strains of rock music pumping under the engine noise and Sam waving out the window as the car left the tower for the streets of New York.
**Various Company**

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Dean meet the Avengers. Finally.

Chapter Notes

This takes places just before 5.16 “Dark Side of the Moon.” It's explained in the chapter what's going on in the lives of Sam and Dean.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Dean! DEAN!” Sam’s yell brought Dean from the bathroom, half shaven, clutching the razor like a knife, for all the good it would do him.

“What?” Dean scanned the room, once, twice. There was nothing there, Sam was in one piece. “For God’s sake, Sam, you tryin’ to give me me a heart attack? What’s wrong?”

“Look.” Sam gestured at the television, a set that was straight out of the eighties and full of so much static that Dean wasn’t sure Sam could see anything. He squinted through the fuzz, watching as footage of a collapsing house came in and out…

“Is that… Tony’s house? In Malibu?” Dean asked, starting to match Sam’s levels of alarm.

“Yeah. Last night. He challenged a terrorist to a showdown.”

“That idiot,” Dean replied hollowly, tossing Sam a beer and sitting down to look at the wreckage of Tony’s house that was now being shown.

The voice of the newscaster trickled through. “Nothing has been seen of Mr Stark or Iron Man since yesterday’s attack and Ms Pepper Potts, Tony Stark’s CEO, is missing as well.” Dean leaned forwards and smacked the television a few times, trying to get a clearer signal as Sam pulled out his phone. Pulling up Tony’s number, the younger Winchester dialed and waited with the phone to his ear. The phone rang… seven, eight times and then cut off.

“No answer on his phone.” There was a somber silence as they watched the replay of the attack.

“What are we going to do?” Sam asked. “Can we do anything?”

Dean sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Sam sighed, too. “Fine. I’ll keep trying his and Pepper's phones.”

Two days later, when both boys had worried enough for a lifetime and tensions were running high in the Impala, Tony had called them and assured them of his and Pepper’s safety. Dean had yelled down the phone line for a few minutes and they had ended the call with mutual agreements not to do anything too stupid before they could get together and be assured that everybody was alive.
Dean’s phone rang, barely audible over the sound of the impala’s engine and the blaring music. He slid it out of his pocket, grinning at the name the caller ID: Tony. Thumbing the answer button, he held the phone to his ear.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey, Dean.” There was something just a little bit off in Tony’s voice and Dean frowned, reaching over to get Sam’s attention before handing the phone to his brother, who put it on speaker. “Look, I think we have a small infestation of rats, maybe. I was hoping that since you guys are professional exterminators, you could look at it for us and decide what kind of work we need to get done. Or maybe you could root them out, whatever.”

“Oh, sure,” Dean responded, just as casually. His heart was racing, though. Something was clearly wrong. “We actually just crossed the Massachusetts -- New York border. We can be there in an hour and a half. Meet you at the tower?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Bring your supplies.” Tony hung up the phone. Dean looked at Sam, who shrugged and pulled out his own phone, calling Bobby.

“Great,” Dean muttered. “Just what we need. Gotta put a hold on stopping the apocalypse to fight baddies in our cousin’s tower. Great.”

An hour and fifteen minutes later, they pulled into the underground parking garage of Avenger Tower. A young woman was waiting by the elevator. “Mr and Mr Winchester?”

Dean nodded cautiously as he got out of the car, one hand discreetly in the pocket of his jacket, gripping the pistol there tightly. “That’s us.” The woman smiled. Her brown hair was in a tight bun and she seemed to emit a competent aura that the two brothers associated with Jody Mills, Bella Talbot, and Pepper Potts herself.

“I’m Stephanie, Ms Pott’s personal assistant. She asked that I bring you up to Mr Stark when you arrived.”

Dean nodded cautiously as he got out of the car, one hand discreetly in the pocket of his jacket, gripping the pistol there tightly. “That’s us.” The woman smiled. Her brown hair was in a tight bun and she seemed to emit a competent aura that the two brothers associated with Jody Mills, Bella Talbot, and Pepper Potts herself.

“I’m Stephanie, Ms Pott’s personal assistant. She asked that I bring you up to Mr Stark when you arrived.”

Dean shifted and Sam had to stop himself from rolling his eyes as his brother turned on his best easy charm smile. “Well, thank you very much. Seems like it would be easy to get lost in a big building like this.”

Sam moved past, weapons duffle over his shoulder, nudging Dean with his elbow as he headed for the elevator. “So you have an infestation of some kind?”

That’s what Mr Stark said,” she smiled as the brothers walked into the elevator and it began to rise. “He was a little sketchy on the details, so I hope you can figure it out. He didn’t even specify if it was a bug thing, a rat thing, or what. Personally, I hope it’s not rats.” She laughed, light and quick and Dean grinned at her.

“Well, hopefully, we’ll find out and then let you know so you can move out of the country away from the rats.” She laughed and looked down. The elevator dinged to a stop and the doors slid open to reveal the strangest scene Dean and Sam had ever seen in their entire life.

The entirety of the Avengers Initiative was sitting in the living room.

“Well.” Dean grabbed the strap of his bag and stepped out of the elevator, Sam right behind him. The elder turned and grinned. “Nice to meet you, Stephanie.” He winked and she blushed as the door closed. Dean was cut out of his reverie as Sam smacked him on the arm.
The younger brother turned to the group. “Hey Tony. Good to see you alive. How’d the--” he made a vague gesture towards the center of his chest, in the area where Tony’s arc reactor used to sit. Tony had called them and told them he was going to get it removed, but they hadn’t talked since, at least until Tony had called them earlier that day.


“Always good to have a little less shrapnel.” He reached out and clasped hands with Tony, pulling him into a half hug. “Good to see you.”

On the other end of the couch, Sam was greeting Bruce. “How’s it going?” The physicist shrugged. “Can’t complain too much. Fighting strange forces around the world, keeping the Big Guy under control. It’s a lot better than it used to be. How did your arms heal?” Sam could feel several sets of eyes on him, but he pulled up his right sleeve anyway and let Bruce examine the cuts on his arm, which had healed into a series of thin white lines. “Not bad.”

Sam shrugged. “We had a good week right after without too many crazy jobs, they had time to heal up.” He looked around. He was getting stared at by the entire Avengers Initiative. “Hey guys.” Sam gave a little wave.

There was a moment of silence, only broken by Dean’s conversation with Tony about his reworking of the Malibu house. Finally, the guy lounging on the smaller couch spoke up. He looked short and had dark blonde hair, bulging muscles in his arms attesting to skill with weapons and a whole lot of brute strength. “So…. who are you two exactly?”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment. “For god’s sake, Tony. I appreciate you keeping our existence quiet, but are you going to make us explain to everyone every time we show up?”

Tony grinned. “Fury already knew. That was one.”

The woman turned and whispered something in the guy’s ear and his eyebrows shot up. “You two were the ones on the other end of that thing in Maine? The police station thing? Fury said something about a team outside his jurisdiction.” Sam looked at Dean.

Sam looked like he was holding back from another eye roll. “Well, then,” he hastily added, “Let me introduce. I’m Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye. This is Natasha Romanoff, Black Widow.” The red-haired woman who had leaned over to whisper waved. “You apparently know Bruce. This is Steve Rogers, Captain America.” Clint finished his round of introductions, Bruce and the taller blonde man waving in turn.

“What about… Thor? He’s the last one, right?” Dean asked the group as a whole.

Natasha spoke up. “He’s off planet right now.” Sam’s eyebrows went up. “Nice to meet you, Winchesters. Fury told me you helped him and Hill out once besides the Maine thing?”

“Yeah, it was an easy thing, she just needed some information. Good thing too, we were busy” Sam said, finally dropping his duffel bag.
Dean huffed out a laugh. “It was just when things started to go to Hell. And I thought our lives couldn’t get any weirder.” Several other pairs of eyebrows went up at that.

“And how weird is your life already?” Natasha asked. Tony snorted from across the room and she glared at him.

“Trust me, Widow, theirs make ours look like a cake walk.”

Steve (Captain America, Sam thought. He was sure Dean was internally fanning) looked mildly amazed. “I didn’t think that was even possible.”

Barton snorted. “There’s no way.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows, a knowing half-smile gracing his face. Dean, in contrast, had his bitchface on full force. “Well, we spend our time killing crap, I spent four months in hell, and by the way we’re currently trying to stop the apocalypse. So yeah. It’s possible.”

“Dean.” Sam winced and glanced at Tony, who had suddenly stood up. “I thought we weren’t going to tell--”

“Me?” Tony cut him off. “You weren’t going to tell me that you two are trying to stop the apocalypse? What happened to ‘We came to check on you because you’re the only family we have left?’ Why can’t you let me help you?” He was yelling by the end.

“Because we started the goddamn thing!” Dean yelled back. The whole tone of the conversation had shifted dramatically within the last minute, leaving the Avengers silent in the awkward face of the arguing family members. “And because we won’t let you. Didn’t you hear about Carthage? What happened there? The hardware store that blew up? Ellen and Jo were hunters. And friends.” Dean trailed off, spinning to look out the window, shoulders high and tense.

“Tony.” Sam stepped forwards, backing Dean up with his body language even as he adopted a softer tone. “Look, we’re finding a way. Castiel is out now, looking for God so he can end this. Bobby’s on it, too. And, um.” He scratched the back of his neck. “This sounds bad, but you’re the one who cryptically called us this morning to come in because you have ‘an infestation’ of something. You don’t know how to handle that, much less the apocalypse. We can take care of this.”

“Excuse me,” Rogers cut in. “Sorry to interrupt the argument about the apocalypse, but can we talk about the weird… whatever?”

“Yes.” Dean flipped into business mode, but Sam could tell he was refusing to look at Tony. Sam himself was more inclined to stare at Rogers, who clearly was not a big believer, based on the flippancy of his comment about the apocalypse. Most people weren’t, not until they saw it for themselves. “What’s going on?”

“Quite a bit of weird stuff, actually.” Natasha leaned forward, scooping a water bottle off the counter and taking a sip. “First, we’ve had quite a few people in the building report sightings of people who died in the Battle of Manhattan, even though that was coming up on two years ago.”

“Then, last week, I saw one,” Barton chimed in. “Near the elevator. One of the guys who worked on the helicarrier with me. He died when, uh. Loki took over my mind and had me attack the carrier.”

“What did he do? At the elevator?” Sam asked.

“He looked at me, then jerked backwards and fell over like he’d been shot. Vanished after that.”
“Jarvis doesn’t have footage of any of it,” Tony chimed in. “The cameras went out whenever they appeared.”

“That’s typical,” Dean pointed out. “Supernatural activity and electronics don’t really mix. Anything else?”

“There are two who work downstairs in accounting; they died in the attack when we were evacuating. Marvin Derring and Peter Katzinski. Don’t seem to realize they’re dead, just appear every once in a while and work at their desks. We had to move everyone who worked in the area. But an employee snuck in last week to check it out and Derring stabbed him through the hand with a pencil.”

“Still pretty typical.” Dean looked at Sam, who was frowning.

“But… why now?” Sam asked, reaching into the duffel at his feet and pulling out his journal and John Winchester’s journal, flipping a few pages. “Why all at once and why now? It’s not like it’s an exact anniversary of the attack or any other specifically related date.”

Dean shrugged. “Looks like we’ve got a case. I’ll call Bobby, tell him we’ll be a few days. Can’t take too long, though, not with—” he made a hand signal that encompassed everything related to the apocalypse. “And I’ll see if I can get Cas up on angel radio, if he has any ideas.”

“Good idea.” Sam looked at the group, then sighed and sat down. “Okay. Here’s a rundown. Clearly, you all deal with crazy crap all the time so this shouldn’t be too much of a stretch for you. Dean and I are called hunters. Fury said that we’re good at our jobs, so you guys don’t interfere much with us.”

“Thank god.” Dean cut in from next to Tony, with whom he seemed to have formed a temporary truce in the face of the current problem and who was now digging through one of the weapon duffles.

“We hunt the supernatural. Ghosts, demons, monsters, everything that goes bump in the night. You name it, we hunt it.”

“How does one get into that, exactly? Doesn’t seem like something you hear about at school career day,” Barton asked. Sam’s lips turned up on one side, glancing at Dean.

“Family business. Anyway, I’ll save the long story for later. For now: ghosts. That’s the two guys downstairs. You have to salt and burn their bones. Iron and salt are effective as a short term measure, so if something tries to attack before Dean and I take ‘em out, hit them with something metal.”

“The others,” Dean cut in, “are probably just death echoes. They don’t hurt people. Not in heaven, not in hell, just sort of hang out and relive their moment of death. Sometimes you can shock them out of it and they’ll go away. It works best if someone who knew them does it. Tony, if you know the ones who worked for you, that’ll probably do.”

“Question: what if they were cremated?” Tony asked, waving a hand around.

“Which one?” Sam asked.

“Neither, I was just wondering.”

Dean groaned and Sam could see Steve rolling his eyes but he answered anyway. “Usually, there’s something else around that links them to the place. A scrap of hair in a locket, a pair of gloves they used for years.”
“While we’re on it, do you know where they were buried?” Dean asked, now starting to pull out their arsenal of salt and holy water and shaking each container to judge how much it held.

“Same cemetery, just a few blocks away.” Tony replied.

“Okay. Here’s the plan,” Dean glanced out of the windows at the darkening skies. “In a few hours, one of us and one of you—” he gestured at the Avengers “—will go and salt and burn the bones of the ghosts. The rest will stay here and try to get the echoes to leave. Until then, we salt the exits and we do some research about why they’re showing up now.” He looked at Tony. “Will everyone be out of the building by then?”

The genius nodded. “Everyone except the seven of us and Pepper. But there’s also guards.”

“Can Jarvis watch for the night?” Sam asked. “We don’t need any accidental casualties.” Tony nodded and began tapping on a tablet, presumably telling all the guards not to come to work that night.

“Any questions?”

“Who’s going with who?” Steve asked.

There was a moment as Earth’s Mightiest Heroes and the two hunters looked at each other. “Clint needs to stay here. At least one of the echoes can probably be stopped by him.” Sam finally said. “Tony has to be here too. That leaves Natasha, Bruce, and Steve.”

“I’d say take Steve,” Natasha cut in. “He’ll be able to help you dig the fastest.”

Sam looked at Steve, who nodded. “Good. What about you two?”

Dean and Sam stared each other down, the silence broken when Sam held out a hand. Dean sighed. “Fine.” The Avengers watched with bemusement as the brothers played a quick game of rock, paper, scissors, Dean throwing scissors and Sam throwing rock. Sam smirked and Dean could almost hear him say it: “Oh Dean. Always with the scissors.”

“Okay, okay,” Dean grumbled. “I’m digging with Steve. Let’s get planning.”

Tony sighed. “I’ll order some food.”

Dean scooped the bags with their clothing and carried them to the rooms they stayed in last time. Sam picked up where Dean had left off, pulling weapons out of another bag. “Tony? Do you still have salt?” Tony was already on the phone and gestured towards the cabinet. Sam set the containers on the counter and started to fill shotgun shells with rock salt.

Dean came back into the room and watched for a second before striding over to the duffel and picking up the first container of salt. He started pouring it in front of the elevator doors and the huge floor to ceiling windows. “You know, Tony,” he called as Tony hung up the phone, “Your houses would be so much easier to monster-proof if you stopped putting in all these huge windows.”

“Dean, we’re on the ninety-third floor.”

Dean shrugged. “Can’t be too careful.” He finished another salt line, only to turn and find Natasha beginning the next window, mimicking the hunter’s movements. “Make sure you get the very edges with plenty,” Dean grinned and turned to look at Steve, Bruce, and Clint. “Ya’ll going to sit or are you going to help?”
There was a mad scramble as they rushed to get their own containers of salt and join them at the windows. Dean dropped his own and stepped off into a corner. “Here goes, Sam.” Sam watched, finishing the last of the shells as Dean closed his eyes.

“Dear Castiel, wherever the heck you are, I know you’re busy but we could use some consultation right about now.” They waited, most of the room unsure what to expect. Nothing happened. “Come on,” Dean muttered under his breath. “Castiel, who art probably not in heaven, please come help us.” Again nothing.

“I got nothing. You want to try?”

Sam shrugged. “He usually responds to you before he responds to me. I say we try again later.” Dean sighed and picked up his salt bin again, joining Bruce at the other end of his window and meeting him in the middle.

“Castiel… he’s the one who left the handprint on your arm, right?” Bruce asked.

Dean nodded. “Yeah. We’re sort of friends now? He helps us out quite a bit, but like I mentioned, he’s looking for God right now, so who knows where he is.”

“Did the handprint heal? You told me last time it probably would, just slowly.”

“Just a scar left.”

“Sorry,” Clint interjected. “But did you say this… Castiel, whoever he is, is looking for God? Like, capital “g” God?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, walking over with his own salt. “Castiel’s an angel. We’re thinking God could help us stop the apocalypse, so… “ he shrugged. “Cas is looking for him.” Clint looked a little overwhelmed at the information he had just received.

“When you say ‘the apocalypse’, you mean…?” Tony asked, voice still laced with a little hostility at the topic.

“The actual apocalypse.” Dean commented. “Lucifer has… risen, we’ve already killed two of the horsemen; War and Famine. We’ve also had a run in with an antichrist and several more angels. Dicks.” He muttered the last part.

“And you plan on stopping it…?” Tony repeated, leaving this sentence open ended as well.

Sam sighed and straightened up to look at Tony. “Tony. As soon as we’re done here, I swear we’ll tell you everything, but that’s a conversation I want to be sitting down and not distracted for.”

“Fine. But I’ll hold you to that.” Tony let out a sigh of his own. Just then, the elevator dinged. Both Winchesters whirled around, hands flying to pockets and the backs of jeans, something that the spies and soldiers in the room didn’t miss.

The doors slid open to reveal… Pepper.

“Sam! Dean!” She hurried across the room and gave them both hugs, leaving them slightly bemused. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“Neither did we, until a few hours ago.” Dean pulled his hand from his pocket, weaponless. “Tony called us to help with your ghost problem.”
“Oh, good.” Pepper called, walking across the room to Tony. “They’re absolutely terrifying.”

“Pepper saw the first one near the lobby. Someone runs through the doors, ducks, but then gets hit by something and falls.” Tony informed them. Pepper handed him a tablet, which he scanned briefly and then signed with a stylus. The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of food. Tony had ordered a variety of dishes -- Sam was scarfing down some sort of wrap with chicken and lettuce, Clint and Dean had burgers. There was pizza, Pepper had Chinese. And there was a lot; Steve was impressed by the amount of food the two non-enhanced guys were able to pack away.

They talked, not about the apocalypse or the Tower’s ghost problem, but about Clint and Natasha’s latest mission in Rome, about Dean and Sam’s run in way back when with the “Ghostfacers” and the Maine thing the spies had been on the other end of, about Tony’s plans for rebuilding his home in Malibu. When everyone had eaten and the chatter finally died down, Sam glanced out the wall of windows to see that the sun had dropped below the horizon. “I think it’s dark enough to go dig without being obvious. Is everyone out of the building?”

“Jarvis?” Tony asked. There was a second of silence.

“The tower is empty, Sir.”

“Okay.” Dean clapped his hands once. “Let’s review the plan.”

Steve spoke first. “You and I will drive to the cemetery and take care of the bones.”

“Pepper and Bruce will stay here,” Tony chimed in, “while Clint, Natasha, and I go with Sam to take care of the death echoes.”

“Any questions?” Everyone shook their heads. “Then get ready.”

The group scattered, arming themselves. Dean and Sam took the usual; salt and iron pokers, a shotgun for Dean, a knife for Sam. Steve returned with his iconic shield and Tony walked back in with the suit folded into a briefcase. Clint and Natasha both opted to arm themselves with pistols from Sam and Dean’s hunter equipment, having turned their noses up at loading their precious high class weapons with rock salt. Tony kissed Pepper on the cheek and both teams headed towards the elevator, loading up and starting off.

None of them noticed the accidentally-broken salt line in front of the stairwell door.

The first group had left the elevator leaving Dean alone with Steve. Captain America. Dean took a moment to eye the famed shield -- it had taken a considerable amount of his self control not to ask to hold it when Steve had walked in with it earlier. “What’s this made of?” Dean reached out and tapped the edge of the painted metal.

“Vibranium.” Steve responded, rubbing his own thumb along the smooth curve. “Strongest and rarest metal on earth.”

“Huh. Wonder if it’ll work against ghosts.” The elevator stopped and Dean strode out, pulling his keys from his pocket with Steve following behind him. “You got a ride or are you coming with me?”

“The bike’s mine,” Steve gestured to a motorcycle a few vehicles down from the Impala, “but if you don’t mind, I’d like to ride with you anyway, ask a few questions?”

Dean nodded assent and Steve slid into the passenger seat of the car, settling the shield on the floor
and letting it lean against his legs. The hunter started the engine, the low rumble of the powerful machine making Steve grin. “Nice car.”

“She’s my baby. Our dad bought her years ago.”

They pulled out of the garage, Dean frowning at the amount of traffic still on the slushy roads. “City that never sleeps,” he grumbled as they passed taxis and pedestrians alike.

Steve laughed. “Not a city person?”

“Sam and I spend more time in the small towns of America. We did come once.” Dean smiled at the memory. “I was in my early teens. Sam and I convinced Dad to let us go into the city for once.” Dean turned down an alley. It was silent for a moment, then Steve sighed.

“Okay. I don’t want to do this, but if I don’t, Natasha will kill me.” Dean tensed, but didn’t take his eyes off the road. Steve cleared his throat and in one long breath said: “If-you-do-anything-to-hurt-this-team-or-Pepper-we-will-personally-hunt-you-down-and-kill-you-and-your-brother.”

This time, Dean did look over at Steve, one eyebrow raised. “Did you just give me the Avenger version of the shovel speech?”

The super soldier had the good grace to look down apologetically. “Yeah. Like I said, Natasha would have if I didn’t. You seem pretty trustworthy to me and obviously Tony trusts you. Even though Tony and I don’t always get along, I’ve never seen him this certain about anything but Pepper. Natasha has more trust issues than I do, so you’ll have to excuse her.”

“Why don’t you get along with Tony?” Dean asked, instead of focusing on the myriad other topics in that little speech.

“Just personality clashes and some strong opinions about what’s right and wrong.” Steve shrugged. “He’s very… impulsive.”

Dean actually laughed out loud at that. “You think Tony’s impulsive? Wait until you spend more time with me and Sammy; it runs in the family. Tony’s just more impulsive with money because he has it. Otherwise he’s fairly level headed.” Steve seemed on the verge of commenting, but changed his mind.

Instead he asked: “So what are we going to actually do when we get to the cemetery?” Dean raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“We’re going to dig up some graves, of course. The whole ‘salt and burn the bones’ thing was literal, you know.”

Back at the Tower, it was smooth sailing.

They had waited at the elevator door for only five minutes before the first death echo had appeared. Sam had stepped forwards. “Why are you here? Who brought you here?” he asked. There was no response; the man just kept looking past him with a thousand yard stare. Sam motioned Clint forwards.

“Mark? Mark, you need to go.” The archer’s voice was soft. “Go, Mark.” Clint shot a dubious look at the hunter, but Sam just pointed him back at the echo. “Mark, go.” Suddenly, the echo’s eyes focused on Clint, he smiled, blinked, and faded away into nothing.
“That’s one.” Sam clapped Clint on the shoulder while the others looked on, Natasha blank faced and Tony blatantly curious.

They hurried on, repeating the process three more times, once with Tony doing the talking and another time with Clint, the third with both Clint and a few words from Natasha. None of the echoes responded to Sam’s questions about why they were in the tower. “What’s the big deal about them being here, anyway?” Tony finally asked. “I mean, I’d rather they weren’t but since we can take care of that then why does it matter?”

“Usually, death echoes are linked to the location of their death,” Sam said, frowning a little. The lights were holding steady, the temperature was the same, but he felt uneasy anyway. “We had a guy, the second time we met the Ghostfacers, actually. He worked at a hospital and took a couple of the corpses home, so the echoes were at his house.” Sam’s frown deepened. “Thing is, there isn’t a reason for them to be here. I mean, the employees, yeah, but the rest should be on that helicarrier of SHIELD’s. There’s got to be something else going on bringing them here.”

Tony looked like he wanted to expand the topic further, but that was when the ghost smacked him into the wall. Sam immediately swung the iron poker, disintegrating the ghost. “Back to back! NOW!” he roared, pulling Tony off the floor. The group formed up, shoulders pressing together as the suit folded around Tony’s arms and Natasha cocked her gun.

“That was a ghost, right?” Clint asked.

Natasha nodded. “It was Katzinski. I remember from when I worked here.” She shot another round as the ghost reappeared, not even flinching as it vanished again.

“So… how often do you do this?” Steve asked, tossing another shovelful of dirt and snow.

“What, dig up graves?” Dean shrugged. “Often enough that it stopped being weird years ago.” In the flashlight beam, he could see Steve make an “okay, then” face at that. “Trust me, digging up graves is much better than digging out of one.” Steve chose not to comment on that either, returning to the digging up part.

“Ever been arrested for it?” He finished uncovering the coffin and motioned Dean over.

“Couple times. It’s hard to explain to the police that we’re not grave robbing, we’re killing ghosts. We were on the FBI most wanted list for a while until we were presumed dead. Tony manages them for us now, keeps us off the police records. Plus, it helps him keep an eye on us.” Dean finished smashing open the coffin and Steve grimaced at the smell even from half a dozen yards away, where he was finishing the grave Dean had started. The hunter just ignored it, scattering salt over the bones and soaking them with lighter fluid before pulling a pack of matches out of his pocket and lighting a few, dropping them in the grave and sending the whole thing up in flames.

“That seemed easy,” Steve questioned.

“It was.” Dean replied. “Usually, the ghosts are trying to kill you before you kill them.” He walked over to where Steve was opening the second coffin and started salting as the soldier climbed out of the grave. “My turn to ask some questions.” Repeating the lighter fluid and matches, Dean stared into the burning grave as Steve nodded.

“Are you the same Captain America from World War II?”

Surprised, Steve blinked before responding. “Yes. We’re keeping it quiet for the moment, though.
But yeah. I went down with that plane, froze for seventy years, and woke up in the future.”

“Do you miss it? The way things used to be?”

“There’s good things. Healthcare. Technology. I’ve got a list I’m working my way through.”

“Got music on it?” A smile tugged at Dean’s lips.

It was mirrored on Steve’s. “Yeah. Suggestions?”

“Remind me later, when you have it with you.”

It was quiet for a second, then Dean started filling in the graves, the shovel scraping against chunks of frozen dirt and rock. Then Steve spoke again. “I miss the people, mostly. Even though I’ve been here a while. My friends from home, the other Howling Commandos… Peggy.” The last part was so quiet, Dean could barely hear it.

“Girlfriend?”

Steve bobbed his head noncommittally. “She’s still alive. In a nursing home.” He shoveled a few more hunks of dirt onto the burning skeleton. “I visit every once in awhile. Sometimes she remembers me, sometimes not.”

Dean finished his grave. “You should talk to Sam. I think you’d have a lot to say to each other.” His phone rang. “Hey. Everybody good on your end?”

“Yeah, we’re all in one piece. Ghosts showed up. Tony’s suit doesn’t work on them, by the way,” Sam said on the other end of the line.

“Both of the ghosts, or just the one?” Steve tensed and Dean waved him down, popping the trunk and throwing in the shovels, the soldier eyeing the devil’s trap on the roof.

“Yeah, both of them. The others got some first hand experience with salt rounds and iron.”

“We’re on our way back. Meet you upstairs?”

“Sure.” Dean hung up the phone and closed the trunk. Steve followed him to the front of the car. “The others are finishing up,” Dean filled him in. “Both ghosts attacked them, but they held them off until we salted the bones. Sam says they’ll meet us upstairs when we get there.”

Steve nodded. “Good. You said Fury knows about you, but I would rather not have to file paperwork explaining why somebody was maimed by a ghost.” And with that, they drove into the New York night.

By the time Steve and Dean stepped out of the elevator, streaked with mud and slush and smelling like smoke and death, everyone else was clean, lounging on various couches, and eating dessert.

“Oh, god. Pie.” Dean made a beeline for the table.

“Not until you clean up.” Sam cut him off. Dean glared but complied, stripping his jacket and heading to the shower. He emerged not long after, shirtless, to find Steve already eating a bowl of ice cream and filling the others in on their grave dig. Dean raised his eyebrows at Sam, who pointed him towards a duffle containing various articles of clothing. They rarely had time to sort laundry anymore, so they frequently just threw it in different bags and dug for it as needed. Clint wolf whistled as Dean crossed the room and Dean flipped him the bird.
“The tattoo new?” Tony asked. “I don’t remember seeing it the first time we met and you were getting stitched up.”

Sam shook his head and pulled down his collar to reveal his own. “We’ve had ‘em for a few years. Work like the necklace we had you wear; they keep you from getting possessed. It was easier.”

Dean caught Bruce’s eyes lingering on the faded handprint on his arm again and rubbed it once before going to sit by Pepper, stopping on the way to pick up a generous piece of pie.

Sam took a bite of his ice cream and Dean looked over at him. “You get a reason why they’re here?”

Sam frowned. “No answer. Got rid of them all, though.” The younger hunter tossed Dean’s journal towards him with a significant look. “I called Bobby just before you got here and he thinks it has to be either a demon or an angel; he doesn’t know of anything else off the top of his head who can control ghosts like that. They’d have to track us, though, and Castiel did the thing with our ribs. I thought maybe Crowley but he wants us to win this so it’s probably not him.”

“It just doesn’t make sense!” Dean said, swallowing another mouthful of pie. “They have no reason to be here.”

“What changed? Has anything changed recently?” Sam looked at Tony, Pepper, and the other Avengers. “When exactly did the ghosts show up?”

Tony tapped his chin with a couple of fingers. “Two weeks? Actually, probably closer to three at this point. The one employee reported, but nobody believed her.”

“Three weeks… that would have been just after…” Dean looked at Sam.

“Just after Michael… maybe word got out.” A horrible sort of realization was starting to dawn on Sam. “Maybe now all of them know that we’re the bloodline.” Sam vaguely stated, glancing from Dean to the Avengers.

“So it wouldn’t be too hard now for it to be an angel or a demon who wants to either stop us or get us to do it. They brought the ghosts here, knowing that Tony would call us. A trap.” Dean stood up abruptly. He scooped up the small pouch from inside the duffel, pulling out a handful of the anti-possession amulets. “Put these on. Now.” Dean tossed them around the group, then closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“Cas, now would be a really good time to show up and answer a few questions!” he started.

Sam had taken a few steps away, rummaging around until he had come up with a short knife. “Tony, sorry about the coffee table.” Clint hastily pulled his plate of pie off the table as Sam cut his hand open and started painting an angel banishing sigil across the glass with the blood. “You said there are devil’s traps at every door?”

“Yeah, there are --”

“But unfortunately he put too much trust in a few employees during the building process.” A different voice cut him off.

Dean and Sam both pivoted to see Stephanie standing in the stairwell doorway, the salt at her feet scattered. “You really shouldn’t have let anyone up here after you painted them, Tony. I’m afraid all the traps were quite ruined by the time we were done.” The beautiful eyes of Pepper’s assistant lingered on the billionaire for a second before raking across the group.
“Demons,” Dean muttered. “Why do they always have to be the hot girls? I hate when the hot ones turn out to be the bad guys.”

Sam cut across him. “What do you want.”

“Did you force the ghosts here?” Dean asked.

“Afraid so, boys.” She held up a handful of tags; Stark Industries IDs and a few SHIELD badges. “Me and a few friends.” A moment later, the lights flickered and went off completely as eight more people walked through the door, leaving them bathed in only the light of the city from the windows. Behind them, Sam could see both ghosts flicker back into view.

“We thought maybe we could do some convincing, maybe give little Sammy some refreshments.” Stephanie smirked, voice overly cheerful. “We can’t let heaven get its hands on you though, Dean, so we’ll probably just kill you. And your cousin Tony. And his friends.”

“I’m not saying yes,” Sam snarled. “Besides, haven’t you heard Crowley? If Lucifer really wins, do you think you’re really going to move up in the world? More likely you’ll get wiped out with the rest of the demons.”

“How about a little drink, Sam?” Stephanie asked. And then she lunged forwards and battle was joined.

Steve wasn’t sure he believed what he was seeing. Sure he fought aliens on occasion, but this was a whole ‘nother level of strange. The secretary’s eyes had turned black, for god’s sake. He had seen one of the ghosts and a couple of the death echoes, or whatever, but in a world where holograms were now a reality, that didn’t really seem too strange. This? This was strange. Sam had just drawn a symbol in blood on the coffee table, the demon wanted him to drink something, and they were working for Lucifer. The Devil.

Before Steve had time to wonder at anything else, the ghost of Derring appeared in front of him. He swung the shield on reflex and gasped slightly when the ghost vanished. A grunt had him spinning around in time to see a demon punching Clint across the face with much more force than a young woman should have possessed. Apparently, enhanced strength was a part of being a demon. Grimacing, he threw the shield. This was getting more weird every minute.

Somewhere in the last minute, Tony had decided that he should have let Sam and Dean double check his devil’s traps because this was not fun. He had shoved Pepper down behind the couch as the suit assembled, sending a repulsor blast at one of the demons. Eyeing the nearest ghost warily, he prepared to shoot in its direction when it vanished. A second later, it reappeared barely a foot from him.

He didn’t even have time to raise an arm (not that it would have done any good; he belatedly remembered from the earlier encounter that the suit was no good on the ghosts) when the ghost vanished. The genius turned to see Pepper standing behind the couch, salt container in hand.
Bruce was taking deep breaths.

As soon as he had figured out what was going on, he had grabbed the nearest bin of salt and made a circle near the wall behind the couch, sitting behind the furniture and closing his eyes. Not the best battlefield strategy, perhaps, but Hulk didn’t know Sam and Dean and definitely wouldn’t do them any favors if he came out now.

Dean and Sam turned together in the middle of the room, Clint and Natasha flanking them. Sam slashed upwards with the demon-killing knife but it slid in his hand, which was still wet from the blood of the angel banishing sigil, and only managed to open a cut across Stephanie’s forearm. She snarled, then lashed out with one hand, Sam yelling as she flung him across the room and pinned him against one of the walls. She stalked closer, examining the gash.

“SAM!” Dean yelled, starting towards him, but he was cut off by two more demons and had to retreat.

“Dean! Draw a trap!” Sam choked out, eyes widening as Stephanie approached. Dean picked up right away on what Sam wanted and let Clint and Natasha cover him as he lunged for the duffel bag, grabbing a can of spray paint. A second later, he had run to the entrance to the hallway, stopping in front of it and beginning to draw a devil’s trap that covered the doorway.

“Sammy, Sammy, Sammy.” Stephanie purred, ignoring the chaos behind her as the unprepared Avengers dodged and slashed at the horde of demons. “What am I going to do with you?” She smiled evilly. “You seem thirsty. Would you like that drink now?” Lifting her deeply cut arm towards Sam’s mouth, the power on his midsection increased, making him gasp for air. The bitter tang of demon blood filled his mouth and Sam struggled to keep breathing without swallowing. Just as he was about to give it up, a repulsor shot knocked her away and he slumped to the floor, spitting out the mouthful of blood and trying not to gag as he sucked in a deep breath.

Sam pulled himself to his feet, dancing out of the way of Katzinski’s ghost and stabbing one of the demons in the shoulder, the man yelling and flashing the usual glowing red before the demon left in a cloud of black smoke. He took a second to look around.

Dean had gotten his memo and was just pulling Pepper and Bruce (who had his eyes closed and seemed to be rippling green around his eyes and hands, despite his efforts) across the trap and into the hallway. There were seven demons left, Stephanie included. Someone had taken another demon down, the woman she had been possessing laying limp by the foot of the couch. Steve’s shield had no effect on the demons on the supernatural level, apparently, but it still packed a punch; the man had to be at least as strong as the demons. It did, however, work on the ghosts, and Sam couldn’t help but grin ferally as the shield bounced off a wall and made Derring disintegrate again.

“Behind the trap! NOW!” Dean roared across the room, and everyone gradually began to work in that direction, punching and shooting as they went. Stephanie was eyeing Sam and started to walk towards him.

“Exorcizamus te, Omnis immundus spiritus--” Sam started to yell. It was a good and a bad idea. For one, the demons stopped chasing the others, letting the rest of the Avengers cross the devil’s trap. However, they were all now looking at him.

“Sam!” Dean started towards him, adding his voice to the chant as Sam dropped out, punching one of the demons squarely on the jaw and following it up with the knife.

But Dean’s rescue turned out to be unnecessary.
A yell from behind him got Sam’s attention and he turned in time to see four Avengers point various weapons at a man of Steve’s height who had just appeared, dressed in a trench coat with a bloody cut on his forehead. “Don’t shoot!” Sam yelled.

“Close your eyes.” Castiel said, his deep voice rising above the noise of the fight. Sam did, hoping that the Avengers would also do what Castiel had commanded. A flash of white light illuminated the room and died back down. Sam opened his eyes to find the room empty except the two ghosts, who had stopped and were staring at Cas. The angel stepped towards them. “Be at peace.” He reached out and touched their foreheads and the two spirits melted away, the pile of ID cards burning to ash before them.

“Cas!” Dean and Sam both hurried towards the angel, who had closed his eyes and swayed on the spot. “You good?”

Cas opened his eyes and touched the gash on his head, healing it. “I am fine. I have sent the humans back to their homes; they will have no memories of this.”

“What took you so long?” Dean asked, looking around the room. It was in shambles, the coffee table shattered, splashes of human and demon blood decorating the floor and walls. Nothing large was broken, but it was a mess. Sam let go of Cas’ arm and headed for the bar.

“I have rebelled against heaven, Dean. My brethren do not take kindly to that, as you well know. Even as I search for God, they search for me.”


Castiel frowned. “Badly. The angels and demons are dividing; some want Lucifer to gain the upper hand, some do not. It’s getting worse. I need to go keep looking.”

Dean frowned in return, but when he opened his mouth to object to the angel’s immediate departure, Cas was gone.

“Can we come out?” Bruce’s voice called out. Dean looked around the room as Sam ran one finger over his lip, which had been cut at some point.

“Yeah, you can come out. Sorry for drawing a devil’s trap on one of your fancy floors again, Tony.”

“Since you just helped save our lives, I think we’re even.” Tony cast a concerned look over at Sam, who had made his way to the liquor cabinet and was washing out his mouth with a mixture of water and whiskey, spitting the demon-blood-tinged liquid into the sink. “What was with the creepy blood thing?”

“You gonna be good, Sam?” Dean called. Sam nodded and raised his glass at his brother, swishing more whiskey around his mouth and spitting it into the sink. The older brother sighed. “Demon blood. It’s part of the whole... thing. I’ll fill you in later, when we have time for the whole story.” He looked at the motley crew of Avengers, most of whom sported an impressive array of bruises and slightly awed expressions. “Anybody hurt?”

There was a round of head shakes. “Let’s start cleaning up then.”

Tony interrupted. “Let the bots get a start on it. They’ll take care of the glass and the blood, which is most of the mess anyway. It’s past two in the morning; we should probably go to bed and then can finish in the morning. And you promised an explanation.”

“Is Tony suggesting we go to sleep?” Clint said. “It must be serious.”
Despite the late night, everyone was up by eight the next morning. Tony was last to arrive and was practically dragged into the living area by Pepper, where he found a mostly clean room, Bruce making waffles, and Steve, Clint, and Natasha talking to Sam and Dean who were working their way through a rather large pile of weapons on the new coffee table. Immediately, Tony beelined to Bruce, who slid him a cup of coffee.

“Did I miss anything?” He asked.

Bruce raised and eyebrow and added a waffle to the stack. “They still have a huge arsenal, they know lots of ways to kill weird things, and apparently they have a pistol that kills anything, except Sam shot Lucifer with it in Carthage and it didn’t do anything.”

“Okay then,” Tony muttered, watching Pepper make her way over to Sam and Dean. They stood to greet her.

“I’ve got to go, some of us have normal jobs.” She pulled Sam into a hug, which seemed to startle the tall young man a little. Leaving the hug, she eyeballed both Sam and Dean. “You two try to be safe.” Tony (and Sam and Dean, he was sure) didn’t miss the slight wobble in her voice.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be careful.” Dean reassured her, as she hugged him. But Natasha and Clint could see his face, something in his eyes that confirmed the unsaid; just because the brothers were trying to be careful didn’t mean they would be safe.

Pepper pulled back and patted him on the cheek. “Stay in touch.” She tapped over and kissed Tony on the cheek before heading for the elevator, stepping over the fresh salt line and newly drawn devil’s trap in front of it.

Tony took another gulp of his coffee before topping off the cup and looking over at Dean. “Hey, if you guys have a couple hours before you leave, I fixed up the Audi if you want to see it, Dean? Before you both fill me in.” he reminded them, again.

The young man brightened visibly and he nodded, scooting across to the kitchen to take the plate of waffles Bruce was offering him before following Tony out of the room. Sam rolled his eyes, crossing to the kitchen himself, the Avengers right behind him as Bruce started plateing up more waffles.

“Thanks, Bruce.”

“Not into cars?” Steve asked, taking a bite of waffle and waving his fork at Sam.

“Not as much as Dean is, that’s for sure. The Impala is his baby. He was always more mechanically inclined than I was, although he did teach me some stuff back before… he, uh. Went to Hell. Wanted me to take care of the car after he was gone.”

“Hang on a second,” Clint cut in, with the air of someone who had just put a lot of information together. “So when Dean said that he spent four months in Hell, he meant literally!? In Hell?! And the guy, Castiel, or whatever, who appeared here last night and took out the demons got him out?”

Sam nodded. “Cas is an angel, remember? He and part of the garrison rescued Dean. And technically, he raised Dean’s soul from perdition. Dean woke up in the grave, had to dig himself out.”

“Do all angels look like that?” Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow. “Bookish… human?”

Sam’s lips quirked at the corners; he could practically see Castiel frowning at the very question.
“They take vessels. Castiel is really Jimmy Novak.”

Steve’s face creased, a frown darkening his features. “So the angels possess people, like the demons do.” It was clear that this was coming as a disappointment.

“Well,” Sam took another bite. “They need consent to do it, unlike the demons. Although I suppose you could say the vessels are consenting without really knowing what it’s going to be like. We talked to Jimmy once when it was him and not Castiel. He said it was a little like getting chained to a comet.”

“And he let Castiel back in?” Steve questioned. “After Castiel… left?”

“Jimmy had been stabbed and Castiel had been forced to possess Jimmy’s daughter to save us all,” the hunter replied, voice low. “Jimmy was dying and told Cas to repossess him instead, to save his daughter.”

“Excuse me,” piped up Bruce, who had been very quiet for the last few minutes. “Did you say Dean dug himself out his grave?”

“Yeah.” Sam shrugged. “It’s not a big deal, Dad had us practice in case it ever happened, so it wasn’t the first time he’s done that. I know how, too.” He assured them, missing the point of the concern.

“Your Dad taught you how to dig out of a grave?” Clint hissed in his direction, stabbing a waffle with more force than was necessary and taking Sam aback slightly.

“Yes?”

“What. The actual Hell.”

“No, based on what Dean’s said about it, I think actual Hell was much worse,” Sam returned. “And at least the grave digging doesn’t take that long. It got harder as I got bigger.” He finished his waffles and set the plate in the sink, returning to the living room.

“No!” Clint complained, dumping his own plate and following him over. “You don’t get to leave things hanging like that. And one way or another, we will find out what you’re doing about the hunting and the friggin’ apocalypse so you might as well give us some back story.”

“Look, the only reason Tony is finding out about the apocalypse is because Dean accidentally let it slip and then we got attacked by demons. Besides, Tony is family.”

“Regardless of how he found out, he knows and so do we,” Bruce pointed out, joining them on the couch. “And,” he added in a gentle voice. “Just because we—” he gestured at the other Avengers “aren’t related doesn’t mean that we’re not a sort-of family. Which means you’re part of it by extension. First cousins to the Avengers though Tony Stark.”

Sam could hear for a second Bobby’s voice echoing just before they drove off to Dean’s death: “Family don’t end in blood.” He sighed; he couldn’t argue with that, even as Clint snorted at Bruce’s metaphorical family tree. “Fine.”

“Awww, yes. Story time.” Clint grunted as Natasha elbowed him, shutting him up before he could say anything else. Steve just rolled his eyes.

“But I’m not obligated to tell you anything.” Sam added. “We have our secrets. You have yours. Dean told Bruce the first time we met that you can ask questions but that doesn’t mean you’ll get
answers. That still holds.”

“Understood,” Steve nodded, a clear tinge of “Captain America Authority” coloring his assurance.

Sam sighed and started checking and packing weapons away while he began the history of their lives. “When I was just a baby and Dean was four, a demon named Azazel came into our house and into my room. Mom came up to check on me and Azazel killed her…” And so Sam started telling them the bare bones of a story that spanned years.

Mostly, the four Avengers sat in barely disguised awe that turned into completely undisguised awe as Sam wove a story full of elements they could barely believe and more tragedy than a pair of young brothers should have witnessed. Sam gave them the basics of their search for their father and the subsequent hunt of Azazel, ending with the opening of the Gates of Hell. His voice became quieter when he told them about getting stabbed by Jake Tulley and Dean’s deal to bring him back. Steve tossed him a bottle of water, which Sam took a drink of before talking about their search for Lilith, who held Dean’s deal, and Dean’s attack by hellhounds.

He talked about Dean’s subsequent return from Hell, about how the apocalypse had started, although he didn’t go into detail, just saying that he had tried to stop the last one from breaking and had broken it on accident. He left out that Dean had broken the first seal. That wasn’t his to tell.

“So, Lucifer has risen,” he concluded. “And we’ve spent the last couple months trying to stop him, besides the usual cases. Had a nasty run in with some ghouls--” he nodded at Bruce “-- done some standard hunting, and killed two of the horsemen since. But things are getting… nastier than usual.” Sam rubbed one hand across his face. “You’ll hear the rest when Tony and Dean get up here.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Wow.” Steve said. “And I thought my life was weird.”

Sam smiled at that, but it was bitter. “At least mine was normal for a while.”

“So angels and demons can bring people back from the dead. Lucifer is real and we’re in the apocalypse.” Natasha asked.

“Pretty much sums it up.”

“How can you sleep at night?” Clint asked, his voice low. “Knowing that they’re out there?”

“Alcohol,” the hunter answered frankly. “Salt, weapons under pillows, and an ‘unhealthy codependence’ on each other. Hoping that at the end of the day, we’ve saved more people than we’ve killed.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Making it through the nightmares one day at a time…” The young man (Steve realized suddenly that Sam had to be a year or so younger than him and Dean several years older; the weight on the hunter’s shoulders and in his eyes made him seem so much older) glanced out the window at the city below, at the thousands and thousands of naive and oblivious people. “And you hope that you make a difference.”

Natasha slid a petite hand onto his large one. “You saved us last night and saved the people who worked for Tony who would probably been killed by a pair of ghosts.” Sam smiled at her, just the corners of his mouth turning up again. “Now, I think we’ve let Tony and Dean carry on about the cars long enough. Jarvis?”

Bruce happened to be looking at Sam when the AI patched them through, so he saw the exact moment Sam turned several shades paler. The loud rock music blasted through the speakers and they could barely hear Tony over it. “Hey, what do you--” telling me what your heart meant “--want? We
haven’t been that long—” the heat of the moment…

“Where’s Dean?” Sam demanded, before asking, of all things: “What day is it?”

“Tuesday, why?”

the heat of the moment shone in your eyes...

And then all the Avengers could hear was Dean competing with the music to be heard by Jarvis.

“Jarvis, turn it off, OFF, NOW! Sam, it’s not that kind of Tuesday, hold on, I’ll be up in a minute…” The music and the line both cut out even as Sam tried to protest.

“Dean, I’m fine, it’s okay—” Sam gave it up; Dean was already gone. But eyes were burning into him, probably because he was gripping the back of the couch with one hand like it was the last life preserver on the Titanic. He made a conscious effort to relax.

“Sam, sit.” Bruce set a hand on the taller man’s shoulder and pushed him down onto the couch, kneeling in front of him. Sam took a few deep breaths, getting some of his color back just as the elevator doors slid open and Dean Winchester barreled out on defcon one and full older brother mode.

“Sam?! Sammy? Hey, hey, you good?” Dean rushed across the room and knelt by Bruce in front of Sam.

“It’s fine, Dean. I’m good.” Sam managed to roll his eyes at his brother, but accepted his bottle of water from Steve and drank the rest of it. “Calm down.” Despite his words, Sam looked relieved that Dean was there and spent several seconds looking him up and down. He looked up to find Tony standing right behind Dean, Bruce beside him and Clint, Natasha, and Steve clustered anxiously behind them. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.” He glanced at Dean.

Dean raised an eyebrow and his forehead creased but he didn’t object, probably because he was coming down from being more freaked out than Sam had. Sam sighed. “Since you’re up here, should we fill them in?”

Tony immediately sat down on the couch and gave Dean and Sam his undivided attention. “Fine. Here goes.” Dean threw himself next to Sam.

“So. It’s the apocalypse. Lucifer has risen, the horsemen walk the Earth. You’ve killed one of them.” Tony summarized, just as Natasha had earlier.

“Two of them. War and Famine. The problem is, there’s a certain way the apocalypse is written to end,” Dean cut in. “Michael, the head archangel, is supposed to fight his brother Lucifer. Lots of people will die, more than are already dying from the horsemen, and then Lucifer will be cast in the pit.”

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Clint asked. “Lucifer to be back in the pit?”

“Yes,” replied Sam, “But I don’t think you’re quite getting the magnitude of how many people are actually going to die when they fight it out. We need to stop it another way.” He looked at his lap, then ran a hand through his hair. “The next problem is that angels need vessels. I explained this to everyone else already, Tony, but the gist of it is you have to say yes to being possessed by an angel. Lucifer is possessing someone right now, but the issue with that is angels have a lot of… energy, I guess.”
Dean snorted. “Basically, the angel’s celestial form is too much for your average vessel. But there are certain people who have certain bloodlines and can support an angel without their body breaking down and dying.”

“Castiel? What did you call him… Novak?” Natasha asked. “He can support them. That’s why his daughter could, because of the bloodline.”

Sam nodded. “Also…” he glanced at Dean. “There’s us.”

“You?” Tony asked, voice hoarse. “You can host angels?”

“It’s, um. Apparently also written to be.” Sam said uncomfortably, shifting his position on the couch and taking a sip of water. “We’re supposed to let the angels jump our bones and battle it out for the end of the world.” A humorless smile touched his lips. “I’m supposed to be Lucifer’s meatsuit. Dean is Michael’s. The angels keep talking about parallels.”

“No.” Tony looked shattered. “You can’t do this.”

“We’re not planning on it,” Dean soothed, the rational one for once, raising a hand to stop Tony when he opened his mouth to object again. “There’s got to be another way and we’re trying to find it.”

“What about Tony?” Steve asked. “Is he safe from… being a vessel?”

Sam nodded. “He’s related to the Winchester family by marriage through our paternal grandmother--she was Howard Stark’s sister. Tony doesn’t carry the bloodline, so he’s out of bounds, except as a bargaining chip or a way to trap us.”

Clint half raised a hand. “Is this why the demon wanted you to drink its blood, Sam?”

Dean nodded. “Demon blood makes a vessel stronger, like we mentioned. Lucifer’s current vessel is probably drinking gallons of the stuff every few days and he’s still breaking down.”

“That’s why they were here, also.” Sam continued. “We’ve got Cas on our side and occasionally Crowley--”

“--who’s not really on our side at all, just trying to save his ass, but it’s better than nothing.” Dean cut in. “He’s a demon. The King of Hell, actually.”

Everyone’s eyebrows went a little higher at that. “As I was saying,” Sam said, laying out allegiances. “We have information from Cas and Crowley. The demons, minus Crowley, want Lucifer to win because they think he’ll reward them. You saw that last night.” Everyone nodded.

“Crowley doesn’t want Lucifer to win because if he does, he’ll wipe the demons off the map, starting with him. Demons are cannon fodder to Lucifer. Cas and the angels don’t want Lucifer to win because Lucifer ruling the earth is a really bad idea, obviously. The angels, minus Cas, want Michael to win through the battle with Lucifer, the way it’s written.”

“Everyone with us?” Dean asked, looking around.

“So, Cas is on your side.” Clint double checked.

“Yep. Team Free Will,” Dean responded, only a little sarcastically. “The only three people (and Crowley, but he doesn’t count) who don’t want Sam and Dean Winchester to get possessed by angels and have a MMA showdown.”
There was a beat of silence.

“Wow.” Steve finally said.

“Yeah.” Sam replied, rubbing his temple. He drank the rest of his water and stood. “We need to head out soon. There’s work to do.”

“First, though.” Dean grabbed a notebook. “You’re going to need to reward the the house. I would do these when you rebuild the Malibu place, too.” Dean tore out a few pages and drew a devil’s trap neatly on it, even though he was sure Jarvis had it stored away somewhere. “Make sure they’re perfect before you cover them up.”

Tony nodded, frowning. They didn’t want a repeat of what had happened last night, when the traps had failed.

“I want Castiel to be able to get in here if we need him or you need him, but I don’t know how to ward against angels but leave Cas out of the warding so we can’t explicitly ward against angels. Otherwise, there’s this.” Dean held up another page where he had scrawled the angel banishing ward. “You all saw Sam do it last night. Draw it in blood, then place the cut hand on it. Sends the angel away.”

He handed the papers to Tony. Their eyes met.

“We can do this, Tony.”

Tony looked at him and Sam for a moment. “I know you can.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the support, dear readers!

For those asking, this will go through the events of Avengers: AoU and at least up to the beginning of Supernatural season 11.
Two Superheroes, a CEO, and an Angel

Chapter Notes

This is the most cannon-disruptive so far. It takes place during 5.21 "Two Minutes to Midnight" and uses direct quotes from the show. Really, it's bits of what really happened, but in a different place.

Tony pushed Pepper back against the elevator wall, lips locked together. He ran his hands down her sides and pulled back a little, grinning against her mouth; Steve was at his apartment, Clint and Natasha on a mission, Thor still off planet, Bruce buried in one of the labs. They had the floor to themselves. "Mmm, Tony," Pepper hummed against his cheek, reaching up to pull his face back to hers.

When the elevator opened on their floor, they stumbled out, holding hands, only to stop dead at the sight of an unconscious man covered with blood in the middle of the floor. The mood having totally been killed, Tony cautiously moved forwards until he could get a good look at the man's face.

His jaw dropped. "Castiel?"

Pepper gasped behind him. "What's wrong with him?"

Tony reached out and touched the angel's shoulder, but the man (man? Tony wondered) didn't respond. "He's totally out." Continuing down, the genius pulled apart Castiel's shirt, which was unbuttoned and coated in fresh blood. "Oh my god."

"Jarvis, get Bruce up here!" Pepper called, face pale as Tony pulled off his t-shirt and started applying pressure to the angel's chest, which was covered in gashes. They seemed a little too organized to be arbitrary to Tony, but there was so much blood he couldn't see the pattern. Pepper knelt next to him and pulled Castiel's arms out of the trench coat he was wearing, the same one he had worn in the brief moment he had appeared last time, scarcely a week and a half before, when Sam and Dean had been there.

Bruce was out of the elevator the second the doors opened, Jarvis clearly having informed him of the situation because he was pulling a folded up gurney, which he opened deftly before kneeling by Castiel. "Help me get him up." Between the three of them, they managed to arrange Castiel on the gurney and then they were off down the hall towards medical, Pepper still holding the bloodstained coat.

The moment Castiel was on a bed in medical, Bruce was pulling on gloves and Tony was cutting off the rest of Castiel's shirt and pants, leaving the angel in his underwear and exposing the entirety of the gashes on his chest. Castiel started shaking slightly and Pepper pulled a blanket up over his legs to his stomach, just below where Bruce had started cleaning off the dried and flowing blood.

It was Tony's turn to gasp as the skin became more clear; there, carved into the skin of the angel, was the banishing sigil Dean had drawn him and Sam had smeared onto a table. "Did someone carve that into his chest?" Pepper asked, her voice shaking. Tony took her hand.

"Looks like it." Bruce muttered, looking upset. "I think…" he hesitated, prodding at a few cuts
before finishing clearing the blood and rummaging through the bandages. "None of them need stitches, but they'll probably hurt a lot. He's going to need an IV. I think..." he repeated. "I think he carved them into himself, or at least did part of it. See, they're at a different angle here near his right hand." He mimicked reaching across his own chest. "I wonder..." the scientist shook his head and started wrapping Castiel's chest with bandages.

"If you're good here, I'm going to go call Sam and Dean." Bruce nodded assent and Tony wandered out of the room. Pepper sat heavily in a chair by Castiel's bed, looking down at the coat that was beginning to shed dried blood.

"Jarvis, can you call the best cleaner service we know, for the coat?" Clearly, the angel liked the jacket. "And order new clothing for him based on what he was wearing last time. And get a person who can clean the blood out of the floor in the living room."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Pepper neatly laid the coat on the back of a nearby chair and reached out to take Castiel's limp hand. It was cold, the fingers still shaking slightly, even with the blanket over his legs. She rubbed his hand gently and looked up at Bruce, who had finished putting an IV line in Castiel's other arm and was now standing with his own arms crossed and his chin tucked into his chest, frowning. She pulled the blanket up to Cas' chin and stood, picking up the coat, just as Tony came back in, holding his cell phone and looking just as worried as Bruce. "No answer on either Dean or Sam's phones."

"I'm sure they're okay, Tony." Pepper took Tony's hand, rubbing at a fleck of blood that had transferred to his fingers sometime while moving Castiel from the living room. "I'm sure the boys are fine."

Tony pulled her into his arms, coat and all, face turned into her neck. "I hope so."

It took Castiel four days to wake up.

Jarvis alerted Tony, Bruce, and Pepper in the late afternoon and all three hurried upstairs from various locations to find the angel standing in the doorway and looking very un-angelic. In fact, he looked pretty bad even by human standards; white as a sheet, leaning on the door frame for support, hair mussed, bags under his eyes, and one hand on his injured chest. But his lips were set, his shoulders were broad, and his free hand held a long silver blade steadily and suddenly Tony remembered the way that Castiel had removed all of the demons from their hosts with the blast of white light; no matter how human he looked, he was anything but.

"How did I get here?" The angel asked, deep voice even more harsh than Tony remembered it being. He did, however, relax a little when he saw them.

"You just sort of appeared in the living room. Covered in blood, symbol carved in your chest." Bruce took a few steps forward and gripped the angel by the upper arm. Tony opened his mouth to warn him to watch the blade, but it seemed to have disappeared. He shook his head and grabbed the angel's other arm and helped him turn around. Clearly the angel was more tired than expected because he didn't protest when they helped him back onto the bed.

"So, um. Castiel." Tony said. "What happened? Oh, by the way, I'm To-"

"I know who you are, Anthony Stark. And you, Robert Banner, and you, Virginia Potts."

There was no hiding their looks of surprise, especially for Bruce and Pepper.

"Look, we go by different names. This is Bruce, and we call her Pepper." Tony gestured at the
"Like the plant." Castiel said.

"Yes," Pepper replied. "Do you know if the boys are okay?"

"The boys?" Castiel asked. "You mean Sam and Dean?" Tony nodded. The angel's face blanked for a millisecond. "I… do not know."

Suddenly, Castiel looked very worried. "I do not know. And my head hurts. And I am… thirsty."

The way he said it, like he was discovering something for the first time and wasn't sure if the word fit the sensation was a little startling but they didn't have time to ruminate on it because Castiel's hand shot out and grasped Tony's wrist in an iron grip.

"I need to call them. Now." If Tony hadn't known better (and he didn't really know, now that he thought about it) he would have thought the angel was verging on panic. So he pulled his phone out of his pocket and thumbed it to the call screen, handing it to the angel.

"I have their numbers if you need them."

Cas shook his head. "I know them." They watched as he cautiously poked at the touch screen until it was dialing Dean's number and then Tony stood.

"We'll be in the hallway when you're done. You probably need some food and Bruce should look at your chest again."

Cas frowned and didn't respond, lifting the ringing phone to his ear. Tony followed Pepper and Bruce out but glanced back and saw the moment that the phone was answered through the second of sheer relief in the angel's face. They could hear most of the conversation, since Castiel wasn't making an effort to keep his voice down. "Dean?"

"I'm in Anthony Stark's tower." There was a moment as Dean probably either relayed the information to Sam or just took a little time to absorb that.

"No," Castiel said, a little fatalistically. "I just woke up here. Everyone seemed fairly surprised. Apparently, after Van Nuys, I suddenly appeared, bloody and unconscious, in the middle of the tower. Possibly because I've been here before and… Tony... is related to you."

Castiel listened for a moment. "How?" he asked, then sighed. They could hear sheets rustling as he shifted. "I can't 'zap' anywhere."

Another sigh. "You could say my batteries are- are drained."

Dean was loud enough that Tony could practically hear him in the hall. "What do you mean? You're out of angel mojo?"

"I'm saying that I am thirsty and my head aches. I have a bug bite that itches no matter how much I scratch it, and I'm saying that I'm just incredibly…" He trailed off, looking despondent. "Human. Yes." The angel's eyes closed. "My point is - I can't go anywhere without money for...an airplane ride. And food. And pain medication, ideally."

Tony had had enough and walked back into the room. "Give me the phone." Castiel looked at him and didn't hand it over. "Jarvis, patch me in." There was a moment and then Tony could hear the whispers of clothing and people coming through the speakers.
"I'll take care of it, Dean. Where are you guys?"

"Back at Bobby's place. But we're heading out soon. We've got a plan to pop Lucifer back into his box. Can Cas spend a few hours there before you put him on… a bus or whatever?"

"Of course. We'll take care of him." Pepper responded promptly, having followed Tony into the room.

"Dean, wait," the angel chimed in. He looked at Tony and Pepper; not a glare, but a clear expression of privacy and they left the room before he continued. They didn't hear Castiel apologize to Dean, didn't hear that the boys had confronted Michael since they had left the tower and that Dean had said no to the possession.

Cas reappeared in the doorway a moment later, handing Tony his phone back and accepting the neat pile of clothing from Pepper with a nod. They both headed for the kitchen, where Bruce was already assembling food and waited.

Just a few short minutes after that, Castiel strode through the door, looking slightly more collected and back to his angelic self now that he was wearing clean, non-hospital clothing. He did up the tie as he approached the table, sliding the knot up but leaving the loop around his neck slightly loose. The way his hands moved without the angel looking at them made Tony wonder if the angel actually knew how to knot a tie or if it was simply muscle memory from his vessel- what was his name? Novak?

"Coffee, Castiel?" Bruce asked, sliding the man a plate of eggs and toast and a glass of juice.

"Please," the angel responded, picking up a fork and attacking the food with a single minded intensity.

"How do you like it fixed?"

That gave him pause, his eyebrows coming together. "I… do not know," he admitted haltingly. "While I am fond of the drink, or my vessel was, I have not drunk very much that I have made myself. Sam... usually fixes it for me."

Tony had to bite back a laugh at the thought of Sam making the angel a cup of coffee just so every time he had the drink. Pepper looked like she was suppressing a smile as well, but asked: "Do you know if he adds cream and sugar?"

"Just cream. I believe. Usually, I" - he tilted his head to the side "- do not eat. Angels do not need to and I can taste the molecules. So eating for flavor is not very important to me." Tony's jaw might have dropped a little at that, but Bruce almost poured the carton of cream on the counter instead of in the mug, so Tony considered himself practically unfazed in comparison.

The physicist managed to finish pouring, gave the mug a stir, and handed it to Castiel, who took a cautious sip. "This is very nice. Thank you." His voice was a little smoother now that he had drunk something, but it was still low and verging on roughness; Tony supposed that must just be what it sounded like.

Castiel finished eating and handed Bruce back his plate, the physicist managing to badger the angel into letting him check the chest wounds one more time before he left and Pepper went running to find him a bag to take some food with him. Tony stepped to the side and had a quiet conversation with Jarvis, managing to secure Castiel tickets on several busses; the idea of the angel trying to navigate an airport for the first time made him anxious. If Dean and Sam hadn't mandated so firmly
that he stay out of the way and uninvolved, he would have flown Castiel out himself, but he held himself in check. Pepper's safety was at stake as well and he didn't want to endanger her.

He came back to find Castiel retying his tie and Bruce throwing away a small handful of sterile wipes. "It's healing up pretty good," Bruce told Tony. "Now that he's awake, it's even faster."

"Great." Tony turned to the angel. "I've set you up with a bus to get you to Bobby Singer's place." He handed Cas a sheet of paper Jarvis had just printed off with the details. "The first one will pick you up right here at the Tower in about fifteen minutes. You'll switch once in the middle." Tony held out a small envelope. "Here's a couple hundred dollars. Use it if you find out Sam and Dean are somewhere else and need to buy a different bus ticket. The driver can probably direct you to someone who can help if you need it. Make sure you eat."

Castiel rolled his eyes a little at that, but considering that the angel was human-ish and had seemed pretty freaked out about being thirsty a little bit ago, it was probably a good thing to remind him. Pepper reappeared with a messenger bag, into which she slid a few bottles of water, some granola bars, and the bottle of pain medication. "Take two if you need them and give them a little time to work. Be careful."

She looked like she wanted to give him a hug, but the unconscious man who had looked like a kicked puppy while he was wounded and asleep had been replaced with a serious, six foot tall angel who she didn't know at all. She ended up taking a call on her phone, touching Castiel gently on the shoulder as she left. Bruce nodded at Castiel. "Take care, Castiel. Keep an eye on the Winchesters."

He extended a hand, which Castiel took and shook.

"Thank you, Dr. Banner. I will."

Tony handed Castiel the tan overcoat that Jarvis and Pepper had gotten cleaned and the angel pulled it on, smoothing out the lapels. Tony walked Castiel out to the bus, pushing open the doors of the building just as the large shuttle started coming up the road. "Be safe, Cas. Look after the boys for me. Please." Tony bit his lip, afraid that he would start begging if he said anything more and Tony Stark did not beg, no matter what. Even about family matters.

"I will, Tony Stark. Thank you for caring for me. I apologize for entering your home without your permission."

"Don't worry about it."

The angel studied him for a moment, the blue eyes piercing deep into Tony in a way that reminded him of Yinsen, as if the surveyor was reading his soul. Although, he reflected, Castiel might actually be doing that.

"Your heart is in the right place, Tony." Castiel shook Tony's hand. "Thank you, again. Hopefully, this will be over soon."

"Hopefully." Tony stood with his arms crossed as an Angel of the Lord boarded a bus to go resume the battle for the fate of the world.
Swan Song: Aftermath

Spoilers for 5.22 “Swan Song” obviously.

Tony had been waiting for the call.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been waiting at that particular moment. Jarvis was offline, actually, since another one of the huge freak lightning storms had damaged some circuits; nothing major, but during repairs Tony had sent the AI into the lowest possible power mode while he repaired the charring.

The genius had been caught up in the discussion/debriefing with the Avengers and Maria Hill about recent events, including a mysterious situation with Thor’s father that the Asgardian had returned to tell them about.

“So, is he dead?” Clint asked, trying to get some clarification from the whole situation.

“Nay,” Thor responded, turning to face the archer and causing his cape to billow behind him. “The being killed here on earth was not King Odin as he would be known, merely a manifestation of his power walking the earth for a short time. A magical extension of his consciousness, a way to see the events of different realms. When the extension was slaughtered, my father fell into the Odinsleep, where he will remain until he has regained a measure of his strength.”

“What does this mean for Earth?” Agent Hill asked, taking notes on a tablet.

Thor’s frown deepened and he crossed his arms, the metal of his bracers scraping together. “It means that whatever evil walks here is of great power, greater than any of us could expect or hope to stop on our own. It is a being of supreme strength and possesses a degree of evil that is… unsettling.”

Again, Tony’s mind flashed to Sam and Dean, who were hunting the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, hoping to stop Lucifer. Were they there when Odin was killed? Was Lucifer the one who killed Odin? Where the boys still alive? Bruce’s voice brought him back into the conversation.

“While we don’t know for sure—” he glanced at Tony “—yet, at least, I’m wondering if the apocalypse is over now and if whatever killed the Odin-projection has been destroyed.”

“It seems like it could be over.” Natasha stood and slid a hologram into the center of the table. “Up until yesterday, see? The lightning storms, the hurricane, the mass killings. There was the swine flu outbreak and the deaths of a few workers at vaccine distribution facilities. The storm in Chicago that suddenly stopped. And then yesterday afternoon everything strange just went away. I think they could have stopped it.”

Tony looked at his phone and was on his feet in an instant, knocking his chair to the floor.

Voicemail: Dean Winchester

He took three quick steps to the door, ignoring Hill’s call of “Stark” and stood on the other side of the glass wall, thumbing the message open and holding the phone to his ear with a hand that was shaking more than he would have liked to admit.

“Hey, Tony.”

That was all Tony needed to know; the pain in Dean’s voice was enough to cement all the fears that
had swirled around the genius’ brain for the last weeks. He closed his eyes and swayed on the spot, the next sentence confirming the impossible.

“Sam is gone.”

Opening his eyes, Tony found himself leaning against the wall, Bruce standing next to him, looking concerned and filled with weary sadness.

The rest of the message kept playing but sounded faint and distorted to Tony as he forced himself to stand and honor his last family member. He took several uneasy steps back into the conference room, seeing his ghost-pale face reflected back from the table as he turned up the volume on his phone. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to say the unthinkable phrase: “Sam Winchester is dead.”

He slumped in his righted chair, starting the message again.

“Hey, Tony.

Sam is gone.”

There was a pause, the low rumbling of the car in the background filling the recording. Tony put his hands over his face. This was not what he had wanted for the brothers, not what Dean had tried to convince him of when he had told Tony they would be careful.

“He came up with a plan to get Lucifer back in his box. I didn’t like it, but he is-- was--” There was another heartbreakingly long pause. “He was an adult and I told him I would support him. We went to meet Lucifer and Sammy said yes to the bastard. He was the vessel and things were… close, but we opened the Cage and Sam took back control and jumped into the pit.”

There was a sound of shock from the end of the table but Tony didn’t uncover his face to see who had made it.

“My brother fought the Devil and won. He saved the world on his own. Sammy was so damn brave and it should have been me, I should have--” Dean’s voice wobbled dangerously in the recording and he cut himself off. “Anyway, I thought you should know. That it’s over and done. I know you guys have been working on it from the other end.

Tony, I need you to do something for me. I need you to leave me alone, out of the life. I’m sorry, God, I’m sorry, but I made a promise to Sam that if I lived through this I would stop hunting and settle down.”

There was a laugh from the other end of the line, brittle and sharp. “Don’t know what I’m going to do with myself, but a promise is a promise. I’m headed to the house of a friend of mine; she’ll look after me. I’ll keep you in my phone, but I’m not going to call.”

A pause. A deep breath.

“Thanks for everything, Tony. You would have been proud of him. He… I wish…. I wish.” Dean’s voice was rough, a whisper only.

“Thanks, Tony,” he repeated, and the message ended.

Tony uncovered his face and picked up the phone without deleting the message, sliding it into his pocket with one hand. “It’s over,” he whispered. “Sam saved the world.”

Thor looked to Steve, an eyebrow raised. Steve shook his head in an I’ll-explain-who-later
expression. The billionaire stood again, slowly this time. “I need to go.” He turned to Bruce. “Can you tell Pepper to come down?” It might be the coward’s way out, but he couldn’t face her right now and tell her that Sam and Dean, who she had taken such a shine to when they had met, were dead and despairing. He needed some time first.

Bruce nodded, his face full of pity and sadness. “I’ll send her after she gets back from work. She’ll want to talk to you, I’m sure.” Tony jerked his chin sharply but found his throat was so tight he couldn’t speak any more.

He walked out of the room and nobody saw him for nearly five days. Pepper had gone down to his workshop and returned hours later, eyes red from crying. Bruce gave her a hug and they Tony down food but otherwise left the genius alone to mourn the death of Sam and the self-imposed exile of Dean. When he returned to the group, nobody asked him questions but let him know through a hand on his shoulder, a bowl of popcorn on his lap, that they were with him.

There was a certain amount of awkward tension among the group; none of the Avengers had known the brothers well, mostly just the one very dramatic visit, not even twenty four hours in length. Bruce had met them twice before and knew them best, but even that was barely a relationship. Steve, whose opinions on Tony’s life choices varied from hesitantly supportive to generally derogatory, wholly approved of the Winchesters but didn’t know much about them. Tony had only know the duo for five years, but over the course of many visits and a multitude of texts and phone calls he had let them into his carefully-guarded heart in a way they had previously only seen with Pepper and Jarvis.

Thor, however, who hadn’t even known of the Winchesters until the message letting them know that Sam was dead, perhaps helped Tony the most.

He sat down on the leather couch next to Tony the second evening after the genius had emerged, taking the very spot Sam had claimed when the brothers had explained their plan to save the world without saying yes to the angels or the devil. Something in Thor’s ancient eyes had caught Tony and held him fast, stopping the flippant remark on his tongue before he could brush the demigod off.

Thor placed a heavy hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Dean Winchester worried that nobody would remember his brother and his great deeds.” Tony nodded, thinking about the waver in Dean’s voice. Thor continued. “Remember Samuel; honor him for what he has done and he will never be truly gone.” It was unexpected and not at all what Tony had been thinking. For once, Tony didn’t respond with a quick comment, simply nodded and absorbed the words.

Things got a little better from there, with time. Tony held to Dean’s request and didn’t search for the hunter. No supernatural forces attacked them. He occasionally forgot about the tiny anti-possession tattoo that sat low on his hip.

The next time he saw Dean Winchester was nearly a year later.

Sam was with him.
Hydra and Soulessness

A dark figure stretched out on the roof of the Blackjack Motel. Black clothing reeking of ill intent, small protrusions that anyone with well-trained eyes would have seen as knives and guns. More weapons were hidden next to the nearby air duct. Keen eyes watched out of the shadows and debris of the seedy establishment, catching every movement as the black Chevy Impala rumbled into the parking lot for the third time that day. They remained trained on Dean Winchester as the man stepped out of his car-- the door closing behind him with a loud squeal-- and walked towards the room immediately below the watcher, a bag of fast food in hand.

When the hunt began later that night, the figure on the roof was nowhere to be seen.

Sam turned the key, cutting off the deep rumble of the impala’s engine and letting silence fall as he handed the keys back to Dean and got out of the car. Dean grunted as he pushed the passenger side door open with his left arm, keeping his right close to his chest to minimize movement of his dislocated shoulder. He hauled himself out of the low vehicle and slammed the door, taking a few steps forward around the hood of the car before he had to cut off a groan at a wave of pain that rushed through him-- Sam’s arm had just shot out and smacked him in the collarbone, jostling his shoulder.

There was no apology from his soulless brother.

He looked up to complain (about the hit and the apology, because that’s what people did and they were still working on the “empathy” thing) but the words died in his throat as he saw what Sam had already seen: the lights in their room were on. Immediately, Dean was on high alert.

It was possible housekeeping had turned them on, but they always used the “Do Not Disturb” sign at the risk of an innocent cleaner finding a stash of weapons and notes on mysterious murders taped to the walls. And Dean knew, even with the confusion of the last few hours, that they had turned the lights off before they left.

Which meant someone was-- or at least, had been-- in their room.

He really didn’t want Sam to go in first; besides the fact that it was Dean’s job to keep Sam from doing stupid crap like that, Sam didn’t have a soul at the moment and who knew what he would do to whoever or whatever was in there? As much as he didn’t like it, this Sam was more of a “shoot first” kind of guy.

Unfortunately, Dean didn’t get to stop Sam or even argue with him because he only had one good arm and Sam was already turning the key in the (locked, Dean noted) door. He gave Dean a silent “on three” and counted, one hand reaching for the gun in the small of his back before he got to three and shouldered the door open.

The person in black was waiting for Dean to return, lounging on the bed as if there wasn’t a care in the world and they were the one who had paid for the room. Good information had led them to the motel, he knew Dean was out on a hunt, and he expected him back soon. He didn’t expect, however, the full force of Sam Winchester.

Clint Barton was beginning to stand the moment the door burst open, a grin starting to form as he
imagined the face Dean would be making when he realized who had broken into his motel room. The smile dropped, however, and a gun appeared in his hand as he registered the face in front of him and his expression turned from a grin to confusion.

“Clint?” Dean’s voice came from outside, behind the considerable bulk of Sam, who looked very much alive to Clint. “Clint, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Dean, why the hell is your brother standing in front of me?” the archer retaliated slowly lowering the gun but keeping it at hand. “You called Tony and told us he was dead!”

Dean huffed. “Long story, as usual. Should we be worried about something?” he asked, eyeing the SHIELD agent’s tactical gear and small pile of weaponry next to him on the floor on high alert. Clint shook his head but Dean wasn’t wait for a response. He dropped his extra pistol, closed the door behind them, and used his good arm to pull over a hard backed chair, sitting in it cowboy style. “Ready, Sam?”

The taller brother nodded and walked over, placing a hand on either side of Dean’s shoulder. Before Clint could protest that they were doing this right now, Sam counted “One, two, three.” and deftly popped his brother’s arm back into its socket. Clint winced in sympathy as Dean’s teeth ground together and he stretched his arm across his chest, no doubt waiting for the wave of pain to fade a little. He was more surprised-- and unnerved-- by Sam. It was his job to read people for a living, to pick up moods and understand how people were going to react. But Sam...there was no expression of apology on his face for Clint to read, no sympathy for the pain of his brother, whose shoulder he had just popped back in, no emotions, just focus on the task. It was made all the stranger by the fact that Clint at least sort of knew Sam; they had met and Clint remembered Sam being much more emotive than this blank faced person in front of him

“It depends,” Clint set the thought aside for a moment and answered Dean’s question. “Were you attacked earlier?”

“By a vampire,” Sam answered. “But that’s not new.”

“Wait…” Dean added. “The three guys who jumped us in the parking lot?” He crossed the room and picked up a bottle of beer, popping it open, taking a swig, and rubbing his shoulder.

Clint nodded. “Seen the news today?” He flicked the TV on without waiting for an answer. Footage played repeatedly of three helicarriers falling from the sky, the newscaster babbling about an information upload, Captain America getting arrested in broad daylight the previous evening, and the crash of three brand new government ships. “Hydra.” Clint ground the word out as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “They’ve been a part of SHIELD since the beginning. They assassinated Fury, tried to kill Cap and Natasha, and put out hits on the rest of us. Natasha uploaded all the information to the internet. Tony was alerted by Jarvis right away and started removing stuff and I think he managed to wipe you two out of it right away, so the world doesn’t know about you. But obviously Hydra would have known. I would bet the guys who jumped you were Hydra. What did you do to them?”

“Knocked ‘em out and left ‘em in an alley.” Sam shrugged. Again, the lack of caring from Sam set Clint’s teeth on edge.

“Did you say Hydra ordered hits on the rest of you?” Dean asked. “Is the rest of the team okay? Pepper?”

“Yeah, Natasha got word out. Stark not only took out the three that came after him but also managed to send a team to get Bruce from Sri Lanka just after Hydra tried to shoot him.” Clint waved down
Dean’s raised eyebrow. “He’s fine. Turned green and scared the locals a little. But he’s back in the Tower now. Thor was out with Jane Foster, his girlfriend, and when Hydra threatened her they didn’t even know what hit them. Steve fought a super Hydra baddie who turned out to be an old friend of his, got shot a couple times, and almost drowned. He’s in the hospital, but he’s stable and apparently recovering well.”

“And you?”

“I was on a mission a few miles away from here, actually.”

“And?” Sam was starting to sound impatient.

“And my handler tried to shoot me in the back,” Clint bit out. “And people wonder why I have trust issues. Anyway, I took care of it and Natasha contacted me a little bit afterwards to tell me to check up with you. Although,” he added, “I thought there would only be one of you.” He raised an eyebrow.

“We didn’t want you all to know yet,” Sam said, shrugging.

“Yeah, cause we really like to keep people in the dark, right Sammy?” Dean’s words were tinged with hostility. Clearly, there was some remaining anger about how Dean had found about Sam.

Sam sighed but didn’t respond.

Dean looked at Clint. “Apparently, Sam’s been undead physically since… not long after he died. Coming up on a year and a bit. I didn’t know until a little more than a month ago.” The tight set of his lips told the spy how unhappy Dean was about the length of time he hadn’t known.

“And now?” Clint prompted.

“And now we have a bigger problem,” Dean said. He shook his head. “Like always.”

“We would rather not tell Tony that I’m alive until we find out how to fix it,” Sam added.

“The problem being…?”

Dean took a deep breath, like a diver getting ready to jump into a frozen pool, but Sam got there first.

“I don’t have a soul.”

“What?!”

“A soul.” Dean rubbed his eyes. “When Sam’s body was raised from the Cage, Sam’s soul didn’t come with him. It’s still there.”

Clint eyed the Sam in front of him warily. “So are you really Sam? At all?”

“Sort of? We don’t really know,” the man responded, not sounding particularly concerned. “We’re trying to figure out how to get it… me… out of the Cage without letting Lucifer back out.”

“So we would appreciate you not telling any of the others until we either know for sure that it can’t be done or we’ve already done it. Don’t let Tony know, especially. You know how much it would kill him that Sam’s not dead. And that Sam’s not… Sam.”

Clint frowned, but nodded. “I understand. How long do you think it’ll take? I don’t exactly have a frame of reference for these things.”
Sam shrugged. “We don’t know any more than anyone else.”

Clint sighed. “Anything we can do? And as a side note, are your lives ever normal?”

“No,” Dean said. “And no.”

The archer’s phone buzzed. “That’s my ride. I’ll be seeing you, hopefully.”

“Hopefully.” Dean muttered. But he didn’t look too hopeful.
Christmas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This takes place towards the end of Season 6, between episodes 21 and 22. I’ve edited the timeline, shifting the whole thing so we’re around Christmas.

On December 15th, Dean sent a text message from the Impala.

The offer for Christmas still open?

Barely a minute later, the phone dinged, the chime soft and barely audible over the rumble of the engine and the sound of wheels on pavement.

Of course. In Malibu; when will you get here?

Dean looked at the road sign that flashed by him a moment later and shoved his sleeping brother’s hand off the map, considering routes. Sam didn’t wake up but reclaimed the stray appendage, tucking it close to his chest.

Tomorrow night. Got a surprise present for you. Bringing someone.

He could almost hear Tony smirking in the distance.

Girlfriend?

Dean rolled his eyes.

See you tomorrow, Tony.

He took the next exit and drove into the night.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ 

The exterior of Tony Stark’s new Malibu home was not dramatically different than the original home that had sat there before the Mandarin incident. It was still white, with sleek lines and large windows, but the additional fortification was evident if one knew where to look. The Impala roared up the long driveway to the house, the silhouette of the building growing larger and glowing faintly in the early moonlight.

“Wow.” Sam looked up at it. “I like it.”

“It’s still plenty fancy, that’s for sure,” Dean grunted, guiding the car to the front door and cutting the engine off. “I get to go first, don’t forget.”

Sam rolled his eyes but didn’t comment. The older brother climbed out of the car and popped the trunk, grabbing his bag before walking to the front door to ring the doorbell. There was a moment of silence before the sound of feet approached and an electronic beep signaled the unlocking of the door. It swung open to reveal Tony, wearing one of his Black Sabbath t-shirts and a pair of jeans, looking like an excited puppy. “Dean!” He shook Dean’s hand before backing up and trying to look over Dean’s shoulder. “Where’s this guest? And where’s my gift?”
“They’re the same thing, actually.” Dean stepped into the house and sideways, letting Sam move forwards into the light of the door.

“Merry Christmas, Tony. Surprise.” Sam smiled, but Dean could see the little bit of fear and worry that was always present in his eyes.

“Sam? How…?” Tony shook his head questioningly and then burst forward, bundling Sam into a hug as best he could with Sam’s bigger frame. He pulled back, wonder on his face, and reached up and out to cradle Sam’s face in a very un-Stark display of awe. “How… we thought you were dead! Pepper!” he called, voice slightly hoarse and verging on anger, before pointing at Dean and Sam accusingly, finger hovering between the two of them. “You don’t get to do that to us!”

Dean intervened. “Let us get inside and we’ll explain.”

However, that was delayed by the arrival of Pepper, who began crying when she saw Sam in the doorway. Finally, fifteen minutes later, all four were sitting on the couch and Sam started to talk. “I was dead, but not for very long. Sort of. Castiel raised my body from the Cage and I was alive for almost a year before Dean found out. I would have told him, but—” he cut himself off. “Anyway a few weeks after that—"

“—Bobby and I realized that he was acting oddly. We talked to Castiel, who did some tests.” Dean took over. “We figured out that Sam didn’t have a soul.”

Pepper gasped. Tony looked sick, all of his anger vanishing. “What does that mean exactly?” the genius asked.

“My body was here. But my soul had been in the Cage all that time. Dean worked out a bargain with Death -- not that kind of deal--” he reassured Tony, who looked worried. “--and Death brought my soul back to my body.”

“So do you remember…” Pepper trailed off, not sure if she wanted to ask.

“The Cage?” Sam shook his head. “Death put up a wall. So I don’t remember any of it. I don’t remember anything else from the last year and a half either.”

“And we aren’t going to talk about it because the wall isn’t the best construction job,” Dean closed firmly. “We’re here because Tony invited us for Christmas. So here we are.”

“Right,” Tony agreed. “Can we at least tell the other Avengers that Sam is alive? They’re planning on coming over at some point during the next two weeks so they should probably get a heads up. And I think at least Steve and maybe his friend Sam were going to be here for actual Christmas Day.”

Sam and Dean held a silent conversation; they didn’t want the situation of Sam and his soul to become common knowledge… but if they couldn’t trust the Avengers, who could they trust? Dean nodded at Tony. “Sure, but nobody else.”

“Understood,” Tony agreed. “I’ll call them later. Secure channels only.”

“A phone call for you, Miss Potts.” Jarvis cut into the conversation.

“Be back in a moment,” Pepper said, and left to take the call, all three men watching her go.

“When are you going to ask her to marry you, Stark?” Dean asked teasingly.
But to his surprise, Tony just smirked. “Sooner than you think.”

Sam and Dean both leaned forward. “Are you kidding!? Congrats, man!” Sam shook Tony’s hand. The billionaire just laughed.

“Don’t congratulate me until she says yes. And keep it down for now; wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Please, keeping secrets is part of our job.”

Pepper’s heels started to tap back towards the room and Tony hastily changed the subject. “So what do you guys want to do for Christmas?”

There was a hasty exchange of glances, but to Dean’s regret Sam looked just as lost as he was.

“Ummm… we don’t really have plans, so… whatever?” Sam said, looking optimistically hopeful that Tony wouldn’t push. The genius sent him a look that said he knew exactly what Sam was doing.

“Uh huh. So no Christmas traditions? Not even from when you were kids?”

Dean snorted. “Hunters are never really kids. Well,” he amended, “some are. But we weren’t.” And if that wasn’t the saddest thing Tony had ever heard. “Sides, we’re lucky if we’re alive on Christmas, much less up to celebrating.” The hunter grinned and raised an eyebrow at Tony. “So teach us your ways, oh great Christmas Master.”

Sam was sitting on the couch with his laptop, playing poker against some random person online and smoking them soundly while Jarvis piped Christmas music through the speakers. Pepper flopped down on the couch by his feet. “Favourite Christmas song?”

“Hmmmm?” Sam asked absentmindedly, winning the hand.

“Sam. Favourite Christmas song?”

The younger hunter looked at her over the top of the laptop. “I don’t really know any.” Pepper’s eyes grew wide. “Christmas music isn’t exactly Dean’s speed. The car rides are a dozen classic rock cassettes. Or old rock radio stations.”

“What about Christmas songs in movies? Or in stores?”

“We don’t Christmas shop.” Sam smiled at the thought of Dean in a Hallmark store, trying to pick out the perfect gift. “And I’ve only ever seen a couple full Christmas movies.” His smile wavered. Christmas inevitably made him think of Jessica, even six years after. They had only spent one Christmas together, their sophomore year of college. Freshman year she had gone home; they hadn’t been dating long enough for him to go with her and he had stayed on campus, working. The third Christmas never came. But Jessica had loved the holiday, had loved the baking and the movies and the spirit of the thing. They had watched It’s a Wonderful Life and White Christmas and The Grinch, Jessica crying at the end of the former and laughing at how weirded out Sam was by the latter.

Pepper must have sensed his dip in mood. “Well then, we need to catch you up.”

Which is how Dean walked in on Pepper and Sam buried under a pile of blankets with a bowl of popcorn, watching Scrooge. “Ghost of Christmas Past?” he asked, voice thick with skepticism. Pepper threw a piece of popcorn at him and he caught it in his mouth, smirking.
“Sit down and be quiet.”

Dean complied.

Which is how Tony walked in on Sam still under a pile of blankets on the couch (and half asleep at this point) with Pepper and Dean on the floor with another stack of pillows and blankets half way through _The Polar Express_. “Tom Hanks! I love him.” Tony flopped down next to Dean, tugging a blanket across his legs and leaning back, head by Sam’s feet.

When Pepper emerged from their room for work the next morning, they were still there, Tony sprawled across a pile of cushions that supported his chest, Dean and Sam lying across various pieces of furniture but still within arm’s reach of each other.

She made sure Jarvis took a photo before they woke up.

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Dean was standing at one of the floor-to-ceiling windows watching the sunbeams dance over the ocean when the wisp of changing air current told him that someone was behind him. He spun, lashing out to grab the strong wrist of his silent attacker in one hand and bringing around the knife that was ever present in his jacket.

He nearly dropped it when the face registered; Natasha just smirked at him as he released her with an exhale. “Agent Romanoff.” Dean slid the knife back into a pocket. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were coming today.”

The smirk relaxed into a smile, albeit with a raised eyebrow. “Natasha, please. Thanks for not stabbing me; Clint’s around the house somewhere, by the way, so watch out for him, too. I think Bruce and Steve are flying in tomorrow and Thor might come sometime.”

“Good to know.” Dean ran a hand through his short hair and looked her up and down. She was wearing jeans and a green blouse, looking very… normal. “What happened to the ninja/spy military getup?”

She shrugged. “Christmas. I’m off duty. And even with Stark’s modifications, the fabric still rubs around the ankles. It’s uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, it’s terrible,” Clint chimed in from the doorway that led to the bedrooms, looking amused at having walked into a conversation about clothing. “Chafes like nobody’s business. Where are Tony and Sam?”

Dean flopped on the couch. “Getting a Christmas tree. I apparently don’t appreciate the ‘art’ of choosing a tree, so I was not invited.” He suddenly grinned boyishly, making him look much younger to Natasha and Clint. “Pepper went to buy stuff to make Christmas cookies tomorrow. I’ve haven’t had Christmas cookies in… a long time.”

Pepper chose that moment to walk back in, carrying only a few bags. “Well, that’s good, because I just found out Tony ordered enough ingredients to make cookies for a small army. Hope everyone likes to bake.” She toed off her shoes and headed into the kitchen. “I also hope you tall people are ready to help handle the Christmas lights!” she called.

Natasha and Clint both looked at Dean.

“Where’s Sam when you need him?” he groaned and went to lend a hand, the two Avengers right behind him.
By the time Sam and Tony lugged a huge Christmas tree through the door, Dean was on a
tepladder, Natasha directing as he straightened a wreath over the fireplace.

“Whew,” Sam dropped his end of the tree, flopping on the couch where Pepper was sitting,
organizing ornaments. “Where do you want this thing?”

“Where is it going to fit?” Pepper asked, eyeing the size of the monstrous tree.

“I thought the corner there,” Tony gestured to the area near the fireplace. “We could move that little
table and then it would fit perfectly. Let me go get the base and we’ll set it up.” It took Dean, Sam,
Clint, and Tony before the tree was positioned perfectly to Natasha and Pepper’s liking. They
chatted merrily away the whole time, directing the men as the group tried not to break anything.
Dean hadn’t really been paying attention, just enjoying the chatter and the strange normalcy of it all.
Suddenly, the hairs on the back of Dean’s neck stood up and he took several steps back from the tree
in order to find Sam. He located his brother on the other side of the massive pine, hands having
suddenly stilled on the branch they had been moving, eyes fixed on something he couldn’t see.

“Sam?” he asked, voice guarded.

“What did you just say?” Sam asked, turning suddenly to Clint. Tony and Natasha stopped what
they were doing, picking up on the sudden tension.

“I said that Steve’s friend Sam actually isn’t coming. You haven’t met Sam; he and Steve joined
forces during the Hydra thing.”

“The Hydra thing…” Sam muttered, eyes refocusing on the middle distance and lips pursing.

“Sam.” Dean said, taking a half step towards Sam, this time a note of warning in his voice. “Don’t
even think about--”

Brotherly instinct kicked in before anything had even happened and he had rounded the tree in half a
second, partially catching Sam as his knees buckled and he collapsed. Somehow, he managed to get
a hand under his brother’s shoulder and guide the dead weight that was Sam Winchester towards the
floor, rather than the tree or the coffee table. “Damn. Fuck,” Dean swore as Sam began to seize, just
as he had the day they left Rhode Island. Sam’s eyes were moving behind the closed lids, watching
things only he could see.

“Dean?” Pepper sounded scared and Dean glanced up from where he was kneeling by Sam’s head.

Dean grimaced. “Longer than the first. By about thirty seconds.” He reached out as Sam pushed
himself to a sitting position, then helped pull him to his feet only to gently shove him into an armchair
a moment later. Natasha walked back into the room (when had she left? Dean had missed it) and
passed Sam an open bottle of water, which he took with a nod. There was a second as Sam sipped
his water, Dean watched him like a hawk, and everyone else awkwardly tried to return to decorating the tree.

Sam spoke up. “Clint… you visited us in a motel? Because…” He frowned. “Because… something had happened to Cap…?” he hesitated. Clint opened his mouth to respond, but Natasha clamped a hand around his arm so tightly Dean could see the skin whiten under her fingers. They waited. Sam chewed on his lip, then his face brightened. “Hydra had infiltrated SHIELD. You had been attacked by your handler. Steve got shot but he’s okay?” The last part sounded more uncertain.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded. “That’s pretty much the whole story. Sam is a friend of Steve’s that helped take out the carriers.”

“Wilson’s a good guy, you can trust him. We’re actually thinking about inviting him to join the Avengers.” Natasha chimed in, voice smooth, neatly changing the subject.

Dean, however, was not done with Sam yet.

“Damn it, Sam, you can’t scratch at the wall! If it’s important enough that Death himself told you to keep it there, then listen, you moron! If just remembering the crap that happened to your body while you were gone makes you have seizures, you can’t take it if it breaks.”

“Dean, I can handle it,” Sam snapped.

“Don’t give me that crap, Sammy. I’ve looked after you and I’ve known when you’re hurting since we were kids. Look me in the eyes and tell me that you’ll be okay if that wall comes down.” The room was frozen, nobody breathing for a long moment.

Sam didn’t look at Dean. “I’m not… it’s not on purpose.” He defended himself quietly. “It just happens. It just happens.”

Dean scrubbed at his eyes, letting out a deep exhale. “Fine. Whatever. That’s not what it looked like when you were waiting at the hospital for Ben and Lis—”

Tony wasn’t sure who Ben and Lisa (he thought) were, but clearly, Dean didn’t want to talk about it. He thought he had seen Dean being surly and cut off before, but it was nothing to what had just happened. The moment the names had slipped out of Dean’s mouth and he had stopped himself from finishing the sentence, Dean had built a wall of his own, one that was solid as the Great Wall of China and twice as high.

Sam sighed. “Dean, I’m—” Dean cut his brother off with a hand.

“Just… shut up. Stay there. And help Pepper direct while we decorate the tree.”

Sam complied and they returned to decorating the tree with relief.

Half an hour later, when Dean looked over for the umpteenth time and confirmed that Sam was finally asleep, he clamped his lips together and set down the ornament he was holding carefully. Then he walked to the door, yanked the car keys out of his pocket, and stalked into the California sun. Clint followed him, taking the duffle bag the Dean pulled out of the trunk and handed him without complaint before trailed the hunter back through the house to the porch, daring Dean with his eyes to tell the archer to leave.

Dean just frowned at him and unzipped the duffle bag, starting to pull out a variety of weapons and
cleaning supplies. They worked in silence for a few seconds before Dean deftly reached out and popped open a box of small knives, picking one up along with a bullet. His shoulders relaxed minutely and Clint grinned as he saw what Dean was doing: carving a small sigil along the tip of the bullet. After nearly twenty minutes of cleaning and carving, Dean set everything down and just stared over the edge of the cliff at the ocean for a moment.

“God, that kid is going to be the death of me.” Dean looked at Clint. “You got siblings?”

Clint’s mouth quirked humorlessly. “I had an older brother. Our parents died when we were young. Dad was an alcoholic, beat on all of us when he was drunk, which was a lot.” They sat in silence for a moment. “We ran away, met up with a circus. But Barney got jealous when I was chosen to apprentice the sword master and he wasn’t. Eventually, he betrayed me. It was a long time before I found out what happened to him, but he’s dead now.”

Dean looked at Clint. That had not exactly been the happy family story he had been looking for. The slightly older man looked steadily back at him. Clint continued.

“But when we were younger, I would have moved the world for Barney. He was the parent, the responsible one, the smart one, the person who could fix anything. He could have hung the moon. And even after he left me for dead, I probably would have trusted him with a whole lot.”

“Yes, well. I went to hell for my younger brother and when I got back he was drinking demon blood. Then he went to hell and came back and didn’t tell me he was alive.” Dean deadpanned. He dropped the smirk. “I don’t know, Clint. There might be too much between us now. And if the idiot keeps scratching at the wall, who knows what it’ll do to him.”

“I think you’re right, Dean. You probably want the wall up.” Clint looked away. “I was mind controlled by Loki for a couple days and that was bad enough. But—” the archer put down the knife he was holding and touched Dean’s arm, getting his full attention. “If I know anything about you two, it’s that you can do anything together. You’ll get through this.”

It was dinner time when Sam woke up and stumbled into the kitchen, trailing a blanket like a cape. Dean handed him a plate with a sandwich and a pile of fries and Sam took it gratefully, accepting both the food and the temporary truce on the topic of the wall.

“Remember that Christmas in Paris?” Natasha asked Clint. “Good food there.”

“Yeah, that was a good one,” Clint nodded before taking a bite of his sandwich. “Phil broke into that fireworks store and we almost blew up the Eiffel Tower on accident.” He grinned. “Quite the show.”

“What about you two, any stories?” Pepper asked Sam and Dean, smacking Clint fondly as he tried to draw a picture of the Eiffel Tower on fire using ketchup.

Dean raised an eyebrow and Sam sent a disbelieving look in Pepper’s direction. “Hardly. You may have picked up on this, but Christmas isn’t really a Winchester family tradition,” Dean said, dragging a fry through some ketchup and popping it in his mouth.

“We did have that one with Bobby,” Sam chimed in with a shrug.

“I didn’t know you remembered that!”

“Well, I don’t remember much.” Sam amended, taking a bite. “I was what... four? But I know it happened.”
“Well, I was eight so yeah, you were four,” Dean calculated, then looked around. “You all know about Bobby, right? Hunter, researcher, all around good guy?”

Everyone nodded and Dean went on. “Well, he practically raised us for a while, after a hunt gone wrong. Dad showed up at Bobby’s with a broken rib, I needed stitches, and Sam was scary sick for a three year old, freaked me out. Bobby told our dad to get out of dodge before he blasted him full of rock salt.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows in approval. “And how long did that last?”

Sam shrugged again. “Off and on for our entire lives. But there was about… a year?”

“Ten months, give or take,” Dean agreed. “We lived only at Bobby’s, didn’t even see Dad for most of it. I think that was the only Christmas we had with the whole thing, a tree and gifts and cookies. We had a few more, sort of, but generally Christmas was a time for recognizing that we lived through another year.”

“And that’s it?” Pepper asked quietly. “One Christmas?”

“I had one with Jessica. Our sophomore year.” Sam took another bite of his sandwich, looking across at the pile of cookie supplies beginning to accumulate for the next day. “She liked to bake.”

“So did mom,” Dean added somewhat unexpectedly. He almost never talked about Mary Winchester, never brought her up in casual conversation and his brother’s head snapped his direction at the unusual openness. “We’ve got her cookie recipe somewhere.” Sam looked at Dean as his brother’s face softened further and he considered for a moment. “We also sort of celebrated a few years ago…” He paused for a second and shook his head. “I guess we’ve had a lot of half-Christmases.” Dean said, thinking about all those years growing up where he would give Sam a gift, Sam would give him one, maybe something would come from their dad. “The one a couple years back was sort of interrupted by a pair of pagan gods.”

“Dicks,” Sam muttered and Tony laughed.

“Pagan gods? How did that turn out?”

“I lost a fingernail, Dean lost some blood, they got ready to pull out one of Dean’s teeth and then we escaped and killed them both,” Sam grimaced. “So much for a happy holiday.”

“Well, you did set the thing up for me when we got back to the motel.” Dean noted. “As ‘last Christmas on Earth’ it wasn’t too bad.”

Sam grinned at him boyishly and then looked around to see everyone looking fairly concerned. “That was the year before—”

“I went to Hell,” Dean finished bluntly. “And if you’re going to have only one Christmas, you make it a good one.”

Sam slumped into the kitchen the next morning to find Dean making pancakes, going through a small and weathered cardboard box, and chatting casually with Captain America and Bruce Banner. All three turned to look at him when he dropped into a chair at the table. Dean pointed at him with the spatula. “Hair. I’m telling you…”
Sam rolled his eyes and shoved it back from his face, running his fingers back over his head and patting down his bedhead into something more Dean-friendly. “You’re not cutting it, Dean.” He could see Bruce grinning out of the corner of his eye but didn’t look away from Dean until Steve poked his brother and nodded at the pancakes.

“When did you guys get here?” Sam asked through a yawn, accepting the cup of coffee Bruce slid his way.

“Just half an hour or so ago,” Steve said, taking a sip of his own coffee. “Came from the New Mexico base.”

“Wow. Super-secret spy biz?”

Bruce laughed and started pulling butter, syrup, and fruit out of the fridge. “Super secret science biz for me and Jane Foster, Thor’s girlfriend. She’s an astrophysicist,” he added at Dean’s raised eyebrow. “Steve was there because he keeps people from talking to me and I get to finish my work faster.”

“I just stand and glare. It’s a good deterrent.”

Sam laughed. The conversation lulled for a moment before he glanced back at Dean. “What’s with the box?”

Dean’s eyes grew comically wide. “You haven’t seen it yet! I forgot!” He shoved the small box in Sam’s direction before going back to pouring pancake batter while he explained. “I found it at Bobby’s, buried under some books in his library. He totally forgot he had it, said that Dad left it with him back when we were little and were staying with him towards the beginning. It’s been in the back of the Impala.”

Sam popped the box open, starting to carefully pull out items. “Photos?”

“Nine of them, but great-grandpa Winchester’s pocket watch is also in there. And… Dean left his spatula and came to rummage until he pulled out an old sheet of lined paper. “There’s mom’s sugar cookie recipe.”

“Why didn’t you tell me we had this?”

“I forgot,” Dean defended. “I just remembered because we were talking about cookies. I was going to tell you at the time, but you didn’t have a soul and probably wouldn’t have cared.” The brothers glared at each other for a second before Sam conceded and nodded in agreement. “Oh, and these two know about the whole soul thing.” He slid Sam a plate and Sam tore himself away from the box of valuables to eat.

“Is that your mom?” Steve asked, pointing to the cookie recipe. It had curled when Sam set it down, conforming back to the shape it had been pressed into by years in the box and the edges of a photo were visible on the back. Dean snatched it off the table and flipped it over, his expression softening into something younger and sadder. It was a four by six shot of a kitchen, a very young boy standing on a chair at the counter and stirring a bowl of cookie dough with one hand, using the other to wave at the camera. His face and shirt were dusted lightly with flour. Next to him, Mary Winchester leaned back against the granite countertop, heavily pregnant but smiling at person holding the camera, right hand on her stomach, left hand steadying her older son. The photo was captioned in a square script that Steve and Bruce could guess was John Winchester’s: Mary, Dean, and soon to be Samuel. April 1, 1983.
“I’d forgotten,” Dean almost whispered. “Dad helped me convince her to make them for April Fool’s Day.”

“Dad took it?” Sam asked, taking it from Dean and smiling faintly at his family.

Dean nodded, the smile fading the longer he looked at his mother, immortalized forever with a smile on her face and a hand on her sons.

“She was beautiful,” Bruce commented softly.

“Yeah, she was,” Dean replied.

Sam didn’t answer; there was nothing to say.

By the time Tony was up and moving, the kitchen was already full of cookies and chefs. The counters were packed, covered with trays of the Winchester’s sugar cookies, classic chocolate chip from Pepper, German kieflies that an old Brooklyn woman used to make from Steve. Natasha was finishing rolling out a batch of Russian tea cakes and Clint, while he hadn’t contributed a recipe, was sitting on the only bare patch of counter left with a cup of coffee in one hand and a sugar cookie in the other.

“Wow,” the inventor said, accepting his own cup of coffee from Sam before looking at each of the trays. “That’s a lot of cookies.”

“Don’t worry,” Dean shrugged. “We’ll eat ‘em all.”

They spent the rest of the day playing Clue, taking it in turns but mostly laughing as Natasha and surprisingly Sam emerged as the clear victors every time one or the other came to the board. “Aggh I give up,” Dean finally said, tossing his cards and half-filled notepad down on the table. “I’m never playing this against Sam again. How are you so good at this?”

Sam smirked. “Must be that fancy college education.”

“How could I forget?” Dean rolled his eyes. “But let’s see… who’s the better hunter?n”

“That’s me, too,” Sam said, exchanging a smirk with Natasha as Clint tried not to laugh. “Only when I didn’t have a soul, though.”

“Wait a second,” Pepper asked. “Where did you go to college, Sam?”

“Stanford,” Sam answered, wistfulness and just a little pride in his voice. “Pre-law, full ride. Got a 174 on the LSAT.”

“So what happened?”

Dean looked at Sam, silently asking if he wanted Dean to intervene. Sam shook his head. “We went to find Dad, but I was going to head back for a law school interview. The night we got back… Azazel murdered Jessica.” There was a small inhale from Pepper and sympathy in everyone’s eyes but to Sam’s surprise, no pity. “After that, law school didn’t seem as important. I thought: just one more case. But hunting… it’s what we do. I couldn’t give it up.”

“What about you, Dean?” Pepper asked?

The man rolled his eyes. “Please. High school drop out, barely got a GED. Sam’s the brains in this
“Not like you’re not smart, though,” Sam pointed out. “You figure stuff out before I do all the time.”

“You’re both alive so that has to count for something,” Natasha jumped in.

“And somehow Sam can beat everyone but the superspy at Clue,” Steve said, shaking his head and injecting a note of levity.

“Well, a lifetime of lying to people asking about the freak accidents in their neighborhood helps, too,” Dean added. And there was no arguing with that, just a wave of good natured agreement as they switched out, Natasha cracking her knuckles as she prepared to go head to head with Sam.

They spent the next week and a half in pre-Christmas merriment; watching movies, eating cookies, and even taking a trip to go ice skating.

(Something that both brothers were surprisingly good at, once they got their feet under them. A lifetime of working on balance and fighting hand to hand granted them the ability to move around the rink with ease, if not finesse. Pepper and Bruce were both spectacularly bad and eventually abandoned the ice in favor of watching from the side of the rink.)

They sparred in pairs, matching for different attributes: Sam’s height and bulk against Steve’s similar size, Dean’s broad shoulders against Natasha’s lithe frame, both brothers together against Clint and Natasha, which lasted nearly a half hour without either side giving quarter and was ended by Pepper making them take a break and drink some water.

Rhodey’s introduction was awkward; while he had heard a lot about the Winchesters from Tony, he had never met either of them before. In fact, the only time he had even seen either of them was when Sam had arrived at Tony’s house half drunk after Dean had been killed by the hellhounds. Dean had broken the moment of silence by holding out a hand and officially introducing himself. “Dean Winchester. Not dead,” he said with a smile. “My brother Sam, who you’ve apparently seen before. Also alive.”

Rhodey, who was possibly so used to Tony that he just ignored all strangeness at this point, shook hands with both and said it was nice to meet them before joining them in sparring later and winning Dean’s lasting respect by holding his own against Sam, who was at least eight inches taller than him.

To Steve’s obvious disappointment, Sam Wilson called and confirmed that he had to cancel his trip. The call was overwhelmed by Tony and Pepper coming back from a fancy dinner, Pepper glowing and with a diamond ring on her finger. That lead to a night of champagne and more cookies, celebrating the engagement. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone get married,” Dean noted.

“Well, you’re invited to the wedding, so here’s your chance,” Pepper said. Dean’s smile could have powered New York.

Despite the size of the house, there wasn’t room for everyone to have their own bedroom while Rhodey was there. Pepper and Tony? Plenty of room. Pepper, Tony, and the Winchesters? Fine. Pepper, Tony, and the Avengers? Still good. But Pepper, Tony, the Avengers, the Winchesters, and War Machine? That was a person too many, even with Clint and Natasha doubling up and people on the couch and floor. Rhodey offered to take the floor, but Dean said he would take it; Rhodey had to leave the next day for a mission and he deserved a good night sleep. They settled in with a very full
house, spread over half a dozen guest rooms and the living room.

However, it wasn’t like they all remained in their beds. It was not a particularly good night for nightmares and by three in the morning, the kitchen had Steve, Dean, and Clint all in it anyway.

Dean hadn’t been particularly surprised when Clint stumbled in, just offered him a glass and pushed the bottle of Tony’s high end whiskey in his direction. From what he’d heard, Clint’s spy life wasn’t always the happiest job and Clint himself had told Dean about his terrible childhood. The hunter had been more surprised when Steve joined them, blanket wrapped around his shoulders. “You too, huh?” Steve asked Dean. “Don’t know why I’m surprised, really.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Dean grunted, draining his glass and holding it out to Clint for a refill. “I don’t actually sleep that much, anyway. Hunter’s sleep schedule.”

“Sam does,” Clint commented.

“Only sometimes,” Dean said. “When we’re working a case, he’s just as bad as me.”

As if on cue, Sam made his way into the kitchen. “Speak of the devil,” Dean said, then winced because that probably wasn’t a good thing to say around Sam, especially when he had just woken up from a nightmare. There wasn’t any other reason for Sam to up this early. “The Cage?” he asked his brother, pouring a few fingers of whiskey and sliding it to him. He raised an eyebrow in Steve’s direction and to his surprise the supersoldier shrugged and nodded, taking a glass of his own even though it wouldn’t do him any good.

Sam shook his head. “Detroit. Chasing Bobby around his house with an axe.”

Dean nodded and pushed Sam’s glass a little closer until Sam picked it up and took a drink.

Clint laughed harshly. “Welcome to the Early Morning Alcoholics Club.”

Despite being up with the EMAC for the third day in a row, Steve was already awake and making bacon when Sam walked barefoot into the kitchen two days before Christmas. “Brace yourself,” Steve said immediately. “Thor is on his way.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, accepting a cup of coffee and starting to pull stacks of plates and cups out of the kitchen cabinet. “Really? I wouldn’t think that Christmas is a very Asgardian thing.”

The soldier shrugged. “I don’t think it is. He’s coming to spend it with Jane, but he wants to meet you two and it probably wouldn’t hurt for you to finally meet the last Avenger in case we ever have to work a case together.”

Sam’s eyebrow had gone down but it went right back up at the implication of that statement. He was prevented from further questioning, however, by the demigod himself. The wind picked up dramatically and Steve flipped the last pancake onto a plate before turning away from the griddle and walking to open the balcony door, opening it and letting a gust of cool, salty, sea air blow in under the heavy clouds that moved in and blocked the sunlight.

There was a flash of light and Sam found himself wanting to reach for the knife he kept tucked in his waistband as the pagan god appeared. Thor was… intimidating and Sam was sure he would feel the same way even if every god they had met so far hadn’t fed on human flesh. He didn’t really think that cannibalistic ritual sacrifice was a Thor thing (there was no way the Avengers would let him be on the team if it were true) but the Winchesters hadn’t lived as long as they had (or at least lived and
died and lived again) by being generally accepting and unsuspicious. The god stood scarcely an inch or so shorter than Sam and a good two inches taller than Steve, making him one of the first people in a long time Sam literally stood eye to eye with. He was wearing regal scale armor and a flowing red cape fell from his shoulders to the floor, making Steve and Sam, who were both in sweatpants and t-shirts, look vastly underdressed. Thor’s hair was even longer than Sam’s own, something Sam knew would amuse Dean to no end. His shoulders were broader than Sam’s were and packed with the muscle that came from years of training, wielding a sword and shield and in this case, hammer. The weapon itself was held loosely in Thor’s hand, etched with Celtic runes and looking (Sam was sure) deceptively light.

But notwithstanding his general appearance, the big man smiled and he suddenly looked much gentler. “Steven! It is good to see you again, my friend.” He reached out and clasped Steve’s forearms in his own, Steve reciprocating and grasping the demigod’s bracers. Thor held the pose for only a second before releasing him and looking back to Sam, smiling at Steve with a question in his eyes until Steve introduced him.

“Thor, may I introduce Sam Winchester, cousin of Tony Stark and a warrior in his own right.”

Comprehension dawned on Thor’s face. Sam wanted to balk a little at the formal introduction but didn’t have a chance before Thor crossed the room in a few quick strides and took Sam’s arms the same way he had Steve’s. “It is an honor to meet you, Samuel Winchester. Both my father, King Odin, and your own kin, Anthony Stark, speak of you with much respect and the Gatekeeper Heimdall has kept watch over you and your brother since your return to the land of the living.”

The hunter didn’t know how to respond to that. “Um. It’s an honor to meet you too, Thor. The others have told my brother and I a lot about you.”

“I am sure you have questions for me, as I do for you.” Thor took a step backwards, releasing Sam’s arms before beginning to unbuckle the bracers and shed part of his armor, stacking it neatly against the wall.

“Well, uh. Yeah,” Sam said. There was probably a delicate way to do this, but Sam didn’t know what it was so he just asked straight out. “Sorry, but um. Do you eat... people? I mean, most of the gods and demigods we’ve met, including King Odin at the Elysian Fields Hotel, eat people to survive, so...”

If Sam hadn’t been so concerned about Thor pausing in the removal of his outer armor and summoning his hammer to smash him into a million bits, he would have laughed at the expression on Steve’s face. The hunter had one hand casually on the knife again, even though the Avengers (and SHIELD) probably wouldn’t like him stabbing one of their own. But Thor just laughed, a deep chuckle that filled the room and Sam relaxed a little; it didn’t sound like he was about to send Sam back to Hell. “Nay, we do not eat human flesh. Unlike many of the lesser entities, we of Asgard were powerful of our own accord, eons before the human race worshipped us, and do not need the sacrifices of humans to fuel our lives. No person, even Odin-King, does not eat your kind, nor did you see the real Odin at the meeting of the gods.”

Much to Sam’s surprise, the demigod joined him and Steve at the table, heartily digging into a plate of pancakes and bacon as the Avengers slowly trickled in and started to eat. Most of them received the same forearm clasp, although when Pepper and Tony entered, hand in hand, Thor stood and bowed. “Anthony and Lady Potts! My congratulations for your upcoming wedding! I will try to be here for the event and wish you great happiness.” Tony repeated the shield bearer's greeting, but Thor bowed over Pepper’s hand and kissed it before letting her give him a quick hug.

Clint and Dean entered the kitchen last, the chatter dying down a little as Clint greeted Thor and then
the demigod turned his attention to Dean. The older hunter shot Sam a quick look and Sam gave him an affirmative “it’s okay, he doesn’t eat people” nod before Dean performed the same ritual as the others. “An honor to meet you as well, Dean Winchester. As I told your brother, both your cousin Anthony and my father Odin speak of you most highly.”

Dean didn’t know how to respond any more than Sam did, and just inclined his head a little, accepting the compliment for once in his life, although the raised eyebrow showed how much he doubted the validity of the statement-- people were generally not very happy to meet them. “Good to meet you too, Thor.”

And so breakfast continued, Sam, Bruce, and Thor chatting about the extension of Odin’s consciousness that had been present at the Elysian Fields Hotel and how it compared to the physical presences of the remaining gods who had been there. Natasha was listening to Dean talk about a Wendigo case they had worked years ago, Pepper was typing on a tablet, Tony had taken over for Steve at the griddle and was working on another round of pancakes as Steve and Clint tossed each other extra cutlery to spread around the table.

Thor gladly sat with the hunters and the attending crowd of listening Avengers when breakfast was over. Sam was flipping through a book of lore he had retrieved from the Impala, while Thor pointed out inaccuracies and showed Dean various places some of the warding was replicated in the etching covering different plates of his armor. They passed nearly an hour and a half until Clint complained that he was going to die from boredom, although Bruce looked on the verge of abandoning physics and taking up mythical symbolism instead. They migrated to the gym, Thor joining their sparring session and finding that he and Sam covered each other’s backs nearly as well as Dean and Sam did. Dean laughed as his tall brother pivoted, shoulders mirroring the Norse God of Thunder that they were fighting with, quickly spinning to take on Natasha as Thor deflected Steve’s shield.

It was about forty five minutes into the sparring when it happened. Sam had subbed out for Clint and was standing to the side watching Natasha; there was something about the fluidity of her movements that caught his eye and reminded him a little bit of Castiel and the angels when they fought. He was watching the pattern of the fight, tracking the heart of the melee and following who was winning the skirmish when Steve threw the shield backhand and Sam froze. He had seen that before, somewhere, the same movement, the same pattern…

This time, Dean was too caught up in the fight to see Sam’s posture change until he was falling towards the floor. He lunged across the room towards his brother, but didn’t make it in time, Sam’s forehead catching the edge of the bench behind him and slicing open cleanly as he collapsed. “HOLD!” Thor roared, ending the skirmish in an instant as Sam started to seize yet again. Natasha appeared at Dean’s side, deftly avoiding Sam’s flailing arm as she pushed his torso and bleeding head away from the bench and wall and into the open where it couldn’t hit anything.

Bruce had arrived an instant later; apparently knowing that Sam had issues from having his soul replaced and actually watching the same person have a seizure because he was being assaulted with memories of hell and what terrible things he did on Earth without a soul were different things. It was dead silent in the training space until Sam’s body finally relaxed. Dean’s hands gripping the front of his brother’s shirt didn’t, though, and he looked up to find Thor’s eyes locked not on Sam, but on him. The hunter shrugged it off, looking back at his brother.

“Sammy, come on, look at me.” Sam’s eyes slowly opened and he groaned, focusing on Dean even as one hand came up to touch his forehead. His eyes widened as he brought his fingertips back into view covered in blood. “It’s fine Sam, just a cut, just a cut,” Dean reassured, pulling Sam into a sitting position. Sam inhaled and let out a deep whoosh of air, visibly trying to slow down his breathing, one hand mirroring his brother and holding tightly to the fabric of Dean’s shirt.
“Sorry,” he shakily said, avoiding the eyes around him. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, you moron,” Dean said, cupping Sam’s cheek and tilting his head down so he could get a better look at the cut that was still dripping blood down Sam’s cheek.

Instead of responding to Dean’s words, Sam looked around until he found Steve, intently studying him for a second. “I think… I saw you sometime in the last year.”

Dean pulled Sam’s head back towards himself, taking the sterile wipes Bruce was holding out and starting to clean off the drying blood. “Just soulless memories, then?” he asked, faintly hopeful. He kept his voice relaxed, but his face was set and shoulders were tense.

Sam grimaced. “Both.” He fell silent, eyes hooded.

Dean frown deepened. Both meant that Sam got a double whammy-- not that he didn’t usually, it was just that for once it would have been nice to have a brother not trying to cope with what his body had done but also what Lucifer had done to his soul. “Well, no scars for you here. No stitches,” Dean said, applying the bandage in question. If only he could patch up Sam’s mind as easily as he could his forehead.

“You were looking for someone,” Sam suddenly spoke up again, looking back at Steve. “And you were checking squatter houses. I was in one, hunting solo. Before Samuel,” he directed at Dean, who nodded. “You didn’t see me. But someone or something attacked you and you threw the shield backhand, like you did when Thor came at you a minute ago.”

“It was winter?” Steve asked. Sam nodded. “Hydra,” the soldier confirmed. “We were looking for Bucky and found a cell in that group of houses. I didn’t even know you were there.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Sam shrugged. “I didn’t care.”

“What is this madness that has taken your mind, Samuel, that you do not remember?” Thor asked, kneeling in front of the bench directly next to Dean and looking into Sam’s eyes. Sam’s breath caught because Thor’s eyes looked like Sam felt; old, older than his body. An old soul who had seen many, many years of life. Sam could see the difference, though. Thor’s eyes held battles and comrades lost and death, yes. But they seemed wise and balanced with happiness and Sam could only feel broken in comparison.

“You guys go back to the match, I’ll explain to Thor,” Dean said, standing and waving the others away.

“No, I’ll do it,” Sam quietly responded, nudging Dean’s knee with his own.

Dean gave him a look that Sam remembered well ever since they were little; he meant business. “You sure?”

The younger Winchester nodded. “I’m sure.”

Thor joined Sam on the bench, Bruce taking his other side and rummaging through the first aid kit to find an ice pack. He broke the crystals inside and handed it to Sam, who looked at it for a moment before lifting it to his head and turning towards the other two. “So you know that I was dead, right?” Thor nodded. “Well, I wasn’t just in hell, I was in the Cage that holds Lucifer.” Thor’s eyes widened.

Sam shrugged. He seemed to be running out of ways to describe the situation besides a shrug. It had happened and they had to deal with the fallout. “I was worried at the beginning that our half brother
Adam would be there, but it turns out that when Castiel molotoved Michael with holy fire and Michael reassembled, Adam took a direct trip to heaven. So he wasn’t there, it was just me and Michael and Lucifer. Two angels who hated each other and hated me even more.”

Thor nodded his understanding. “But now you live.”

“Because Castiel raised my body. But somehow, he left my soul.” At that, the demigod inhaled sharply, a more dramatic reaction than Sam had yet seen.

“Body and soul separate?” Something near alarm had crept into Thor’s voice.

“Yeah.” Sam bowed his head. “It was like that for a little more than nineteen months. I was pretty much a soulless killing machine, apparently. Dean finally managed to work out a bargain with Death and Death put my soul back in my body, but he build a wall to keep the memories of the Cage away from the rest of me. It means, though, that I don’t remember what I did while I was soulless either.”

“But the wall isn’t very solid,” Bruce said, “And that’s why you’re having seizures?”

“The human mind is delicate and I was in the Cage for a long time,” Sam shrugged and barked out a sardonic laugh. “It’s just a shitshow up here right now. I’ll see things and they’ll trigger memories of the soulless time, but generally crap from the Cage comes back with it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how long…” Bruce trailed off, not sure if this was a triggering question or not.

“Was I in the Cage?” Sam finished. Bruce nodded. Sam smiled, a thin, bitter smile that Bruce thought had no right to be on a young man’s face. “I don’t know. I don’t remember. But time runs differently in Hell. Dean was dead for four months and that was forty years in Hell. I was soulless for almost five times that.”

Thor stood, summoning his hammer into his hand. “Know this, Samuel. I will speak with Frigga-Queen on your behalf, for if anyone deserves healing, it is you who saved this realm. Perhaps she will know of a way to unite your mind without harm.”

Sam opened and closed his mouth twice, trying to find something to say to that. “Thank you,” he eventually settled on. “Only…” he hesitated, hoping he didn’t sound ungrateful. “Can you not tell Dean you’re trying? In case it doesn’t work.”

Thor dipped his head regally. “I will agree to this.” And with that, he strode into the battle, striking left and right to deflect Steve and Dean in quick succession.

Christmas Eve found them all balancing on the edges of melancholy, nostalgia, and happiness. Bruce sat in the kitchen for a while with a photograph of a young woman and a cell phone next to it that he never picked up. Steve spent a lot of time with a sketchbook and a compass. Clint and Natasha spent most of the day in the kitchen, eventually joined by Bruce, as they were apparently in charge of Christmas lunch the next day. Thor gave out another round of forearm clasps and dramatically parted from the balcony after placing a few packages under the tree. Midday, Dean and Sam called Bobby, wishing him a Merry Christmas and grinning when they found out that Sheriff Mills was planning on stopping by with some food the next day.

There was a lot of sneaking going around; every time Dean walked through the living room, there were a few more gifts under the large tree, wrapped in different papers. He, being the sneaky person that he was, had managed to slide his few presents under the tree while everyone had been playing
with a small drone that Tony had built with Bruce and Sam in the lab the previous afternoon.

All in all, Christmas Eve was quiet. His last Christmas had been with Lisa and Ben… he didn’t even want to think about that. But before that… there had been the year Sam had given him the amulet and realized for the first time why their Dad did what he did; the year he had been going to Hell so they sort of had Christmas but ended up also killing pagan gods, the year after that when they had in the middle of stopping the apocalypse so Christmas was completely forgotten, two Christmases when Sam had been at college and the name of the holiday never even came out of his father’s mouth (even though he had to have noticed the envelopes of gift cards and stingily hoarded cash that Dean sent his brother). The Christmas two months after Jessica had died, when Sam had pretty much shut himself in for a few days and totally ignored Dean until the holiday was well past.

So the Dean Winchester Christmas Track Record? Not to good. Which is why Dean was amazed when Pepper started doing something as normal and Christmas-y as hanging stockings after dinner.

It was an odd scene: Tony had dug up a pile of hooks from somewhere and they were stacked on the table. Natasha disappeared for a moment and reappeared with two stockings, both in the same SHIELD blue but in a velvety fabric with “Natasha” and “Clint” embroidered in a silver thread along with a small spider on one and a small arrow on the other. “Gifts from Phil. Coulson, that is. Christmas mission, ‘05.”

Natasha started what she declared to be the “Avenger’s Side” of the mantle, hanging hers and Clint’s on the far end and fixing Steve with a look until he smiled. “Got it, Tony?”

Tony grinned and pulled a stocking out from behind him, handing it to the soldier. “Took forever to find. I can’t believe you took it with you and left it with Howard, of all people.”

“I didn’t take it with me. Mrs Caplesmith, who let out the apartment to me and Bucky back in Brooklyn, sent them to us at Christmas. I don’t know what happened to his, though.” Steve’s smile faltered.

“I’ll keep an eye out for it,” Tony promised, and Steve’s smile wavered back to life before he went to hang his on the Avengers end.

Pepper rummaged around in a box at her feet until she found what she was looking for and she hung a stocking the color of Thor’s cape next to Steve’s, pulling out her phone to take a picture, presumably to send to Jane. Bruce joined her, sliding another hook onto the mantle and quietly hanging a dark purple stocking that was stitched with “Rebecca and Bruce.”

“My mother. My father… was not a Christmas person.” Bruce told Dean and Sam, sliding his fingers over the names. “She got it for us the year before--” he cut himself off and didn’t finish.

“J, you up?” Tony asked, holding up an atrocious stocking at the a patch of wall that housed Jarvis’ nearest camera and sensory system.

“For you Sir, always,” the AI was able to sound amused.

“Jarvis is an Avenger in his own way but that one starts the other end, Tony,” Pepper said, smiling at the camera array and Tony. The genius hung it on the other end of the mantle, Sam getting a full view. It was bigger than he had thought, made of a terrible bright green plaid and a red fabric that had “Jarvis” written on it in what looked like childish handwriting.

“I made it when I was little,” Tony said, reading the question in Sam’s eyes. “For Jarvis, the family butler. That’s who J here is named after. He pretty much raised me.”
“Sam?” Dean’s slightly overwhelmed voice pulled his brother’s attention away from the stocking just as Dean reached out to stroke a velvety navy stocking and a dark green stocking of the same material. They had appeared from somewhere when the brothers hadn’t been paying attention and Sam wasn’t sure why Dean was so-- but then he saw it, “Sam” across the top of the blue and “Dean” on the green; the white lettering matched the embroidery of “Tony” and “Pepper” on the pair of red and whites that Pepper was pulling out of the box next.

“Pepper?” Sam asked, but it wasn’t really a question because who else? The slender redhead stood, picking up the green stocking and walking over to hand it to him. Sam hesitated, but took it, putting a hand on Pepper’s before she could pull away. “Thank you.”

She smiled, moving over to Tony and picking up a few of the hooks before heading to the mantle and hanging four of them. Sam looked up from the stitching spelling his name on a Christmas stocking of his own to see Dean hanging his next to Jarvis’ on the end; he hastily took a few steps over and slid his onto a hook next to his brother’s. Pepper hung hers next and Tony finished out the line of decorations, the ten stockings evenly covering the entire mantle.

Before Sam left the room later to get ready to go to bed, he made sure to take a picture of them all, “Sam” and “Dean” clearly visible between “Jarvis” and “Pepper.”

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Dean snorted. “Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house everyone was awake. Because I woke up screaming.” Sam ran his hand over his face at Dean’s cavalier attitude and looked at the blinking time on the little alarm clock. 6:03. Not bad, as nights went. Everyone, as far as Sam knew, had slept through, unofficially disbanding the Early Morning Alcoholics Club.

That was until ten minutes ago, when Dean had started yelling “No!” and “Sam!” and “Please!” in a voice that made the hair on the back of Sam’s neck stand up. He had woken up from his doze and sprinted down the hall, demon killing knife in one hand and pistol in the other, only to meet Clint and Tony at the door, Steve rounding the corner a moment later, and Natasha right behind him, raising an eyebrow at the weapons. By the time Sam pulled the door open and peeked in, Pepper and Bruce were there too and they all stood in silence for a moment, unsure if they should try to wake Dean up or not; he was now silent but his shirt was soaked with sweat and he was moving-- until he woke with a start on his own.

Dean’s eyes raked up and down Sam, taking in his disheveled appearance and the knife clutched in the steadying hand to the pistol hand. He took a second to control his breathing, shaking off the end of the nightmare. “We good?” he asked Sam.

“Are you good?” Sam shot back.

There was a moment as he catalogued. “I’m good,” he responded. “I’m fine.”

Another awkward pause. The doorway was crowded with Avengers in pajamas and bedheads and nobody seemed to know what to say. Which is when Dean made his comment about the night before Christmas. Clint snickered, then half raised a hand. “Since it’s morning and we’re all awake, can we start Christmas now?”

Steve laughed and everyone turned to look at Pepper and Tony, who were now grinning. “Why not?” Tony said.

So Dean went to shower, Clint went to put on pants (he was wearing only boxers), Sam went to stow away his weapons, and everyone headed out towards the living room. By the time Dean made
it out, there were cookies on the coffee table and Natasha was passing out presents. They were random; Pepper’s wrapped in neat red paper, both Dean’s and Sam’s in brown butcher paper and taped tidily on the ends, Clint’s mostly in bags with colorful tissue paper.

It was organized chaos and Dean was loving it, everyone opening gifts and tossing balls of discarded wrapping paper around. Natasha had a bow on her head that Clint had peeled off a gift and Bruce had a ribbon tied around his neck as a by-product of sitting next to Tony. Dean turned to his own gifts, opening a mug from Sam that matched the one his brother was currently drinking coffee out of, reading “My Brother’s Been to Hell.” Bruce saw him open it and snorted; “Payback’s a bitch,” Sam called from the other couch, where he was opening the envelope Dean had written his name on.

The younger Winchester gasped when he pulled it open, a small picture fluttering out and onto his lap. “Tony helped me find it,” Dean said simply. It was Sam and Jessica, sitting on a patch of grass at the base of a palm tree in the California sun with books spread around them. They were both laughing and the sun was shining in Jessica’s hair.

“Pepper, here’s yours from us,” Sam tore himself away from the picture and handed Pepper the small package. She unwrapped it to discover a battered jewelry box, curiosity flitting over her face before she popped it open.

“It’s beautiful!”

Natasha leaned over to look at it and nodded. Tony poked at it and Pepper smacked his hand away, lifting the necklace out of the box so that the others could see it. Bruce looked at it over his glasses. It was a hanging pendant, a small feather with the nib tipped in silver and formed into a loop to hang on the the long silver chain.

“Is that a feather?” Clint asked curiously.

“Sure is, Hawkeye,” Dean smirked. “And not just any feather. That,” he gestured, “is a one hundred percent genuine angel feather.”

Pepper almost dropped the necklace. “What?”

“An angel feather. Useful in spells, has some basic protective properties.” Sam grinned at the awed expressions on everyone’s faces as they looked at the feather. It was small, almost downy, and a steely grey. “We’ve never actually seen an angel’s wings, but we find these around every once in awhile after Castiel comes or goes in a hurry.”

“Wow.” Pepper sounded breathless and she pulled the necklace over her head even though she was still wearing pajamas. She slid off the footstool she was sitting on and rummaged around under the tree and handed Sam, Dean, Natasha, and Clint each a package. “From Thor.”

They each slid the boxes open to find long hunting knives, the handles made of dark wood and etched with symbols and spellwork, most of which Sam and Dean could recognize. “Nice,” Dean admired, swinging the blade in a quick circle. “Good balance.” He set the blade down and looked over at Tony. “Ready for this?”

Tony looked confused. “Ready for…?”

Dean took a deep breath, as if preparing to do something very dangerous. Sam worked to hide a grin. “For Christmas, I’m going to let you take my baby for a drive.”

Tony’s eyes widened. Dean had previously banned him from the driver’s seat of his precious Impala
but Tony had wanted to drive the car ever since he saw it.

“Really?” Tony sounded just as awed about the car as Pepper had about the angel feather.

The older Winchester grinned. “Really. We’ll take her for a spin, break a few speed limits.”

A few minutes later, everyone had wound down, smiles on faces all around. “Is that all of them?” Natasha asked, pushing some wrapping paper away from the tree with one foot in case it was hiding something.

“Oh,” Sam said. The Avengers watched with interest as he met Dean’s eye, then reached into his pocket, pulling out a tangle of cord that Dean apparently recognized, based on the slight widening of the hunter’s eyes. The younger man shook out the ball, revealing an amulet hanging on a leather loop; Tony recognizing it as the charm that Dean had been wearing around his neck when they had first met and almost every time subsequently. He hadn’t even realized that Dean hadn’t been wearing it.

“You… I didn’t know you…” Dean trailed off, sliding off the couch and crossing the room, reaching out to touch the dangling amulet that Sam had given Dean for Christmas all those years ago.

“I grabbed it before we left. Figured you might want it back at some point and left in the duffle bag. Merry Christmas, Dean.” Sam dropped it into his brother’s hand, only to get pulled into a brief hug.

“Thank you.” Dean’s voice was muffled in Sam’s shoulder, but Sam nodded.

“Anytime.”

Dean pulled back and returned to the couch, sliding the cord over his head and smiling to himself as the golden amulet fell to rest over his sternum where it sat like an old friend.

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Immediately, the business faces were on.

Dean sat up on the couch from where he was half laying, picking up the phone and making sure Sam was paying attention before answering. “Agent Ruger.” He frowned, swinging his legs around and planting them firmly on the floor. “Gideon? When did you leave Blue Earth?”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up and he asked “David Gideon? The pastor?”

Dean nodded but kept up the conversation. “Hearts? Probably werewolves. Where are you?” He waited a moment and then rolled his eyes. “I know it’s Christmas, but killing things that are killing people waits for no holiday. Where are you?” he repeated.

Jarvis obligingly pulled up a map and Dean looked it over. “Creston? We can be there in… three hours. Better give it four for good measure. See you then, try not to get killed.” Dean hung up the phone with a snap.

“What’s Gideon doing out of Blue Earth?” Sam asked.

“He apparently left after he discovered his daughter was... you know,” Dean said, closing Jarvis’ map.

“His daughter was what?” Clint asked.

“The Whore of Babylon,” Sam said. Several sets of eyebrows went up. “During the apocalypse. A false prophet created to send as many souls to Hell as possible. It was complicated, but we had to kill her. That’s apparently her dad calling us. He used to be a pastor but… things changed.”

“Pepper, Tony-- sorry to abandon ship so fast, but we’ve got business,” Dean looked at Pepper, who was clearly trying to smile even though she looked upset.

“I understand,” she nodded. “How long until you leave?”

“As soon as we’re ready,” Sam said. “Sorry.”

“I’ll pack you some food to go,” she stood, Bruce following her to the kitchen.

The brothers spent forty five minutes gathering their belongings, loading weapons, and changing clothing-- it amused Natasha to no end to simply watch from the couch as the brothers moved in and around the house, first in shirtsleeves, then in ties (Dean’s tied and Sam’s still hanging), then in full smart black suits with polished shoes. Eventually, everyone reunited in the living room, Sam and Dean looking spiffy and going through a box of what looked like fake IDs. “Ruger and Bersa?” Sam asked and Dean nodded, accepting the FBI ID his brother handed him before tucking his own into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

A moment of awkward silence ensued. The brothers were fully dressed in suits; everyone else was in sweats and t-shirts. It was Christmas Day and the duo were getting ready to go kill monsters.

As one, the team grabbed various bags and tupperwares of food packed by Pepper, Bruce and Steve, following the boys out to the car. They were loaded in the trunk and Dean pulled his keys out of a pocket. “Sorry about the ride, Tony. Remind me next time,” Dean grinned. Much to Pepper’s surprise, Sam stepped forwards and gave her a hug. She had hugged him before, but she had always had to initiate; this was the first time that Sam had started the hug.

“Thanks for a great Christmas, Pepper.” Sam stepped back and Dean took his place, the older Winchester giving her a hug and a jaunty smile. There were handshakes all around before Dean gave
a cocky salute, Sam gave a little wave, and both brothers slid into the sleek black car and drove off into the Christmas sun.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Drop me a review and let me know what you think!
Like so many of Tony Stark’s interactions with the hunting world, this one began with a phone call.

He was in the silver Lexus, driving the short distance between Avengers Tower and Pepper’s favorite bakery downtown. The lovely CEO was trying to work on the weekends again, simultaneously planning the wedding even though Tony would be happy to have someone do it for them, and additionally was spending time worrying about the Winchesters. It had become more or less a constant pastime ever since they had left at Christmas with Sam having seizures and Dean trying not to crack under the stress. She needed some comfort food and Tony was on a mission.

It didn’t help that as of yesterday there was a string of videos being uploaded to the internet of Sam and Dean Winchester very clearly walking into banks and restaurants and deliberately shooting groups of civilians for no reason whatsoever. Tony didn’t know what to think; the Sam and Dean he knew would never kill someone in a cold blood and certainly not while recording it and putting it on the internet. But neither of the boys had called him to tell him what was happening. So while he was sure there was something going on -- Dean had mentioned shapeshifters once, was that what this was?-- he and Pepper didn’t know what the threat was or what to do about it. For now all he could do was keep Jarvis on the web, clearing the videos as fast as possible before they reached too many people on the open internet.

Which is why he was hoping this call would clear things up. The number flashing on the screen was unknown, but that wasn’t particularly uncommon; occasionally Dean or Sam would call him from a burner phone instead of their personal devices, especially when they were on a case. “Answer,” Tony said out loud, prompting the high class car to patch the call through as he coasted to a stop at a traffic light. “Hello.”

“Tony Stark?” the voice on the other end of the line asked. The man himself frowned and prepared to start tracing the call. The voice was deeper and had a more pronounced drawl than either of the boys. But who else would know this number?

“Yes,” Tony finally answered. “Who is this?”

The deep voice immediately answered. “This is Bobby Singer. The boys gave me your number, Mr Stark. We need to talk.” The call ended and Tony whipped the wheel around, pulling the car into an alley and emerging on a side street headed back to the Tower.

“Call Pepper,” he commanded. The phone rang once before she picked up and Tony didn’t even let her get a word in. “Hey Pep. I’ll be back to the tower in fifteen minutes. No food, sorry. I’m going to meet Bobby Singer.”

The Iron Man suit swooped to a landing just outside of a junkyard/auto shop in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Tony took a step forwards, the armor disassembling as he did so and neatly folding into the
suitcase. The billionaire picked it up and walked onto the property, eying the various cars as he did so and wishing he had a toolkit to get into the engine of the Ford Galaxie up on blocks. The rough sign read “Singer Salvage” and the yard looked like it had gotten years of good use. He pulled himself away and kept walking, heading towards the front door of the well worn house, per Bobby Singer’s instructions.

Tony had heard a lot about the guy. Sam and Dean mentioned him at least once just about every time they saw him. He had to be smart; he apparently did quite a bit of research for the boys. He had to be kind; they always mentioned him with fondness. This was the man who practically raised the Winchester boys for most of their lives, the man who Dean and Sam talked about like a father, the place Dean immediately came when he was raised from Hell, the house where Sam had gotten his soul back after a year and a half in the Cage. And he was walking towards the front door with a Black Sabbath t-shirt, jeans, and a good number of nervous butterflies.

Reaching out with the hand not firmly holding the suit, he knocked. There was barely a second before the door opened; Bobby must have been watching him come up.

The two men took a second to look each other up and down. Bobby must have been fifteen or twenty years older than Tony but had an inch or two on him, although he would be short compared to Sam (like most people). He had broader shoulders and was stocker overall than Tony and his face was lined with the worry of years. He was wearing a jeans and a old jacket along with faded blue baseball cap and had a sandy beard and piercing eyes that looked like they were x-raying Tony down to his soul. “Best come in, boy,” Bobby finally said, standing back and letting Tony into the house.

Tony let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding; apparently he had passed some sort of test, although he didn’t know what it was. Not the type he was expecting, though. “Don’t you want to check me?” Tony couldn’t help asking. “Make sure I’m not a vampire or a demon or whatever?”

The corners of Bobby’s mouth twitched into what could almost be a half smile as he reached over to the kitchen table and picked up a bottle, handing it over to Tony. Without hesitation Tony took a gulp: holy water. He slid the bottle back and nicked himself with the knife Bobby offered next. “Good enough,” the old hunter said, sliding Tony a bandaid. “Coffee?” he offered and Tony nodded, taking a seat at the table. Bobby walked comfortably around the kitchen with the unconscious ease that came from having lived in one building for his entire life, pouring coffee from a shiny new coffee pot into two chipped mugs.

“Thanks.” Tony accepted the mug and took a swig; it was hot and black and he was grateful because he had no doubt he was going to need it for this conversation. “Nice coffee.”

The hunter took a drink of his own. “Sam made us get a new coffee maker a few weeks ago. Said if he had to drink one more cup from the old machine he was going to let himself get ganked next time he hunted something.” He shook his head.

There was a lull in the conversation as both men sipped their coffees. Tony took the moment to look around the house. An open wall led into what looked like a living room/study combination, a battered wooden desk sitting under a corner full of heavy books. A blanket was tossed over the back of a recliner and a wheelchair was tucked in the corner, coated in a heavy layer of dust. The kitchen itself felt old, the counters topped with formica instead of plastic, the refrigerator a blast from the past. Somehow, the hunter fit perfectly into the surroundings and Tony could easily imagine Sam and Dean here as well, worn jeans and dark jackets and sawn off shotguns blending into the atmosphere of the house. Tony shook his head, took another sip, and decided to get the ball rolling.

“So you’re the one that helped raise Sam and Dean,” Tony half asked. Despite the assessment of the
house, he couldn’t get a good read on the hunter and wasn’t sure how he would respond, but the
Winchesters seemed like they would be as good a subject as any.

“That’s me. Kicked their daddy out on his backside and had ‘em on and off ever since. They’re good
boys. Idjits, though. Always getting into trouble.” Tony couldn’t help but laugh. Bobby raised an
eyebrow. “Something funny?”

“No, it’s just,” Tony controlled himself and took a sip of coffee. “You’re just like they described.
They’ve talked about you. At length.”

Something like a fond twinkle appeared in Bobby’s eyes. “You’re not exactly how they described
you,” he returned. “I got the impression you’d be more flashy and more sassy.”

“Well, I know a person I need to respect when I see them, Mr Singer.” Tony grinned, raising his
coffee cup in a half salute.

“Call me Bobby, everyone else does.” Tony reciprocated on the first name rule and the hunter
flashed a genuine smile for a moment before getting down to business. “So. You know about the
Leviathans.”

Tony didn’t know what he was talking about. “No?” He shrugged. “I mean, I know something is
wrong. I’ve seen the videos of ‘Sam’ and ‘Dean’ shooting up restaurants, but I know that’s not them.
Me and Jarvis have been keeping an eye on the situation and wiping the videos as soon as they
appear but that’s all we can do for now.”

“And I’m glad to hear it,” Bobby said, pulling a notebook towards them from across the table. “The
last thing we need is a national manhunt for the boys. They’re being replicated by monsters called
Leviathans, fresh out of purgatory.” He showed Tony a scan from what looked like a very old book,
a disturbing image of a person whose whole body seemed to be in the process of stretching and
turning into another person. “If they get their hands on biological material, they can change to look
like someone else. Like shifters except more into eating folks.”

“Why are they here?” Tony asked, pushing the paper away and standing to refill the coffee mugs.
They sat and talked for almost half an hour, Bobby telling him about the downfall of Castiel, whose
sin was pride, about the complete destruction of the wall in Sam’s head, about Dean’s need to hunt
and kill the Leviathans.

Bobby finished by describing how the Leviathans had been released before standing and collecting
their mugs, dropping them in the sink and pulling two beers from the fridge. He slid one to Tony and
opened his own with a pop.

“So they’re everywhere?” Tony finally asked. “Pretty much? And they’re indestructible?”

“We don’t have a way to kill them yet,” Bobby confirmed with a grimace. “Like I said, they work
through biological material. Somehow that’s how they’re impersonating the boys.”

“What’s their goal?” Tony asked, running a hand through his hair, eyes flicking back again to the
drawing of the changing Leviathan. “World domination?”

“We don’t know,” Bobby shrugged. “They’re looking for something but we don’t know what.”

“That’s never good,” Tony muttered.

“No, it ain’t,” Bobby agreed. “Next problem is their leader.”
Tony raised an eyebrow in question.

“Ever hear of a guy named Dick Roman?”

A lump of lead dropped into Tony’s stomach. “The guy who owns Richard Roman Enterprises?” He’s a Leviathan?” He had met Dick Roman several months ago, at a corporate mixer. The man was not particularly pleasant, but hadn’t deserved this fate.

“Yup.”

Tony put his face in his hands. “God.” He shook his head. “I met him once. He’s a… well, an asshole. But he didn’t deserve to be killed and replaced with a monster!”

“Nobody ever does, boy. But that’s what we’re looking at. Next problem: Roman owns a bucketload of businesses. Subsidiaries all over the place.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Tony asked.

“We need your help. The boys are hunting down as many as they can right now. I’m researching. Between the three of us, we can hopefully find a way to kill these sons of bitches.” Bobby took a sip of beer and gestured with the can at Tony. “You’re on the top. We need you to stay away from Dick and company because they’re bloodthirsty and dangerous and we can’t even scratch them right now. But we also need you to try and get into their computers and find out what they want without them knowing it’s you.”

“So get as close as possible but also stay away?” Tony asked, frown becoming deeper.

“Sounds ‘bout right. Don’t let any of this slip, don’t let them suspect you know they’re anything but human. Never meet with any of them in person. Sam told me you’re going to get married?”

Tony nodded silently.

“For both your sakes, don’t go poking too deep.”

Bobby stood and Tony did the same. “Keep me updated on how the hunt goes. And the Winchesters, especially with Sam’s… problems. How bad is it, really?”

Bobby let out a deep sigh. “Pretty damn bad. That wall… it was holding back a lot of memories and hardly any of them were good ones.” He shook his head. “Let us know what you find. Tell that team of yours to be careful; you might want to pass this information on to at least some of them.”

They walked to the door and Bobby held out a hand. Tony shook it, looking Bobby in the eye. “Nice to meet you, Bobby.”

“Nice to meet you too, Tony. Never thought I’d see the day Tony Stark was standing in my house.”

Bobby chuckled and shook his head.

Tony turned and was two steps down the porch when Bobby spoke again. “The boys seem to like you and Ms Potts a lot.” Tony looked back. Bobby’s face was set, brow furrowed. “The world hasn’t been nice to those boys, especially in the last few years. You give them something outside of hunting, something even I can’t give them. It’s good for them.” Tony’s throat was tight and Bobby nodded once, sharply. “Thank you.”

Apparently that was all he had to say before he turned back into the house. Tony was sure he was watching him, though, as he unfolded the suit and took off into the night.
So that was Bobby Singer, he mulled as the suit rocketed over the midwest back towards Manhattan. No- nonsense, knew what he was talking about, clearly cared for the Winchester brothers.

Tony liked the guy.
When Sam Wilson had signed on to look for Bucky Barnes he had known that there was going to be some weird shit in his future. People were monsters and people were what they were looking for. Weird was to be expected and he was ready.

However, he hadn’t expected to be cornered in an abandoned warehouse by a group of four literal monsters. These “Leviathans” looked like people but bled black blood and healed up from everything the trio of superheroes could throw at them, figuratively and literally. Steve’s shield, Natasha’s widow’s bites, plain old shooting from Sam; nothing was working. Tony had given them a heads up that there was something weird around and that they were working on it, but he didn’t have any ideas how to kill them.

“Plan, Cap?” Falcon called over the hum of his wings and the buzz of Natasha slipping gracefully around one of the creatures to taze it again, startling it for a moment. But instead of answering, Steve cocked his head sideways, listening to something only he could hear until a moment later Sam could hear it too: the low rumble of an approaching car. Sam’s forehead creased even as he returned to tracking the attackers’ movements around the trio; they were pretty much in the middle of nowhere, the rocky Arizona desert unmarred for miles around the rotting warehouse. Why would there be a car anywhere near? Could be a jeep full of SHIELD agents, except they preferred quiet cars, or a truck full of Hydra operatives, except they preferred planes. Who, then?

To his surprise, when he looked back at Cap and Natasha to get some instructions about the plan of attack, he caught the end of a silent conversation in raised eyebrows and a brief nod from Cap before Natasha grinned almost ferally. Cap smiled as well, the corners of his lips twitching up as he turned to keep one of the creatures in view, the car’s engine continuing to grow until the very building seemed to shake.

“What--” Sam started to ask, feeling left out, but didn’t have time to continue the question before the most rotten of the old walls exploded inwards.

The sleek lines of a Chevy Impala burst through the newly created hole, Sam catching a glimpse of the driver-- a broad shouldered, short haired man -- before the newcomer whipped the wheel sideways and sent the car into a smooth slide. As the car rotated, the passenger door flew open and a second man leapt out, conserving his momentum and tucking into a neat somersault centered around one arm as the car continued on its path, smashing into two of the creatures and slamming them into the far wall and a steel tank. With surprising finesse, the man who had leapt from the car fluidly stood from the dive, pulling his arm clear to reveal a short machete that he used to quickly and violently decapitate one of the attackers, hacking through its neck before kicking the severed head away from the body.

The short haired driver had left the car, using a machete of his own to kill another of the Leviathans and using his free hand to splash a third with a wave of something from a flask, making it writhe in pain before Cap’s shield flew across the room and neatly severed its head. The acrobat leaped...
forwards and killed the fourth in a burst of black arterial blood and the room was silent for a moment except for the deep rumble of the car’s engine, which stopped as the driver leaned in and turned the key.

To Sam’s surprise, the acrobat was surprisingly tall when he straightened, taller than the six foot Captain America and possibly taller than Thor, although he wouldn’t have bet on it. Both of the men screamed danger, and not just because he had watched them decapitate three out of four monsters. Their movements, casually and subconsciously choreographed to watch each other’s backs, the lithe grace and obvious muscle, the ease with which the shorter of the two scooped up one of the heads and dropped it in a bucket with a grimace but without hesitation. Yet despite the faint lines around his eyes, the tall one grinned at the trio of Avengers and it lit up his face, melting away a few years. “Hey, Steve, Natasha. Long time, no see. How are you liking the forces of Purgatory?”

“They’re great,” Natasha deadpanned. “Just stellar. It would be nicer if we knew how to kill them.”

Falcon’s eyebrows went up further. They knew Cap and Widow’s real names? First name basis? They had met them before? They knew about these Leviathans? “Steve. Who are they. Some part of your super-friends that I don’t know about? Are they supposed to be dead too?” Wilson had to resist the urge to tug childishly on Steve’s sleeve.

The driver looked askance at Wilson. “How many people who do you know who should be dead but aren’t?”

“Counting Cap, three.”

“Well, you can add two more to the list.” The long haired one stepped forwards and held out a hand. “Sam Winchester. My brother, Dean.” Wilson shook, mentally evaluating again the man before him at a closer distance. Firm handshake, strong gaze, tired eyes that occasionally flicked around the room and settled in odd places, like he was seeing something not actually there. Recent grief, not a lot of sleep and the long look he had seen in soldiers at the VA. People who had seen some serious shit.

Dean stepped forwards and blatantly looked Wilson over once before holding out a hand as well. “So you’re the one we heard about at Christmas? Who helped Cap with the Hydra mess?”

“That’s me. Sam Wilson.”

Dean Winchester went back to work, slinging the machete over his shoulder and casually scooping up another monster head, dropping it in his bucket. “Well, I hate to interrupt whatever you were doing here, but can we move this little clambake somewhere else? Dick’s probably got eyes on the place.”

“You guys got a ride?” Sam asked, gesturing to the trio.

Natasha frowned. “Stark was going to send someone out with a jet, but apparently they got delayed.”

“He called us, said that he knew we were in the area on a case and might want to stop in and check out what you guys were up to. We didn’t know it was a Leviathan thing until we were closer and picked up some of the black blood you left back there,” Sam pointed out the hole in the wall towards the spot the trio of Avengers had picked up the Leviathan trail.

“Ohay, ladies and gents, less talk, more loading. Everyone in the car. We’ll get further away from here until your ride arrives.” Dean gestured at the car.

“Shotgun.” Natasha called.
“Ah, no. You’re in the back.” Sam said.

She didn’t respond, just raised an eyebrow. Sam raised his eyebrows back and slung his machete over his shoulder before picking up the second bucket of Leviathan heads and popping the trunk of the car. “Too tall,” he called forwards. Natasha’s blank mask didn’t vanish, but the edges of her mouth quirked up and she slid neatly into the backseat. At that, it was Falcon’s eyebrows that went up.

“Did he just make Natasha…?”

“Yep,” Steve grinned. “Meet the Winchesters.”

Ten minutes later, they were hightailing it up the mountains, cactus blurring by the windows and the roar of the car echoing off the rocks. Dean pulled over by the side of the road and stopped the Impala, the three superheroes gladly pushing out of the cramped back bench seat as the two Winchesters pulled shovels out of the trunk along with the buckets of Leviathan heads and began to dig.

“So… this is how you get rid of them? Leviathans?” Steve asked.

“Yes. For now. Since we don’t know how to actually kill them. Decapitation, bury the heads or dump them in a river or something so that they can’t reform. Also, Borax burns their skin,” Sam replied, throwing another shovel full of dirt out of the rapidly growing hole.

“How’d you figure that out?” Wilson asked.

“A friend of ours worked it out.”

“Bobby?” Natasha asked. “I remember you mentioning him before and Tony said they met about the Leviathans and Roman. Bobby’s a hunter, does a lot of research, right?”

Sam could see Dean’s jaw clench at the present tense. “Yeah, Bobby was the best,” the older Winchester replied tightly, hands gripping the handle of the shovel so strongly his knuckles turned white.

“Was?” Steve asked. Wilson winced. He watched as the body language changed further, both brothers curling in on themselves a little.

“Bobby’s dead.” Dean stabbed the shovel into the ground. “Dick Roman shot him in the head, two weeks ago.” Dean’s voice was curt and very clear. He didn’t want to talk about it.

Wilson decided it was a good time to change the subject. “This is what you guys do? Kill leviathans? And you met the Avengers…?”

Sam rolled his eyes and threw his hands in the air. “Damn it, Steve. I thought you, of all people, would explain. You’re worse than Tony.”

“Just didn’t want to deprive you of the pleasure,” Steve deadpanned. “Besides, I would have explained… eventually. I just didn’t know we’d be running into you today.”

Dean tipped the bucket of leviathan heads into the hole, moonlight glinting off of teeth and half lidded eyes until he started filling in the sand. His brother leaned on his shovel and looked at the other Sam. “We’re Tony’s cousins, which is how we know the Avengers. We met Tony… five
years ago? Damn, it’s been a long time. We met the rest of the Avengers when Tony needed some help with a few ghosts in the tower.”

“And yeah, this is what we do,” Dean threw over his shoulder as he finished filling in the hole. “Hunting demons, vampires, werewolves. Ya know, things that go bump in the night. And recently, leviathans.”

Sam Wilson would have liked a moment to process that, but unfortunately, there was no rest for the weary as Natasha took over. “You remember the freak storms a few years ago? The weird crap in Chicago and Detroit, the systems over DC and Vegas, the tornados and earthquakes in the Middle East, the temperature drops in Africa?” Natasha asked him.

He nodded; it had been the end of his second tour and he remembered clearly the series of tremors that shook their base and the freak tornados that had led to weeks of inspections and equipment grounding because of the flying sand. “That was something to do with you guys?”

Dean snorted. “That was the friggin apocalypse.”

Despite himself, Wilson could feel his eyes widen as he looked over the pair again before looking skeptically at Natasha and Steve. “You stopped the apocalypse. How?”

When the older brother didn’t answer, Wilson looked back at them and found Dean frowning at his taller brother. Again, the younger Winchester’s eyes were trained on something that Wilson couldn’t see, looking off to the side, eyebrows furrowed. Dean cleared his throat and his brother’s eyes shot to him, one of his big hands coming up to the other and his thumb pressing hard into a bandaged palm. His shoulders relaxed infestiminally. Dean’s didn’t.

“You good?”

Sam rolled his eyes at Dean, but the way he kept his hands together made Dean stand abruptly. “We should go.”

“Dean, I’m fine.”

“Oh yeah, you’re the paragon of mental health. If you weren’t doing the hand thing, maybe I would believe you,” Dean snapped, then took a deep breath. “Forget that. Keep doing the thing.”

Steve stepped forwards. “What does the “hand thing” do exactly?”

Dean looked like he was regretting bringing it up around other people. Sam glared at the ground. There was quiet for a moment. Then the younger brother spoke, still avoiding looking at everyone. “I don’t know if Tony told you, but… the wall is down.” Wilson didn’t know what “the wall” was, but if Natasha and Steve’s shared inhales were anything to go by, it wasn’t good. “Tony knows, obviously. Bobby told him the details, but Castiel went power-crazy and removed it. But you can’t tell him there are problems.”

“Like hell we can’t,” Steve responded evenly. “He deserves to know. He’s helping you on the other end, slowing down Roman’s work on whatever he’s looking for as much as he can without getting caught. More than that, he’s your family. Tell him or we will.”

“Look, Steve,” Dean said. “Until the Leviathan problem is done, we can’t risk Dick finding out that Tony is related to us in case he tries to go after Tony. He met with Bobby and got the info on the companies Roman is buying. Yeah, he’s helping and we need all the help we can get but he can’t do anything that makes it obvious he knows Dick is anything but human. If he thinks Sam has a problem, he’s going to come find us, Dick is going to notice, and all of us will probably die.”
Natasha nudged Steve. “You know they’re right, Steve. Tony is their family and he’ll worry. It’s what he does best.”

Sam took over where his brother had left off, looking Natasha, Sam, and Steve each in the eyes. “You can tell Tony about Bobby. He met Bobby before… he should know.” A small smile touched the corners of Sam’s mouth for just a second. “Bobby really liked him, talked about the visit for days.” Sam shrugged. “Tony can call us if he wants to know the details.” Dean looked like that was the last thing he wanted, but Sam kept going. “But you can’t tell him about… you know. The problems.” He tapped the side of his head. “Tony will abandon everything and try to come find us, try to fix it. That isn’t going to help anything; it’s just going to make a bigger mess for everyone.”

Steve sighed. “Fine. Since he knows you are out here with us, we’ll tell him about Bobby. And you better answer the phone when he calls you. I won’t tell him about the wall, but you’re going to have to eventually.”

“And you better tell Castiel that if we see him again, he’s going to be in a world of trouble for what he did to you,” Natasha added evenly, spinning a knife between her fingers.

“Um,” Dean looked down and viciously kicked a rock, sending it flying into the night. “Apparently either Bobby didn’t tell Tony or Tony didn’t tell you this either, but--” the hunter’s frown deepened and the lines in his forehead became more pronounced. “Cas is dead, too.”

Natasha sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Dean shook his head. “Make sure Tony knows about that, too. If he doesn’t know.”

“ Deal,” Steve said.

Wilson watched as Sam shook hands with Steve. “Now. We’ve got to go. Leviathans to kill and a hermit hacker to visit.”

Dean nodded at the trio of superheroes just as the muffled roar of quinjet engines were audible across the desert. “Good luck on your mission-y stuff. Catch you on the flipside.” He scooped up the shovel and tossed it back in the trunk, sliding into the front sheet and starting the engine as his brother opened the other door and got in. Sam gave a half grin and then they were gone again, rumbling back into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Ugggh I hope my timelines are sort of accurate in terms of order of events. I’ve reached the point where I’m writing these as ideas come and not in terms of season order so things are a little crazy. Sorry!

(Also, I know that they put the Impala in storage for a while because it was too obvious and whatever but I’m saying that the boys brought it out to take it for a drive and kill some Leviathans. I just needed this scene to happen.)
The Wedding

Chapter Notes

Takes place somewhere between 7.11 and 7.17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean’s phone rang with the ringtone reserved for Tony and co and the hunter crossed the seedy motel room to pick it up.

To his surprise it wasn’t Tony, but Pepper.

“Pepper!” The surprise was evident and Sam’s head popped up across the room where he was reading a book on the second bed. Dean put the phone on speaker and pushed it a little closer to Sam. Only a little through. If he wanted it any better he would have to get up. “How’s it going?”

“Couldn’t be better. Worried about you two, as always. Keeping Tony out of trouble.” Her voice was fond over the line and Dean couldn’t help the little smile that stole onto his face when she said she was worried about them.

“Getting ready for the wedding?”

“Of course. That’s why I called, actually. It’s not like I can send you an invitation in the mail.”

Dean let out a heavy sigh. He wanted to go to the wedding. He really did. But… “Pepper, there’re leviathans everywhere. You don’t need us in wedding photos or hanging around when you’re trying to get married.” Plus, Sam was messed up right now, hallucinating all the time. They couldn’t push that on to Pepper and Tony. Dean sure wasn’t going to say that out loud, though, not with Sam on the other bed.

“Dean. It’s going to be in the tower. We’ll send a plane to pick you up if you want so you don’t even have to bring the car.”

Sam muffled a laugh-- a rare sound from him, these days-- probably at the look on Dean’s face. “Leave my baby? Absolutely not, Pepper. Are you sure you’re the real Pepper Potts? Because I think you might be going crazy from working too hard.”

Pepper laughed on the other end of the line. “Come to the wedding. It’s in two weeks, Saturday the fifteenth but Steve says they expect you here at least two days early for Tony’s bachelor party.”

He snorted. A bachelor party for Tony Stark? Sounded… wild. But then, if Steve was in charge, things might not get too out of hand. Not that he would have minded an evening of strippers and alcohol.

Sam called across the room, not even looking back up from his book. “Dean, if you even think of saying no to this because of me I will leave you here and go on my own.”

Dean rolled his eyes; he had reservations, but it wasn’t going to take him a lot of convincing. He held the phone back up. “Looks like we’ll be there. Should we be expecting a lot of people?”
“It’ll be the Avengers, Sam Wilson, probably Maria Hill, Jane Foster, and maybe a few friends? Harold Hogan (Tony’s bodyguard and friend), Rhodey… That’s probably about it that you know. The wedding itself will have two dozen other industrialists, business friends, people from the company and their plus ones. Fairly exclusive. They’ll only be there for the wedding and reception, not before or after. Neither of us have any other family, so that’s about it. The only photographer will be Jarvis and one other hired person so you don’t have to worry about them going all over the internet.”

Dean needed one more confirmation. “Are you sure you want a pair of felony ridden monster killers at your wedding?”

“Dean, we couldn’t be more sure. Just get here a few days before.”

“See you then.”

“Say hi to Sam for me!” she called before hanging up.

Dean ended the call on his end and looked at Sam. “I guess we’re going to a wedding.” He glanced ruefully at their bags of dirty laundry. They were going to need to go shopping.

The classic car roared into the Avengers Tower garage three days before the wedding of Tony Stark and Pepper Potts. Nobody met them this time (which both Sam and Dean were fine with; last time someone had met them to take them up, they had ended up being a demon) and they made their way into the elevator, bags slung over shoulders and looking fairly presentable except for the fading bruises on Dean’s cheekbone and left eye and the ever-present bandages on Sam’s left palm.

The moment the elevator doors swung open, Pepper shrieked “Sam! Dean! I didn’t know you’d be here today!” Dean couldn’t help but laugh as the bride to be launched herself across the room and threw her arms around Sam. He saw the flinch Sam suppressed at being touched, but he also watched as Sam reciprocated with a smile so he said nothing. Pepper turned to him. “I thought you were getting here tomorrow!”

He wrapped his arms around her and grinned. When she let go, Pepper reached up and trailed her fingers over Dean’s face and frowned at him before she bounced back over to the sofa where two women neither Sam nor Dean recognized were neatly hand-lettering a small pile of seating cards.

“We finished up a job a day early, thought we’d head over and see if you needed any help with last-minute stuff,” Sam said, heading over to a chair by the couch and setting down his bag before flopping into it.

“Not that we’d know about what that would be. We’re not exactly wedding planners,” Dean admitted. “Just point us in the right direction.”

He studied the two other women. The one who was sorting out the written invitations had light brown hair that was past her shoulders, a plaid (Sam probably approved, he thought) shirt, and comfortable jeans. She wore minimal makeup and looked a little bit like her head was in the clouds all the time. The other had her much darker hair up in a tight bun and had a pencil tucked through it. Her eyes were piercing; this was clearly a woman who meant business. She stood and extended a hand to Dean. “Maria Hill.” Dean shook and Sam got back up from his chair to do the same.

“Sam and Dean Winchester,” he said, gesturing to Dean and himself.

“I know,” she responded, with a small smile and a twitch of her eyebrow. “I was actually Deputy
Director of SHIELD before the fall.”

“Impressive,” Dean said. “So you know all about us.”

“Not really, actually,” Pepper said. “Tony edited those files a lot.” Maria shrugged and sat back down, pulling a piece of paper towards herself and beginning to letter another thank you card.

The other woman stood and shook hands with the brothers also. “I’m Jane Foster.”

“Thor’s ‘Lady Jane’?” Sam asked with a smile. “We’ve heard a lot about you. Astrophysics, right?”

She blushed. “That’s me. Nice to meet you both.”

Dean had to smile at the thought of Thor and this young woman; she had to be a full foot shorter than him. His train of thought was interrupted by Sam again. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Jarvis?” Pepper asked.

“Sir, Captain Rogers, Mr Wilson, and Dr Banner are still setting up the reception hall.” Jarvis immediately responded.

“Natasha and Clint are on a mission and getting here tomorrow,” Pepper added. “Thor and Rhodey will be here tomorrow also. Happy insisted on working today and tomorrow but you’ll meet him at some point.”

“Okay, then. We’ll go dump our bags and help the guys for a while.” Dean picked up the bag he had set down along with Sam’s and hauled them down the hallway to the rooms they had been in before, grinning at the sight of the comfortable beds yet again after weeks of motels and the Impala. He came back to find Sam reading the guest list.

“Let’s go, dude.” His brother stood and followed him to the elevator, both brothers turning when Pepper spoke up.

“Sam, Dean,” she smiled, “Good to have you back.”

Dean shot her a jaunty salute before the elevator doors closed and Jarvis whisked them away.

Sam didn’t even blink when all the lights in the elevator went out except the emergency, leaving Dean and Lucifer bathed in deep red. He didn’t flinch when Dean’s skin started melting off his face, starting with the already bruised left cheekbone and spreading across his face like a disease. He didn’t jump when Lucifer moved behind him and hissed in his ear, the snakelike noise blending with the smooth whirr of the elevator.

He was more than a little relieved, however, when the doors slid open and they left the box, leaving Lucifer behind for the moment in favor of bright sunlight and four men setting up chairs and tables.

“Hey guys,” Dean called and the movement in the room slowed to a stop as the superheroes finished setting up the tables they were on before coming over to greet the arrivals.

“Good to see you,” Tony said, giving Dean and Sam short hugs. They shook hands with Bruce, Sam, and Steve before looking around the room. It was the size of several large conference rooms but had been cleared of office equipment and was now boasting a series of long tables for food along the inside wall, small round tables set along the windows for people to sit in pairs and trios and look out on the city, and the beginning of a dance floor and more round tables through the middle of the
“Wow, guys.” Sam looked around, examining the hanging light fixtures from the higher-than-average ceiling and the section of windows that could be opened to the afternoon sky. “This is great!”

“Thank you, thank you,” Sam Wilson gave a theatrical bow. “I did all the planning for this room.” Steve elbowed him in the side. “Ow!”

“Please, I did all the planning. With Bruce. Because you wanted to take a nap instead and Tony was working at his actual job.” The Falcon looked highly indignant but didn’t protest.

“What else needs to be done?” Dean asked, looking at everything already set up.

“Not much,” Bruce said, pulling up a hologram and manipulating it, spinning it around once before sliding it towards Tony. “We’re working faster than anticipated so all that’s left are those tables—” he gestured to a group of ten more round tables leaning against the wall “— and the chairs that go with them. Pepper’s ordering pizza at five, so if we want any that would be a good time to get back upstairs.”

“You guys don’t have to help, you’re probably tired,” Steve commented, looking at the bandages on Sam’s hand and Dean’s bruising. Sam waved him off.

“Just a fast job, took it easy getting here. We’d love to help. It would be nice to work on something… normal, for once.”

Steve shook his head and shrugged in a “whatever you want” gesture and spread his hands at the tables. “Have at it, then.”

The group descended and a moment later, Jarvis was playing “You, Me, and the Bottle Makes 3 Tonight” per Sam Wilson’s choice and the guys were laughing and bantering as they set up tables and chairs for Tony Stark’s wedding.

The next morning, two days before the wedding, Dean walked into the kitchen around eight. Pepper was eating a bowl of fruit, Tony next to her with a cup of coffee, and Bruce scribbling on a notepad with a plate of toast. Tony took a sip of his drink and gestured to the cabinets with his mug when Dean raised an eyebrow. The hunter found a mug and poured his own cup, sitting across from the billionaire and taking a drink before yawning. “I love your beds. If we ever stop living out of motels and the car and get a place to live, y’know, permanently, I want a bed like that. Memory foam is the best invention on the planet.”

Pepper frowned a little at the “if” in that, but Tony just grinned. “I know, right?”

“What’s up for you today, Dean?” Bruce asked. “Besides the bachelor party tonight?” He smiled in Tony’s direction and the genius pumped one first in the air.

Dean shrugged. “If there’s nothing else to do to get ready… sightsee? I was in the city once when I was in my early teens, but that was at night and I was busy trying to get away from Dad for most of it.”

“We have passes to most of the museums that we keep for employees if you want them. Plus the Statue of Liberty, Empire State, and a few other places.” Pepper pulled up a table display. “I’ll have Jarvis send them to you.”
Dean wrinkled his nose at ‘museums’ but perked up at ‘Statue of Liberty.’ “Sam would love that, the nerd.” He looked around, shoulders tensing slightly. “Where is he, by the way?”

“He went for a run with Steve and Sam,” Bruce responded. “They left an hour or so ago, should be back soon.” Dean looked reassured that Sam was in good hands, but nervous nonetheless. A heavy silence descended on the room.

Bruce was the one who quietly broke it. “How is Sam? We all know the wall’s down, by the way. But, I mean, I don’t know how this works, but is he… okay?”

Dean grimaced and took another sip of coffee, weighing how truthful he wanted to be. Probably good to get it out there, he decided, but try to keep it manageable. “It’s not great,” he admitted. “He, um.” He took a second to set the mug down and scrub his face with both hands, suddenly feeling very tired even though he had just gotten up. “He hallucinates some. A lot, sometimes. We’re keeping it pretty much under control, but I think it’s worse than he’s telling me.”

“Hallucinates?” Pepper repeated, her voice higher and verging on shrill.

“Yeah. Some days are worse than others.” Tony let out an explosive breath. Dean laughed, a strangled sound. “It sucks.”

“Um, yeah.” Tony said. “Can we do anything about it? Send him to a shrink or something?”

“And say what? ‘Hey this is my brother who spent who-knows-how-long in a small box with the devil himself and now is at least a little crazy? They’d lock him up. Hell, they’d probably lock me up, too.” He sighed and let some of the bitterness fade out of his voice. “I don’t know. We’ll keep dealing for now. See where it gets us.”

“How are you, Dean?” Bruce asked.

Dean took a drink of coffee and set the mug down probably harder than was strictly necessary. “I’m dealing,” he repeated.

“Dealing?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Dealing,” Dean agreed. “That’s all I can do. What about security at the wedding?” He asked, changing the subject.

Tony launched into a long-winded and through explanation of how there were security guards on all the lower floors who had been briefed on the leviathan situation as well as normal security protocols. Each guest would be discreetly tested in some form or the other with a light Borax. Nothing would stop this wedding.

Steve and Sam offered their services as tour guides to Manhattan, so the day was spent with Sam and Dean being swept around the Big Apple by a pair of enthusiastic natives. They stood in the Statue of Liberty, looked off of the Rockefeller Center balcony, and wandered through Times Square. Sam elbowed Dean in the ribs as they walked by CBGB, the place where Dean had gone when he slipped away from his father and Sam.

They ate hot dogs in Central Park and wandered down the green paths. It was strange for Sam Wilson, seeing Sam and Dean Winchester sitting together on the edge of a fountain and watching the people walk by them. The only time he had seen them before was in the middle of a frankly terrifying leviathan attack and it was odd seeing them so relaxed (well, more relaxed-- the veteran
and counselor didn’t miss the perpetual watchfulness that surrounded them both, the way Dean always kept one eye on Sam, and the occasional moment where Sam would eyeball something that nobody else could see before moving away.)

They stopped at a street vendor and got fancy ice cream even though it was mid-March, walking back to the Tower. Dean was focused on his snack, Sam was looking at the buildings and asking questions and had to be reminded by Dean to eat the ice cream before the early spring sunlight melted it.

By the time Jarvis whisked them up to the common floor of the Tower, it was considerably more full of people when they had left. The doors opened and Thor’s voice was immediately audible, the low bass rumbling under the sound of Natasha and Maria talking to Pepper and Bruce chatting with Clint. The demigod was sitting next to Lady Jane, looking more normal than Sam or Dean had seen him before, wearing a pair of jeans and a plain green t-shirt. He stood when the doors opened, crossing to the brothers, Cap, and Falcon and greeting them all with the same arm clasp he used at Christmas.

Dean was pulled into the conversation with Bruce, Clint, and the newly arrived Tony, who had entered from the hallway a moment before. Sam made as if to follow but was stopped by Thor’s large hand on his arm. “Samuel, I would speak with you for a moment.”

Startled, Sam nodded and let Thor guide him into the kitchen, away from prying eyes and ears. “I have spoken to my mother about the wall in your mind. I am sorry, but she is unable to make it stronger and does not know anyone who can do so, not even my brother Loki, who is good with magic.”

Sam stared for a second, Lucifer sitting on the counter behind Thor, swinging his legs and momentarily disregarded. The hunter had completely forgotten Thor’s promise to look into fixing the wall. “Thank you, Thor,” he finally said, when he had his voice back. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.” Thor raised an eyebrow. “The wall is gone.” Sam added. “Totally shattered.”

Thor looked stunned. “It has been removed? What of your mind?”

Sam let out a strained laugh. His mind? Who even knew anymore? “It’s a little crazy in there. Memories, but also just—” As if to prove his point, Lucifer hopped off the counter and started slowly going through the knife block near the sink, looking over each blade one at a time until he found one to his approval. He casually walked up to Thor and Sam had to work hard to keep from flinching as the devil stabbed the blade into Thor’s ear.

“Don’t bother talking to him, he can’t hear you now, Sam,” Lucifer said, smiling.

Sam realized he had stopped talking in the middle of the sentence and that Thor was watching him with a combination of sorrow and compassion. “He makes me watch people die. Or he tortures me or makes me remember what it was like in the Cage. Sometimes he’s just really loud and annoying and I can’t concentrate on everything. He just stabbed you in the head,” Sam informed Thor, who didn’t seem at all concerned by that. “It’s hard to tell what’s real or not real because he did that a lot in the Cage, he’d mess with my head so I didn’t know if I was still there. He’d kill Dean, he’d make me kill Dean, he’d make himself look like Dean and then would torture me…” Sam trailed off, hands clenching involuntarily around the back of the chair as the rush of words slid out of him. That was more information than he had even given Dean so far. “Don’t tell him,” he requested. “Don’t tell Dean.”

Thor looked troubled, but he nodded. “As you wish. Should we rejoin the others?”
Sam agreed and they headed back to meet the group, Dean raising his eyebrows at Sam and Sam giving Dean the “not important” head shake. His brother shrugged and went back to his conversation, Sam turning as Bruce asked him something on the other side.

A few hours later, Tony Stark found himself at an event he never thought he would be having. A bachelor party was something that went with getting married and that hadn’t been something on his radar for a big part of his life.

Not only was he getting married, he was having a bachelor party with the strangest people he knew who also happened to be his greatest friends. Growing up, he had had Jarvis and the bots he was building and on the rarest occasions, older cousin John Winchester. Then he had lost Jarvis and gained Rhodry and eventually Happy and lost John. But the Avengers had happened, SHIELD had fallen, and most notably to him, he had met Sam and Dean Winchester.

Now he was sitting in the private room of one of his and Rhodey’s favorite restaurants. He was surrounded by people he knew, friends. Rhodey and Happy, Steve and Clint and Bruce and Thor, Sam and Dean.

They talked and ate and laughed, drank quite a bit, told old stories. Sam and Dean got great pleasure out of the stories about Tony’s MIT days from Rhodey. Happy and Rhodey wanted to hear about the time Tony had tried to sneak a modification to the Impala’s engine and Dean had hit him with a small wrench thrown across the room and almost knocked him out.

It was Rhodey who gave the first speech. “Tony, I've known you since you were just a punk ass kid in some of my classes. Lord only knows why I gave in and decided to share an apartment with you, you were the craziest person I had ever met.” There was a round of hoots and laughter. “But you turned out great and now you’re about to marry the most unobtainable woman we know. I don’t know how you did it, but you managed to convince her to marry you and you deserve it. To Tony!” A cry of “To Tony!” went up, everyone raising glasses and pounding on the table, Thor’s voice deeper than everyone else's.

They had another round of desserts and food and more alcohol, lasting late into the night. Neither Sam nor Dean gave a speech, but near the end as the party was winding down, Tony met Dean’s eye and the younger man gave him a half smile and a salute. That was all, but it was all Tony needed. He grinned back and it lit up the room.

Despite the late night, Sam was up early the morning before the wedding. Mostly due to the fact Lucifer seemed to think because he had had a good night the previous evening, he needed to have a horrible day to make up for it. So at four in the morning, Sam had woken up gasping from a dream where his lungs were being removed by Lucifer to find the angel himself sitting on the end of his bed, singing “Heat of the Moment” and preparing for a full day of misery.

Sleep was no longer an option. He took a shower (blood pouring from the tap and over his shoulders and clotting in his hair) and got dressed, heading out to the common room and standing by the one of the large windows, watching cars already moving in the city that never slept. His reflection stared back at him, occasionally sneering and flickering between his own face and what he had looked like when Lucifer had been possessing him: colder, harder eyes in a carefree face. Sam closed his eyes. He didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to see Lucifer take over his body and kill a dozen people Sam had known growing up, didn’t want to watch him hurt Dean and the Avengers and Castiel and Bobby.
He jerked, falling forwards and hitting the window when a voice very close behind him said “Sam?” Eyes opening involuntarily when he fell, he twisted around to see that yes, it was indeed Lucifer standing over him once again. “Hope you’re ready to play,” the devil whispered. “Because oh, we’re going to play today.”

Bruce wandered into the common room around six in the morning, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt and ready for a cup of coffee. To his surprise, he wasn’t the first one there. Sam stood by one of the windows, shoulders high and tense and with his arms wrapped around himself. His eyes were open, Bruce could see them in the reflection, but he didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular. Lost in thought, the scientist guessed. “Sam?” Bruce said, intending to ask if the younger man wanted a cup of coffee.

He wasn’t prepared for Sam’s reaction. The hunter started violently, stumbling forwards and hitting the window with a shoulder before falling over, and shoving himself around to face Bruce. His eyes were huge and he looked unreasonably scared. The scientist dropped to his knees and reached out to touch Sam’s arm. Sam flinched away, pushing back until his spine was against the window, but Bruce was more startled by something else: Sam was freezing. Not just goosebumps and air conditioning cold, but ice bath and hypothermia cold, to the point where Bruce wasn’t sure it was all in Sam’s head. How could he be this cold otherwise?

Fortunately for Bruce, Steve chose that moment to walk in. “Bruce, what--”

“Blanket, now!” Bruce clicked his fingers without taking his eyes off Sam. Steve pulled the thick afghan off the back of the couch without question and slowly approached, holding the blanket out and spreading his hands like he was trying to touch a skittish dog. Sam’s eyes focused on the super soldier, leaving Bruce for the first time, but he eyed Steve like a threat, fear blatantly spreading through his eyes as the blonde man moved a little nearer. Steve got close enough to drop the blanket over Sam’s outstretched legs and started inching it higher, pulling it up over Sam’s knees, past his hips.

Suddenly Sam’s eyes flashed and Steve sat back a little, afraid he’d startled Sam further. But Sam just pushed his right thumb into his left palm hard, something Steve remembered Sam doing back when he, Natasha, and Sam Wilson had been hunting for Bucky and the Leviathans appeared. He heard Bruce make a little sound next to him and saw his hand twitch involuntarily forwards towards Sam; the bandages had been removed at some point and Sam was pushing hard with his nails and had to be close to drawing blood. Slowly, Sam’s eyes cleared a little and he looked next to Steve. His voice trembled but was quietly defiant when he spoke. “You’re not real,” he told the patch of air. The hunter deflated and his eyes closed for a second before opening and focusing on Steve and Bruce kneeling in front of him. “Hi,” he said. He tried to smile, but it felt weak in the face of so much worry and compassion. Sam looked down and found a blanket over his lap and twisted a hand in it.

“You’re up early,” Bruce commented lightly, reaching out slowly and pulling him to his feet, taking the edge of the blanket and wrapping it around Sam’s shoulders in the same movement.

“Yeah,” Sam mumbled. “Nightmares. And then he was -- loud.”

“Do you want a sweatshirt or something?” Steve asked. It was astounding how worried he felt for someone who was his own age, if not a few years older. Maybe it was because for a second Sam had looked like a five year old who had a bad dream instead of a hunter who killed things Steve didn’t even know about. For all of his height and experience, Sam had a way of looking much smaller.

“No, I’m fine,” Sam said. But Steve saw him pull the blanket a little close around him. “I just need a
cup of coffee or something,” he said, following Bruce towards the kitchen.

Steve followed, even though he sort of wanted to get Sam a sweatshirt anyway. “I hate being cold,” he said lightly. “I feel like we should just move our whole base out to join Tony in Malibu.”

Sam smiled a little and it felt more real this time. “You’re in charge of the Avengers. You could probably swing that.”

“We’ll put it on the funding list,” Bruce added, picking up the pot of coffee Jarvis had started brewing fifteen minutes before and pouring a mug for each of them.

Sam could hear the echoes of Lucifer in his mind, when he and Dean had gone to meet him in Detroit. “Most people think I run hot. Quite the opposite, actually.” He picked up his mug and took a sip, feeling some warmth run through him and burn away the icy fingers of the Cage that were running all over him. A couple minutes later, the cup was empty and Bruce silently refilled it for him.

“Go for a run?” Sam asked Steve. “It’s better when I can do some exercise.”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Just let me go change.”

Sam nodded. Steve set his mug in the sink and headed out, Sam draining his own mug and following. They came back through a few moments later, now with a very awake Natasha and a fairly sleepy Clint in tow, and left together, Bruce watching as they left.

“So, I feel like I missed something?” Natasha asked conversationally as she poured a cup of coffee.

After their run, Sam spent most of the morning with the Avengers and Dean helping set up in the church that Tony and Pepper were going to get married in the next day. They rearranged chairs, set up tables with the beautifully lettered name cards reading the names of the people involved in the wedding, hung ribbons and flowers. Steve and Clint helped move some things around for the priest, a man named Father Latom with a nice smile who seemed pleased that there were people with lots of brawn to haul things if he asked nicely.

They went back to the tower for a lunch made by Jane, Thor, and Bruce, who had stayed at the Tower to finish preparations for the reception before heading off to check with the florist again. It was noisy, it was lighthearted, with lots of banter bouncing around the group along with a good deal of sarcasm and teasing.

Which is why it was so startling to most of them when Sam suddenly dropped his sandwich and pushed the plate away so fast it almost shot off the table. Dean, who was across the table from Sam, stood immediately and started to come around towards him, watching (along with everyone else) as Sam shoved himself backwards and swallowed hard a few times, like he was trying to keep himself from being sick.

He flinched suddenly and tracked something around the table behind Dean, watching movement only he could see. Clint moved carefully so that Dean could take his spot next to Sam and the hunter slid into the seat beside his brother.

“Stone number one, Sam,” Dean quietly said.

Sam didn’t move. He had turned white, blood draining from his face, and with every second the fear in his face grew a little bit stronger as he eyed the patch of air next to Dean. “Sam.” Dean repeated himself, voice considerably more firm and he reached out carefully to grab Sam’s left hand, the one with the new scar. Sam grew whiter and flinched again, but a second later he also pulled his eyes
away from the empty spot.

Pulling his hand away from Dean’s, he pushed his own together, the strain in his face clear as he jabbed at the skin with his nails hard enough to break open the barely healed skin. Blood started flowing again and Sam’s shoulders relaxed minutely but he kept the hands together. He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes, staring blankly at the table instead and hunching in on himself a little more. “Sorry,” he mumbled, looking more like a kicked puppy than a grown man should have been able to. “He’s… really working it hard today.” Sam swallowed convulsively again and pushed his hands together harder.

“Stop apologizing and focus.” The Avengers watched as Dean lifted Sam’s entwined hands, adding pressure. The older brother’s words were hard, but the tone was gentle. “Stone number one.”

Sam nodded. “You going to wrap it?” he asked, voice growing a little bit stronger if it still trembled slightly.

“Do you want me to?” Dean answered with a question.

Sam hesitated, then nodded. “Okay,” Dean touched Sam’s shoulder lightly. “I’ll go get the kit.”

The room was subdued as Dean quickly ducked out; everyone kept eating but it was harder to enjoy their food when they knew that Sam was being torn apart on the inside. Dean returned a moment later and they watched as he cleaned and bandaged Sam’s hand with an automatic efficiency born from years of first aid.

“He’s playing roulette,” Sam said in a small voice. Dean’s head snapped up and the sound died as the polite we’re-not-listening conversations were effectively stopped by that potent sentence.

“On me?”

Sam nodded. Flinched again and rocked forward slightly, his breathing growing more rapid and his eyes getting wet.

“There’s one bullet--” Sam’s watery eyes grew huge and he let out an almost-silent strangled cry, flying out with the hand Dean wasn’t bandaging to touch the side of his brother’s head. He looked surprised to find only whole skin and bone, no blood, no bullet wound.

“I’m fine, Sammy,” Dean said softly. “Eat your sandwich.”

Sam shook his head and wouldn’t make eye contact. “It’s got… stuff in it. Bugs and fingernails and… stuff.”

“No, it doesn’t. Eat.” He sounded frustrated.

“Dean. It’s not going to happen.” Sam’s voice rose a little but his arms were wrapped around his stomach again and Dean just sighed and gave in.

“Okay.” A little surprise bled into Sam’s expression, but didn’t voice it. Dean packed up the first aid kit. “Go sleep on the couch or something. You need a nap.”

Sam nodded and got up, ignoring the Avengers, and headed for the living room.

Dean set the kit on the floor and ran a hand through his hair once before standing to wash his hands and then returned to his sandwich.
“Stone number one?” Clint finally asked.

“Something I said to him when this all started. It’s a reminder to, um, trust me when I tell him he’s not in the Cage,” Dean responded. “Some of you already heard this, but apparently Lucifer likes to make Sam feel like this is one long game, something he did in the Cage a lot. He makes Sam think he’s in the Cage, he never got out, and all this is just Lucifer. That the world’s not real.”

Dean set down his sandwich and looked at his own hands, squeezing one into a fist. “But the thing with his hand?” Natasha asked, glancing at the first aid kit.

The hunter took a deep breath of his own. “When you’re in hell. And they’re doing what they’re doing to you… the torture is…” Dean’s eyes bored into the table as he refused to make eye contact with any of them and Tony was suddenly harshly reminded that while they were worried at this moment about Sam, Dean had also done his forty years of time. “It hurts, god it hurts.” Dean visibly swallowed. “But you can’t pass out, you can only scream if they let you, and you can’t die and get away from it.” The hunter swallowed convulsively, almost the same way Sam had earlier. “You can feel them peeling off your skin layer by layer with a dull knife, you can feel them pulling out your spine one vertebrae at a time, you can feel every goddamn meat hook that goes through your shoulders and heels and hands that drag you into space and it hurts like nothing you ever could imagine.” Dean reached up and rubbed the muscle on top of his right shoulder unconsciously. “The things you’re willing to do and say to make it all stop…” he shook his head. The Avengers and company looked horrified. Several of them looked like they wanted to throw up. Tony was suddenly very happy that Pepper had been called out earlier to go do an hour of paperwork because this was not something she needed to hear the day before she got married.

“But it feels different than regular life crap,” Dean said, standing and walking over to a lower cabinet where Tony kept the booze these days. He poured a generous tumbler of expensive whiskey and downed it in one before pouring another. “I don’t know how to explain it, it just feels different.” He started looking around the kitchen again, pulling out another plate, a loaf of bread, a knife, a banana.

“So the hand is an anchor,” Clint said. “Because it hurts, but it hurts like he’s alive.”

“Got it in one,” Dean replied, starting to slice the banana. “It happened here, after the wall came down and it reminds him he’s out. Do you have peanut butter?”

Tony found it for him and popped open the jar before handing it to Dean. Dean spread some on the slice of bread, topped it with the cut up banana, and set the other slice of bread and peanut butter on top before slicing the whole thing diagonally.

He turned and rummaged through the fridge, pulling out a sealed bottle of water before picking up the plate with one hand and following Sam out to the living room.

Sam and Dean had declined Tony’s offer of being in the wedding party. For one thing, it wouldn’t do for word to get around to other business owners about the two unknown men in the famous Tony Stark’s wedding party. For another, both knew that Sam’s head was messed up enough he didn’t need to be standing in front of a group of people. So Rhodey was the Best Man, Bruce the lone groomsman, and Clint, Thor, and Steve were going to provide additional security to Jarvis by sitting strategically around the church sanctuary. Happy would be walking Pepper down the aisle, Natasha would be her maid of honor, and Jane and Maria would be sitting with Thor and Steve, respectively.

The men finished dressing, Dean and Rhodey liquoring Tony up a little before they all left the tower ten minutes before the women, in order to minimize the odds of Tony seeing Pepper in her wedding
dress. They fit comfortably in the limo, even though two out of the nine were superpowered/gods and most of the rest were just big guys.

Father Lantom smiled as they entered the church, all dressed in nicely tailored suits courtesy of Stark Industries with light gold pocket squares and ties. He ushered Tony and the two wedding party members into a side room amid a final round of back slapping and hand shaking from the rest of the Avengers. The remaining men took their positions; Thor and Steve on opposite sides of the church, Thor a little farther back than Steve, Clint in the middle center of the balcony, happily perched almost on the railing. Sam and Dean waited out of sight until the church had filled a little with businessmen and women, ex-SHIELD agents, and plus ones before they slipped out to sit near the middle on Tony’s side.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony emerged, standing with Father Lantom at the alter, Rhodey and Bruce next to him. He didn’t look nervous to Dean’s eyes, but the hunter was pretty sure the genius was wearing his “press conference” face, which meant he was less than composed internally. The organist jangled the keys of the instrument and everyone turned to see Natasha entering gracefully, pale gold dress making her hair almost glow, especially in the soft lighting of the church.

Sam watched as Natasha waded through a river of blood and gore, the thick liquid not impeding her smooth stride but staining the light fabric of her dress up to her knees and sloshing behind her in frothing, steaming, swirls. He caught the edge of Lucifer in his peripheral vision, sliding out of the pew and dancing over to the spy. The devil took her hand, kissing up her arm before using some of the blood to draw a red line across her neck. He looked up, making direct eye contact with Sam before pulling out a small knife and slitting her throat, the spray of arterial blood soaking the front of the gown as Natasha’s head lolled--

Sam shoved his thumb into his palm. “Not today,” he muttered quietly. “Not today.” Lucifer fizzled once and then vanished. He closed his eyes and reopened them, finding Dean’s had on his elbow; everyone was standing, the isle was clean and clear, Natasha was standing in the front of the church across from Rhodey, Tony’s smile looked almost too big to be real, and Pepper was entering in a spray of gold tulle and diamonds on Happy’s arm. There was a collective sigh as they walked down the aisle, Dean managing to catch the bride’s eye and give her a wink and a smile.

The ceremony was beautiful and perfect; Rhodey handed over the two gold rings, one a plain band and the other set with a small ruby and three perfect diamonds. Sam almost broke the newly scabbed cut on his hand halfway through the ceremony when Lucifer clubbed Father Lantom with a heavy candlestick and started reading mutilated versions of the wedding vows, but after that incident, the devil didn’t return.

Dean found he couldn’t stop smiling, just a little. Even seeing Sam occasionally dig his fingers into his palm couldn’t get rid of the little bubble of happiness in his chest. They had returned to the tower, Pepper and Tony exiting the church in a shower of gold confetti before pulling Sam and Dean, Rhodey, and Happy into their limousine. They drank champagne, Jarvis played music, and Tony still hadn’t let go of Pepper’s hand. He was reluctant to let her go change once they arrived, even when Pepper pointed out there wasn’t room for all of them and her dress in the elevator.

But Tony had let Rhodey drag him away from his new bride and joined everyone flocking into the reception area. Pepper and the women emerged shortly after, Pepper wearing a much lighter dress of the same gold color as before. They ate and laughed, Pepper throwing her bouquet into the arms of a lucky blonde ex-agent and Tony tossing the garter into the hands of a businessman who immediately kissed the woman next to him. Pepper put a very precise dab of frosting on Tony’s nose when they
cut the cake and the inventor leaned into give her a kiss, making sure the sugar smeared lightly on her cheek.

Natasha had conspired with Jarvis and gotten the artificial intelligence to segue from Tony and Pepper’s first dance number into a smooth jazz number that she had caught Sam listening to over Christmas and dragged the hunter onto the dance floor.

Dean could practically feel himself getting lighter, watching Sam use what dance skills he had to spin Natasha gracefully out and back into his arms. It would be good for him, adding to the positive memories they had so few of, especially recently. Tony danced by with a woman Dean didn’t recognize and Thor swung past with Jane on his arm before Pepper swept over to the table, holding out a hand. “Dance with me, Dean?” she asked, smiling. Ordinarily, Dean would say no, pull the ‘I don’t dance’ card and back out. But what the hell. The sun was shining through the windows, he had good food and wedding cake and champagne, his little brother was smiling and laughing and dancing with a beautiful woman.

He could let himself be happy and carefree for a few more hours. “Sure,” he said, smiling back before taking her hand and letting her lead him to the dance floor.

They moved gracefully, Pepper stepping into a dainty twirl and Dean following her lead. They moved around the room, Tony catching Dean’s eye and giving him a playful glare. “Thanks for inviting us to the wedding, Pepper. I’m sorry we don’t have a gift for you guys.” He had been feeling guilty about it for days; it hadn’t even occurred to them that they needed to get a gift and then there hadn’t been time-- or money.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry about it, Dean. You’re both here. That’s enough for me. Really,” she added when he looked doubtful. “It really is.”

Slowly, the wedding reception came to an end and the hall began to clear out businessmen and SHIELD alike congratulating Tony and gathering around the elevators. Finally, only the Avengers and company remained. “Pictures!” Pepper clapped her hands.

And so it began. It seemed to go on forever to Sam, but not in a bad way-- a series of photos with just Tony and Pepper, then the three who had made up the wedding party, then just the Avengers, then just the women. Sam and Dean got pulled into the group shot with the men despite their protests, Tony assuring them that the only pictures that would be released to the public were the ones with just the bride and groom and just the Avengers. Then a few more-- just Rhodey and Tony, one of Jane and Thor, one of Natasha, Clint, Steve, and Maria (the ex-SHIELD crowd, as Natasha called it).

Finally, “Family shot!” Clint hollered, pushing Sam up off the chair he had been lounging on and taking the now-vacant chair. A family shot. Dean hadn’t even realized, but the last family photo they had really taken was the one with Ellen and Jo, Bobby, Cas, and both brothers. Taken just before they had lost Ellen and Jo, back when they still had Bobby, before Cas had been so caught up in whatever he was doing now… Dean shook himself back to the present and the fading golden light in the room, taking a sip of champagne and moving to take his place next to his brother. He smiled for the camera and was going to move away when Tony stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“How about one with just you two?”

A formal photo, dressed nicely at a wedding? How many chances would he have to get a photo taken imagining what their lives could have been? How many more times would he look at Sam today and wonder if he would ever ever attend his little brother’s real wedding? How many times would he wonder if this is what the big day would have been like if everything hadn’t gone sideways
and Sammy had gotten to marry Jessica?

“Sure,” he said, already mentally adding the photo to the box of photographs in the Impala.

He stood next to his overly tall brother, wrapping his arm around Sam’s shoulder and grinning when Sam reciprocated.

“Chick flick moment?” Sam asked.

Dean smacked his chest with his free hand. “Shut up and smile.”

Jarvis took the photo and flashed it up on the screen for them to see; Dean pulled his eyes away from the image of his brother looking happy and carefree for once to find Sam just as mesmerized as he had been. “Stunned by my good looks?” Dean elbowed Sam.

“Please,” Sam replied good-naturedly. “Just admiring how handsome I am compared to you.”

Pepper intervened by handing Dean a very full glass of champagne and forcing him to stop talking and take a sip before it spilled everywhere. He flipped Sam off with the other hand but Sam just smiled at him and sprawled in a chair next to Clint, long legs extended in front of him in the picture of casual relaxation.

They chatted and drank and snacked on leftover food until Natasha yawned. “Well, this has been fun, boys and girls, but I’m going to bed.” She stood gracefully and left without a hitch in her stride, despite the amount of alcohol that had been consumed and the four inch heels she was balancing on. Slowly, the rest of the group followed, leaving Sam and Dean alone with the newlyweds for a moment.

“You two lovebirds are headed out in the morning?” Sam asked, fiddling with a lone fork.

Tony nodded, reaching over to grab Pepper’s hand. “Yep. Honeymoon, here we come. When are you two leaving? Will you be here when we get back?”

Dean shook his head. “Leviathans to kill, you know. The usual.”

Silence descended on the group. It was so hard for Pepper and Tony to picture, in the warm glow of happiness that came from the recent wedding, in the gentle lighting and quiet atmosphere of the conference room, full of good food and expensive liquor, wearing expensive tuxedos, that Sam and Dean hunted monsters. It wasn’t forgotten, not by a long shot. But when the boys just about refused money and help on the hunts and there was no other way to keep up with them, talking sporadically at best and visiting on occasion… it was hard to reconcile the life the boys led with what the other two did on a day to day basis.

Tony broke the quiet by standing. “Be careful. Like always.”

Dean followed his example, pushing his chair back and stretching before letting Tony give him a hug. “You too.” Sam muffled a yawn behind him and Dean raised an eyebrow, making Pepper stifle a laugh before embracing Dean.

“Have a good trip,” Sam added, collecting his hugs from the pair.

They headed towards the elevator together, Sam and Dean standing in the car awkwardly for a moment before nonverbally deciding to leave because Pepper and Tony were giving each other that all encompassing I’m-so-in-love-with-you look and nothing would get to them now.
(The next morning, Sam found a package neatly slid under his doorway and slid off the gold wrapping paper to find a framed photo collage, holding the photos of him and Dean, the male Avengers, and the various group shots, all centered around the picture of Tony, Pepper, Dean, and him. There was another copy, unframed, of the same collage, underneath. This in turn topped a stack of the photos printed individually. The last page was blank except for neat handwriting swirling through the middle of it.

‘Don’t give up, Sam. The world needs you. And so do we.” A little heart followed them.

Lucifer told him it was crazy to get emotional about a stack of pictures with a little note and he was the expert on crazy. However, when Sam walked into the hallway to see Dean standing with his door open, looking at the same stack of photos and what looked like a note of his own, he decided that Lucifer could stick it where the sun didn’t shine.)

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, I'm posting early this week and may or may not be posting next week because I will be out of town and without good internet/reliable computers for a few days. Let me know what you think about this chapter and what you're looking forwards to seeing!
Rescue Mission

Chapter Notes

This takes place during the events of 7.17, "The Born-Again Identity" and afterwards. I would like to note that I have no personal rights to the dialogue or character actions in the middle which are directly taken from CW's "Supernatural."

Dean’s phone buzzed and he groaned, viciously kicking a rock in his path on the way to the car and running one of his hands over his short hair in frustration. He didn’t have time to help with a hunt or meet Garth about something or whatever this was; his brother was stuck in a fucking mental hospital, barely, barely, holding himself together. Regardless, he dug into his pocket and searched around for the device. To his surprise he pulled out the phone to read “Tony” lighting up the screen.

Tony rarely called them. Even though the brothers talked to their cousin once every few months at least, Sam or Dean always initiated or Tony would text them first for an okay. The last thing both parties needed was for a demon or an angel or anyone, really, to pick up the phone and put two and two together between Iron Man and the Winchester brothers.

So it was with a little trepidation that Dean answered the phone.

“Dean! Are you in northern Indiana?” Tony asked without preamble.

The hunter blinked, nonplussed. “Um, yeah?” He clamped the phone between his shoulder as he fished his keys out of his pocket with one hand and opened the door with the other, sliding into the car. “How’d you know? The credit card?”

“Yeah. I keep a track on that one specifically in case you lose it so that nobody just picks it up and start spending. So I saw the withdrawal-- big one, and the first you’ve made in years.” The genius added slightly reproachfully. He was always trying to badger Sam and Dean into using the card more so they didn’t have to hustle pool or run credit scams. “And then Jarvis flagged a report of a John Doe with Sam’s general description being checked into a hospital. By the time I read it a couple minutes ago, it had been updated with a failed psych test and the name Sam Smith. Is it him?” There was so much concern in Tony’s voice and Dean wanted nothing more than to tell him that it wasn’t Sam, that his brother was fine and in the car with him and they were driving off to go see a ball game or something.

But instead, he told the truth. “Yeah, it’s him.” Dean ran a hand over his face before starting the car. “Sam’s real bad, Tony.” He took a deep breath. “He’s trying so hard to keep it together but he hasn’t slept for five or six days. And I don’t mean he hasn’t had a full night sleep and he’s just been dozing. I mean, he hasn’t slept. At all. And then he walked into the street and got hit by a car and…” Dean could feel his voice shake just a little but he plowed ahead because goddamnit he was going to fix Sam. “They won’t let him out because his head’s so screwed up… and they’re probably right, he’s probably safer here.”

“What can I do, Dean?” Tony asked, voice soft and much more composed than Dean felt at the moment.

Dean hesitated but decided he was beyond caring how involved Tony was for the moment. If they
did find something and cured Sam, his brother would probably be pissed he had brought Tony into this but they would cross that bridge if they came to it. When, Dean corrected, when they came to it. “We need a cure. A mystic with a reaper, a faith healer, anything. I’m headed to the cabin we were staying in to look through Dad’s journal and Bobby’s papers.”

“We’re on it. Jarvis and I will start digging. We’ll check SHIELD’s stuff and also general reports. Call if you find anything, we’ll do the same.”

A little bubble of warmth bloomed, melting a tiny patch of the icy fear that had taken hold back in that room when his brother had said he was too tired. “Thanks, Tony.”

His phone rang again six hours later, just as he scratched off the last name on his notepad of people. Tony. Dean rubbed his gritty eyes, took a sip of beer, and then answered. He was caught slightly off guard when, despite the caller ID, the voice on the other end belonged not to the billionaire but to Clint Barton.

“Hey Dean,” the archer greeted. “We think we found something.”

“Great, shoot,” Dean said, snatching a piece of paper from the pages scattered over the table and flipping it over to the blank side.

“A guy in… Bruce!” It sounded like he was calling across the room. “I can’t read your handwriting! What’s the town?” There was a shuffling and some muffled calling and white noise that made Dean think people were moving around a big room.

“Hi,” Bruce’s voice took over. “There’s a man in Sidewinder, Colorado called Emmanuel. People contact him through his wife Daphne. There’s a guy on some website that says he’s the real deal. His name is… Mackey.”

Dean frowned. “Pete Mackey?”

“Uh, yeah. Says that this Emmanuel healed his blind eye. Do you know him?”

“He’s a hunter. I’ll call him and check, but that probably means this Emmanuel is clean; at least, he’s not a monster or anything. Otherwise Mackey would have stopped him. Can I get that number?”

Bruce read him a phone number and Dean scribbled it down. “Thanks.” There was more jumbled noise on the other end of the line.

“Steve says at least one of us is coming with you and wants to know if you want it to be Tony or someone you’re not related to.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open and he took a moment to shake his head and take another swig of beer. “How many of you are there working on this?”

“Um… All the Avengers except Thor? Plus Sam Wilson? And Rhodes? Tony pretty much put out a call to Assemble.”

“Wow.” He was a little overwhelmed; the last time they had this much help to fix one of their problems had been… never. It had only ever been him and Sam, or them and John Winchester, or Bobby, or one or two individuals at a time. A full support team, highly equipped and ready to do whatever it took to save his brother? That was new. “Thanks, but I can’t–”
“Steve also said that if you say none of us can come we’re all coming. Plus, I think this might be one of the first times he and Tony have whole-heartedly agreed about anything and it’s almost scary how determined they are.”

Dean sighed. “Fine. Steve should come in case we need manpower. Tell Tony-- is he listening? Tony, hey. Keep searching in case we get to Colorado and Emmanuel doesn’t pan out.”

“Got it.” Tony’s voice filtered back through, clear although he sounded like he was yelling from a distance and Jarvis was making it louder. More rustling, then Tony again, sounding as if he had come closer to the actual speaker. “We’ll send Steve out; by the time he gets cleared and makes it to Colorado and lands somewhere discreet you should be close. Can he ride with you after that?”

Dean nodded even though they couldn’t see him. “Yeah. We’ll get Emmanuel and then hopefully Sam. Then we’ll drop Emmanuel back off and head for… where are you guys? The Tower? And return your super soldier.”

“Listen, Dean.” Suddenly, Tony sounded even more serious, if that was even possible at this point. “Even if Emmanuel doesn’t work, get Sam anyway and bring him back to the Tower. We can keep and eye on him, use the medical stuff we have here, and you can stay here until…”

The “until” hung in the air. Dean knew what that meant: until they fixed this, or until Sam died.

He swallowed the knot in his throat. “Will do. Tell Steve to keep in touch when he lands. I’m headed out.”

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Dean pulled the Impala into the gas station parking lot and turned the big car around. He had barely stopped when the door opened and Steve Rogers slid in, looking very nonchalant with jeans, a t-shirt, and a jacket. “Ready?” Dean asked.

“Let’s go.”

They drove just down the street and pulled up to a rather plain looking house, neatly landscaped. Both surveyed it for a moment before Dean headed for the porch, Steve a few steps behind him as the hunter raised a hand and knocked. A man opened it and Dean looked him up and down once. He was about Dean and Steve’s height, although he was older, and had dark brown hair.


The dark haired man smiled at him. “Well, you found him. Daphne’s resting. If you don’t mind…” he gestured towards the porch.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Dean and Steve stepped back and Emmanuel moved outside onto the porch, closing the door behind him. Steve looked sideways as something caught his eye and through the gap in the windows saw a woman who was tied to a chair and gagged, panic in her eyes. He nudged Dean, who was looking at her too and they both whipped back around to see Emmanuel’s eye’s turn black as he grinned ferally. The demon -- probably not Emmanuel, Steve thought wildly -- grabbed the front of Dean’s shirt and threw him against the door. Steve took a step forward and reached back for the gun in his waistband but faster than any human the demon lashed out and punched him in the sternum, knocking the wind out of his lungs and knocking him back and almost off the porch.

The demon turned back to Dean. “You were saying, Dean?”

Dean half shrugged, looking pissed. “You know, I’d think twice. Didn’t your boss issue a hands off
The demon just laughed. “Please. What have you done for him lately? Roman’s head on a plate?” Dean looked away, answering that question. “No?” The man’s eyes flicked back to normal. “Whatever Emmanuel is, Crowley’s gonna want him-- a lot more than he wants you these days. And your friend, whoever he is,” he added, shooting a brief and disdainful look at Steve. “So…”

He started towards Dean, whose hands blurred as he stabbed forwards, impaling the man with the demon knife Steve had usually seen Sam use. The demon yelled and the red-orange flight flashed from his eyes and mouth as he died. Dean pushed the body away and down the front steps as he pulled out the knife, the demon rolling to land at the feet of--

Steve gasped. Because he had only seen him once in person, and then only briefly. But he had heard a lot about him from Sam and Dean, he had seen pictures from when he had showed up, bloody and unconscious, in Tony’s living room, and Steve knew that he had destroyed the wall in Sam’s mind before trying to play God and being overwhelmed by the Leviathans as a result of his pride.

Standing before them was Castiel.

But the way he was looking at the body lying at the foot of the steps… he looked concerned and confused and most certainly didn’t look like Castiel.

This was only confirmed as the man-- what had Sam said he was once called? Jimmy Novak?-- drew his eyes away from the body and up towards Dean but without signs of recognition. “What was that?” He asked.

Castiel-- or Emmanuel, apparently-- didn’t wait for an answer, rushing up the steps and around Dean to enter the house. Steve followed Dean the opposite direction, down the stairs, picking up the body of the demon and helping Dean move it onto the porch up against the railing, where it was hidden from view by the shrubbery in front. They trooped after Emmanuel to find him removing the woman’s gag and ropes, hands gentle.

“That creature hurt you,” Emmanuel said, his unique voice reminding Steve vividly of his-- Castiel’s-- dramatic appearance in the tower and the angelic power he had used to take out the demons before speaking briefly to the hunters and leaving.

The brown haired woman stood, standing very close to Emmanuel. “I’m okay. But, Emmanuel… They were looking for you.” The worry was evident in her voice.

“It’s okay,” he assured her before turning to Dean. “I’m Emmanuel.” He held out his hand and Dean shook it, eyes searching Emmanuel’s face.

“Dean. I’m Dean.” His voice was flat, but Steve could see the tension radiating out from his shoulders at having to introduce himself to his friend.

Castiel-- Emmanuel-- damn, Steve needed to get a handle on what they were calling him-- turned to Steve. “Steve,” the soldier introduced himself, reaching out to shake the angel’s hand.

“Thank you both for protecting my wife,” Emmanuel said and Dean’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“Your wife, right,” he replied, voice dropping a little, but maintaining a fairly even tone.

Emmanuel glanced out the window towards the front porch they had been on moments before. “I saw his face. His real face,” Emmanuel added, half asking, as if he was unsure if it was real or not and wanted a little more information.
“He was a demon,” Dean casually responded, as if it should be obvious.

“A demon walked the Earth.” Emmanuel murmured, looking a little awed and alarm bells were really starting to go off in Steve’s head because the man was looking less and less like Castiel by the second and Steve was starting to doubt the benefits of being here at all.

“Demons. Whackloads of them. You don’t know about...?” Dean cocked his head and Steve could see the expression that he was trying to hide, an expression that was all too familiar to him. It was something he saw in the mirror, something he felt on his own face every time he remembered Bucky, standing in the street and looking at him as if he was a stranger, every time his friend’s voice echoed in his ears, asking who the hell is Bucky? It was the final dawning realization on Dean’s face that no matter how much this man looked and sounded like Castiel, he was most definitely not Castiel in any way but appearance and voice.

“You saw the demon’s true face,” Daphne said to Emmanuel. “Emmanuel has very special gifts,” she added to Dean and Steve watched as Dean refocused.

“Yeah, I-- I’ve heard about… Emmanuel. That you can heal people up.”

“I seem to be able to help to a certain degree. What’s your issue?”

Steve and Emmanuel and Daphne watched as Dean’s face crumpled slightly, sinking into the mask of a man who was very, very desperate. “My brother.” Dean’s voice broke slightly, fear bleeding through the words. He looked down at the floor and then back up at Emmanuel, beseechingly. “Please.”

Shortly after, they were back in the car, Emmanuel now riding shotgun and Steve folded into the back. Steve couldn’t help but be glad that he had Tony and the resources of the tower at his beck and call because if they did get Sam and all had to drive back with with him and all of them in the car they would probably be pretty cramped.

Many, many hours later, space in the car was even tighter. And the situation was more awkward than ever. Steve had suffered in silence through the horribly weird conversation about Daphne finding Castiel, about Dean’s ‘friend’ who was now ‘gone’ who had sent his brother to the hospital. About how Emmanuel didn’t feel like a bad person. About how Dean was angry with ‘Cas’ for hurting his brother.

There had been the fast-paced and crazy five minutes when Emmanuel had waited in the car, Steve had walked away to call Tony and give him an update, and Dean had managed to kill three demons before returning with a woman he called Meg. Emmanuel had immediately pointed out that he was a demon and Steve could sense the large amounts of barely– barely– buried animosity between Dean and Meg– this seemed to be more of a “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” situation than anything else. She did seem to know, based on the variety of comments and Dean’s rolling eyes, that Emmanuel used to be Castiel. Steve was less than pleased to be riding in the back of the car with her, but he took it in stride with one hand on the gun tucked beside the seat. And they had kept driving, Dean continuously deflecting Meg’s less than subtle comments about Dean not telling Emmanuel everything.

Steve sighed mentally. They had been driving about eleven hours, stopping only for food and gas and sitting mostly in silence with the radio on. Only seven hours left.
The Impala finally rumbled to a stop in the parking lot of an Indiana hospital. The group clambered out of the car on top of the bluff, looking around. Steve frowned at the tableau in front of him; a number of people were standing around the entrance of the hospital. A man in a wheelchair, an orderly behind him. Two more men casually standing on the other side of the door.

“Oh, gracious,” Emmanuel said, eyes wide, the phrase almost comical coming from his low voice. Dean pulled out a pair of binoculars from somewhere, looking at the people.

“Damn it. Demons,” Meg added.

“All of them?” Steve asked.

Meg raised her eyebrows at him. “No grass growing under your feet.”

“How many of those knives do you have?” Emmanuel asked Dean, apparently ready to fight his way in.

Dean’s frown grew deeper. “Just the one,” he replied, raising the binoculars again.

Emmanuel tilted his head in Dean’s direction. “Well, then, forgive me, but what do we do?”

“Yeah, Dean,” Meg chimed in, staring at the hunter pointedly. “Got any other ideas how we could blast through that?”

Dean rolled his eyes and looked at Steve and Emmanuel. “Excuse us. Meg?” He jerked his head to the side.

“Oh for the love of…” she followed him off, Steve’s hearing letting him catch the conversation even while he stayed with Emmanuel.

“Sam’s in there. I know you’re enjoying the double dip with your old pal, but--”

“You think it’s that cut and dry? Really? You know what he did.” Dean’s voice was getting louder. “And you want to tell him and just hope that he takes it in stride? He could snap. He could… disappear. Who knows?”

Steve looked over at Emmanuel only to find that apparently he had been able to hear the entire conversation as well. The healer raised his own voice so that Dean and Meg could hear him. “I gather we know each other.”

“Just a dollop,” Meg added cheekily and Steve had to refrain from rolling his eyes.

“You can tell me. I’ll be fine.” Emmanuel assured.

Dean took a few quick steps back their way. “How do you know? You just met yourself. I’ve known you for years.”

“You’re an angel,” Meg told Emmanuel flat out. Steve rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“Really? Was that necessary?” He asked Meg, who just rolled her eyes at him.

“I’m sorry?” Emmanuel responded. “Is that a flirtation?”

“No, it’s a species. A very powerful one,” Steve responded. Apparently they were going to have this conversation right now and he wanted to get it over with so they could get back to saving Sam.
“They’re not lying. Okay?” Dean spoke back up. “That’s why you heal people. You don’t eat.” He shrugged a little. “I’m sure there’s more.”

Emmanuel looked confused, processing the information. “Why wouldn’t you tell me? Being an angel… it sounds pleasant.”

“It’s not.” That hung in the air for a moment before Dean added. “Trust me. It’s bloody, it’s corrupt. It’s not pleasant.”

Meg kept her eyes on Emmanuel. “He would know. You used to fight together.” She turned to look at Dean. “Bestest friends, actually.”

“We’re… friends?” The healer looked stunned and then his face fell further. “Am I Cas?” Dean’s eyes dropped and that was all the answer Emmanuel needed. “I -- I had no idea. I don’t remember you. I’m sorry.”

Steve could see the pain in Dean’s face as his best friend told him that he didn’t know who he was. Again, the words seemed to echo in the air. “I don’t remember you. I’m sorry.” Somehow, it seemed just as harsh as his own “Who the hell is Bucky?” even though the words were quiet and seemed sincere. Maybe because Emmanuel was here, standing in front of them, and because he was regretting not knowing Dean as much as Dean was probably hurting that Emmanuel didn’t know him.

Meg cut back in. “Look. You’ve got the juice. You can smite every demon in that lot.”

Emmanuel turned away from the other three, surveying the demons below for a long moment. “But I don’t remember how.”

Dean had apparently given in to the situation, stepping up beside Emmanuel. “It’s in there. I’m sure it’s just like ridin’ a bike.” He gave Emmanuel a small nod of encouragement.

Emmanuel immediately responded, “I don’t know how to do that either.” Dean seemed lost for words and unsure what to say next but Emmanuel preempted him by adding “All right. I’ll try.”

He started to walk down the hill, the others following at a distance. Steve pulled the gun, Dean had the knife in hand. “This ain’t gonna go well,” Dean muttered.

“I don’t know,” Meg mused. “I believe in the little tree topper.”

Steve rolled his eyes again. “We’ll see, I guess.”

Emmanuel walked up to the nearest demon, looking him dead in the eye.

“Hey, I know you,” the demon said, confused. “You’re dead!”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” Emmanuel responded, looking the demon up and down briefly before reaching out and grabbing the front of the demon’s shirt and pulling him close enough to put a hand on the demon’s forehead. The demon screamed, white light streaming from his face. Steve could just see Emmanuel’s face from his angle; his mouth was slightly parted but the rest of his expression seemed strangely blank, as if he was watching something nobody else could see. The two orderlies stepped towards Emmanuel, who reached out and smote them simultaneously.

“That’s my boy,” Meg said from next to Dean. The last demon tried to run, but Emmanuel vanished and reappeared in front of him.
“I don’t think running will save you,” he told him, before placing a hand on his forehead and killing him in the same burst of white-yellow light. The demon dropped to the ground and Emmanuel simply stood for a moment, his back to them and his shoulders high and tense. Steve, Dean, and Meg walked up behind him.

Meg smiled. “That was beautiful, Clarence.”

“Cas?” Dean asked cautiously. Desperately. Hopefully.

“I remember you,” Castiel -- for it truly was Castiel, now-- responded, turning to face Dean. “I remember everything.” An expression of dawning horror was beginning to form on his face. “What I did. What I became. Why didn’t you tell me?”

And there, thought Steve, was the difference between Bucky and Castiel; they were trying to tell Bucky, trying as hard as they could any time they even thought he was in the area; leaving notes, food, supplies with messages, trying to find him and tell him: You are James Buchanan Barnes.

Dean interrupted his reverie. “Because Sam is dying in there.”

The pain in Castiel’s eyes grew and he spit the next words at Dean. “Because of me. Everything. All these people. I shouldn’t be here.” The angel pushed through Dean and Meg, past Steve.

“Cas. Cas!” Dean pointed at Meg. “You stay here.” He looked at Steve. “Keep an eye on her.” He strode after Castiel.

Meg and Steve watched as the pair strode back up over the bluff, out of even Steve’s earshot. Meg looked up at him. “So… come here often?” She smiled, but it didn’t quite meet her eyes. Steve didn’t answer. This may have been a necessary partnership, but he didn’t like it one bit and he wasn’t about to start trusting her now. “Or not,” she added, tracking Dean and Castiel as they reappeared at the top of the hill. Steve didn’t know what had been said, but apparently an agreement had been reached because Castiel was still there and he was wearing the frayed and bloodstained trenchcoat that he used to wear. Halfway down the hill they stopped.

“Cas?” Dean asked, confused.

“Something’s happening to Sam,” Castiel replied before popping out of existence. Dean swore and started running, Steve right with him, heading for the doors. Steve reached them first and found them unlocked, to his surprise. He yanked it open and silently slid into the building. They quietly slinked down several hallways, Dean taking the lead. A few moments of avoiding nurses later and Dean entered a room, just in time to see Castiel stand from where he was kneeling next to a low bed where he had evidently just deposited Sam.

Steve missed the first half of the conversation, struck as he was by Sam’s appearance. The man was a mess; half healed cuts and bruises littered his face, probably from the car accident. He looked thinner than Steve remembered. Muscles stood out just as strongly but there didn’t look like there was any fat reserve covering them. He thought of the wedding, Sam dropping his sandwich and shoving it away, convinced it was full of bugs. Dean having to make him a different sandwich and coaxing him into eating half of it one tiny bite at a time. Sam probably hadn’t been eating very much, if at all.

And then, of course, there was the exhaustion. Sam looked gaunt with it, his skin sallow and unhealthy looking from days without rest. Even now, as he sat on the bed, his eyes didn’t close, just hovered at half mast, looking slightly dazed and empty. The white hospital scrubs didn’t help either, just added to his pallor and emphasizing the bruises and scrapes, the shadow of a beard on his face.
and the bags under his eyes.

Steve tuned back in.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Castiel looked even more troubled, eyeing Sam on the bed. “I mean there’s nothing left to rebuild.”

“Why not?” Dean demanded.

“Why not?” Steve echoed.

“Because it crumbled.” Castiel looked straight at Dean. “The pieces got crushed to dust by whatever’s happening inside his head right now.”

Dean’s shoulders grew more tense. “So you’re saying there’s nothing?” His voice was thick. “That he’s gonna be like this until his candle blows out?”

“I’m sorry.” Castiel closed his eyes. “This isn’t a problem I can make disappear.” He looked at Dean, who was watching his brother on the bed, despair dripping from his face. “You know that.”

There was a long moment as they all watched Sam, watched as his breathing grew faster and then slowed down again. Then Castiel’s head lifted a little. “But I may be able to shift it.”

“Shift?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, it would get Sam back on his feet,” Castiel answered, stepping towards the bed and rolling up his sleeves with purpose. He sat on the low bed, close to Sam’s head, as Sam watched him with visible terror. “It’s better this way.” He glanced up at Dean. “I’ll be fine.”

Dean took an abortive half step forwards. “Wait, Cas, what’re you doing?”

Castiel ignored him. “Now Sam, this may hurt.” The angel took a deep breath. “And if I can’t tell you again, I’m sorry I ever did this to you.”

He reached out and placed his palm on Sam’s forehead, just as he had to the exorcised demons. Sam groaned and Steve took a step of his own towards the bed, stopping as Sam’s eyes and face lit up red. The red began to spread and travel, spirling up Castiel’s arm in a blood-vein pattern and through his neck and face, his own eyes turning red. Sam gasped suddenly and Castiel released him, swaying.

“Sam?” Dean asked immediately, voice full of fear and concern. Rushing around the bed to the other side.

“Dean?” Sam gasped again, shoving himself backwards against the iron headboard.

“Sam!” Dean reached for Sam’s shoulder.

“Cas? Cas is that you?” Sam asked, confused.

Castiel shoved himself backwards off the bed. Steve started to steady him but the angel flinched and backed away, hitting the wall. “Dean, what…?” Sam pushed himself up further and then swayed a little. “Woah.”

“Easy, easy there.” Dean looked over his shoulder at Steve. “Can you find a wheelchair?” Steve nodded and turned on his heel. “Steve?” Dean added.
“Yeah?” Steve asked, one hand on the doorknob.

“I hate to even ask, but… can the Impala fit in that jet of yours?”

It took an hour. Sam had been out of it since Castiel had ‘taken his crazy,’ as Dean called it, half asleep in the bed but still sitting up, apparently unwilling to sleep in the room he had spent the last two days in, but so exhausted he could barely fight it anymore.

Steve had finally located a wheelchair and although he had to knock out a night guard who looked very put out that there were strangers roaming the hospital, eventually got the chair back to the room. He found Dean finishing what looked like a very serious conversation with Meg, who had reappeared, a long silver knife in hand.

“-- call me if anything happens. We’ll come back and check in as soon as Sam’s good to travel.” Meg nodded and smirked a little at Dean before holding out her hand in what looked like a test; Dean’s jaw clenched a little more but reached out and shook.

“Trust me, Dean. I’ll keep a close eye on your friend. Besides, all the other demons who know about Clarence are dead.”

Dean swallowed hard and turned away from Castiel, who had, at some point, curled himself up in the small chair by the bed, eyes closed. Steve finished unfolding the wheelchair and raised his eyebrows. “Plan?”

“Cas is staying here.” Dean said definitely and Steve didn’t argue; they couldn’t take care of Castiel at the tower, it wasn’t safe for any of them. And Meg was right, as much as he hated to admit it; everyone who had know about Castiel was either in the room, in the Avengers, or dead. “Meg is going to convince them that Castiel has always been here; we’ll get Tony to change the computers to match. Meg will also stay here to keep an eye on him.” Steve didn’t like it. But Dean was right.

“And right now?” Steve asked.

“We’re going to take Sam to the Impala, take the Impala to your jet, and fly--” the hand that wasn’t back on Sam’s shoulder squeezed into a fist “-- all of us back to the Tower so Sam and I can sleep and we can feed Sam up some.”

“Sounds good,” Steve agreed. “Natasha’s flying, she’s bringing the jet now. She’ll be landing in a field about a mile away in fifteen minutes, so that would be a good time to be out of here.”

Dean nodded and they had begun the arduous process of loading all six foot four of half awake, very shaky, barely functioning Sam Winchester into the wheelchair. It had taken them nearly ten minutes. Just after they finally got his feet to stay on the footrests, he had reached out and latched onto Dean’s wrist. Five minutes later they had said their goodbyes to a unresponsive Castiel, Meg had given them a little half-salute, and Steve had pushed Sam out of the hospital since Sam was still clinging onto Dean’s wrist.

They managed to load him into the back seat of the Impala for the short drive by nature of Steve holding onto Sam by his armpits and sliding himself and Sam backwards into the vehicle. Dean slammed the door behind them and Steve directed Dean to the field just out of town where the quinjet was waiting, engines thrumming quietly. As soon as the headlights flashed across it, the bay door began to lower.

Dean swore softly a few times with his foot on the brakes before driving up the ramp. He turned the
car off as soon as he was sure they were in and then got out, walking around the car once and looking at the walls as the bay door closed. “If anything happens to my car, I will be so pissed,” he called to Natasha.

“No promises,” she responded dryly and they slowly rose into the air. Steve saw Dean take two short breaths. So not just concern about the car then.

“No fan of flying?” Steve asked as Dean opened the door and started pulling on Sam’s legs; Sam was still fighting sleep but it was taking its toll; he was dead weight. Steve slid himself forwards, Sam leaning on his chest, a solid mass. It took almost as much work as getting him into the wheelchair but they managed to wrangle him onto one of the benches that lined one wall of the jet, Steve wrapping a padded strap over his chest to make sure that he didn’t slide off. Dean sat next to Sam’s head.

“No,” he answered tightly. “Why do you think we have the car? I’ve flown twice in the last ten years; remember those planes that kept going down around twenty minutes or whatever into the flight? That was a demon. We took the last flight to gank it and it was terrible.” Dean seemed to contemplate the straps around him for a moment, then started buckling himself in.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Natasha called. “We’re only about twenty five minutes out, now.”

“Do they know we’re coming?” Dean asked.

Steve nodded. “I called Tony while I was getting the wheelchair. Since Sam seems okay medical-wise besides being exhausted and probably starving, everyone’s agreed that he probably doesn’t need to go to medical right away. Tony’s set up your rooms so he can get some actual sleep as soon as we get there.”

Dean nodded. “Thank god.”

“If you give one of us the keys, Natasha will land the jet in Central Park and we’ll bring it back to the Tower for you before we return the jet to the helicarrier.”

It took Dean a second to get over the fact that Natasha was going to land the Avengers jet in Central Park to comprehend the rest of the sentence, then he nodded. “I owe Tony a drive, anyway. Might as well give him this one at least.”

Dean shed his jacket as Sam shivered in the cool air of the jet, draping the worn leather over his brother. They sat quietly, Dean watching Sam’s chest rise and fall, hitching occasionally as the younger hunter yanked himself back into full consciousness. His eyes roved around the room as if searching for someone, but he didn’t seem to be finding anyone or focusing very well. To Dean’s relief, Natasha didn’t ask for details; in that moment he felt just as tired as Sam looked.

Twenty two minutes later, the jet slowed, the lights of New York city bright below them. They landed smoothly on the suspended pad and the bay doors opened to reveal the remaining Avengers except Thor along with Pepper anxiously waiting for them. Dean let out a huff of relief as the engines powered down to a more sedate hum and the door locked open.

Bruce hurried forwards with a gurney as Steve unbuckled the strap that was keeping Sam from falling and Dean touched his brother’s shoulder. “Just a couple more minutes, Sam.” He raised his eyebrows at Bruce.

“I figured it would be faster than a wheelchair. He can just sit or lie or whatever on it and we’ll get him to the bedroom,” Dean nodded and reached out to help prop Sam up as his wobbly brother
swayed into a half sitting position, pulling the slipping jacket up over his shoulders.

“One, two, three,” Steve said, taking Sam’s other arm and assisting Dean as he pulled Sam to his feet and lowered him back onto the gurney.

“Dean?” Sam asked, voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah, Sammy?” Dean replied, one hand flitting out involuntarily to touch Sam’s face. Sam’s eyelids were fluttering open and closed again, the Winchester still fighting the sleep he desperately needed.

“Dean?” He repeated.

Dean rolled his eyes fondly. “Yeah, Sammy,” he responded again, the barest bones of a smile touching his lips.

They carefully moved out of the jet, Bruce and Steve on either end of the gurney and Dean in the middle, keeping Sam balanced and saying some variation of “Yeah, Sammy” every few seconds when Sam said his name. Dean gave Tony a wave in between answers and tossed him the Impala keys. “Bring her back in one piece and we’ll go out in a few days to see what she can really do.” Tony’s eyes lit up and he gave Dean a half salute.

“Next stop, Central Park,” he said. “But I want all the details when I get back.” Tony trotted up the ramp into the jet, Natasha firing the engine back up. The rest followed after the gurney, forming a quiet parade broken by quiet chatter.

“He probably doesn’t need an IV,” Bruce was saying when Dean started paying attention to him again. “They would have kept him hydrated even if he wasn’t really eating. We’ll wake him after he’s had at least a little sleep and make him eat and drink something.” Dean nodded.

“Dean?”

“Yeah, Sam,” Dean responded automatically. He stepped half to the side for a moment so that they could fit through the door.

“Dean!” Sam sounded panicked to find that Dean was no longer by his side and Dean squeezed hurriedly into the room behind Steve.

“I’m here, Sammy,” he said yet again. Steve switched sides of the gurney and he and Dean began to move Sam from the gurney to the bed.

“Dean,” someone quietly called and he almost responded “Hey, Sam,” automatically before realizing that it was Pepper, holding out a pair of sweatpants and a soft t-shirt. “Thanks,” he said instead. Bruce knelt and started pulling off the soft shoes Sam was wearing and the room vacated slightly as the two helped Sam change clothing.

“Dean,” Sam whispered. “He’s gone.”

Dean’s heart was in his throat.

“Lucifer?” he asked.

“He’s gone.”

It felt as if a tidal wave of—everything: hope, relief, frustration about Cas, exhaustion—was crashing
over him. It had worked. Lucifer was gone. Sam was going to be okay. Castiel had taken his place. His throat seemed to be the size of a drinking straw and answering was hard; there were so many conflicting emotions overwhelming him right then. But he managed.

“Yeah, Sammy. He’s gone. Everything’s going to be fine.” He finished pulling Sam’s shirt down and grabbed the corner of the blankets. “Why don’t you get some sleep, okay? I’ll come check on you in a little bit.”

Sam slid under the light covers and Dean pulled them up to his shoulders. “Stop fighting it and go to sleep, Sam.”

“He’s gone, Dean,” Sam mumbled one more time, before burying his face in the pillow and falling asleep almost immediately, breathing evening out into a slow, deep, rhythm.

Dean stood, looking around to realize that the room was now empty, Bruce apparently having taken the gurney and shooed everyone out. It was the same as he remembered, lightly decorated, tasteful lighting and accent colors. He smiled, a real smile; there, a foot away from Sam’s head, was a small framed photo of Tony, Pepper, Sam, and Dean from Christmas. They were lounging on the couch, Sam on the floor leaning against the arm, Pepper squished between Tony and Dean. The hunter reached out and adjusted it, angling it so Sam would be able to see it when he woke up. “Keep an eye on him for me, Jarvis?” He asked, standing and picking up his jacket.

“Of course, Mr Winchester.”

Dean stood in the doorway for a second, watching his brother sleep peacefully in the safety of the Tower. Then he turned out the lights and headed down the hall to the open living space where he could hear the clink of glasses and quiet discussion.

Pepper stood the moment he came into the room and crossed over, meeting him in the middle and wrapping her arms around him tightly. Dean reciprocated, letting his head rest on hers and closing his eyes for a second, just reveling in the feeling of another person. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Pepper responded softly, pulling away and reaching up to adjust his collar.

“Coffee?” Clint offered from behind her. “It’s not caffeinated. You should probably get some sleep soon, too. How long has it been since you slept?”

“Probably about forty eight hours,” Dean responded. “And yes to the coffee.”

“Irish?” Clint asked.

“Yeah.” Dean collapsed into a chair and accepted the spiked drink, taking a grateful sip before letting his shoulders consciously relax.

The elevator dinged behind him and he let his head flop backwards to see Tony walk out, carrying two duffel bags that Dean recognized as his own and Sam’s. He headed over and set them on the floor next to Dean’s chair. “Keys are in yours. Nice drive.” Tony grinned.

“Better believe it,” Dean agreed, lifting his cup and taking another long drink. “Thanks.”

He looked around; Pepper was on the short sofa and Tony flopped next to her, Clint was sprawled over another armchair, and Bruce was sitting with a cup of tea in the chair across from Dean. “Where’s Steve?” Dean asked.

“Went to get some sleep,” Bruce told him. “Are you hungry, by the way?
Dean shrugged. “Not bad. We stopped twice on the way back from Colorado and got some snacks so I’m okay.” He hesitated, then asked a question that had been niggling at him ever since he had seen Steve’s face when Castiel–Emmanuel–had said he didn’t know Dean. “How long has Steve been looking for his friend? Bucky?”

“Coming up on two years, now?” Tony responded. “Why?”

Dean took a deep breath, took a drink of coffee, and launched into the story. About how Emmanuel had been Castiel, about how he had washed up and been found, how he hadn’t recognized Dean.

“Anyway, someone who’s better than I am at the whole touchy-feely crap might want to talk to him. He was like a kicked puppy when Cas apologized for not recognizing me.”

“Natasha can,” Clint said. “She’s good with Steve. And she was there when the Winter Soldier crap went down. But finish the story.”

So Dean finished the story, talking about Castiel ‘shifting’ something in Sam’s noggin, how the red had gone into Cas, how he had immediately started taking on some of Sam’s symptoms and how he and Steve had gotten Sam to the car.

When he finished, he drained his cup and they sat quietly for a moment before Bruce asked the million dollar question. “So is it gone? Is Sam better?”

“I don’t know,” Dean said. “He seemed better. And just before he went to sleep–” Dean pointed down the hall where Sam was in dreamland “-- he told me that Lucifer was gone. But I don’t know if Castiel actually took the memories or…” Dean trailed off. It was all so tenuous. “I know Sam’s here and sleeping for the first time in, like, ten days. So that’s something.”

“Speaking of sleeping, you should get some too.” Pepper stood and started collecting coffee cups. “We can talk more later.”

Dean let out a deep breath, sinking back into the chair. “Probably a good idea. Wake me up if there are problems.”

He stood, snagging the straps of their duffle bags as he went and headed down the hall, passing his own room to peek in on Sam (still safely asleep) before backtracking and dropping both bags next to his bed. Dean stripped down to his boxers and undershirt, dropping the Samulet onto the bedside table and leaving everything else in a pile on the floor before turning out the lights and letting himself relax for the first time in days.

Sam was okay. And they would find a way to save Cas.

It was only minutes before Dean was asleep.

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Dean woke up the next morning to Jarvis slowly polarizing his window and letting in the bright, late spring sun. He yawned and stretched, rolling over to look at the bedside table only to find a picture of his family (accompanied by a burst of warm emotion that was unusual for him immediately after waking up) and no clock.

“What time is it, Jarvis?” He asked the room, flipping to the other side of the bed and shoving back the covers. His clothing that he had hastily stripped off the previous night was gone, replaced by a new t-shirt and a clean pair of jeans, pack of boxers, and pair of socks.

“It is ten thirty-eight in the morning. Mrs Potts-Stark did not want to go through your bags but notes that if you sort through your belongings and leave the clothing you would like laundered by the
closet, she will have them taken care of. Mr Winchester the younger has not yet woken, although Doctor Banner is beginning to make noises about waking both of you up to eat and to check Mr Winchester’s mental state.”

The last phrase startled Dean’s brain into action, clearing away a little of the early morning fuzz. “Okay. I’ll clean up, take care of the clothing, and then go talk to Bruce about waking Sam up.”

“As you wish, Mr Winchester.”

Dean headed to the attached bathroom, opening the door to find that Jarvis was already running the shower and clouds of steam were starting to fill the air. He shook his head; he would probably never get used to an artificial intelligence helping around the building. Stretching again, Dean pulled off his dirty clothing and stepped into the shower, using the extensive hot water and unlimited soap to scrub the smell of travel and battle and hospital off of his skin.

By the time Dean emerged he was cleaner than he had been for days. He pulled on the new clothing and took a few moments to sort through their bags, piling the dirty laundry in front of the closet, per Pepper’s directions. “Okay, Dean,” he muttered. “Face the day.”

He headed down the hall to the left, looking in at Sam. Blankets tangled around his brother’s legs and arms wrapped around a pillow; Dean closed his eyes for a second, listening to his brother breath slowly. It was quiet and smooth and deep and Dean relaxed, only to jump out of his skin a moment later as someone touched his shoulder. He whipped around, reaching for a weapon that wasn’t there.

“Woah!” Tony took a step back and raised his hands in the air. Dean slumped back against the doorway, taking in Tony’s appearance: disheveled hair, a smudge of engine oil on his cheek, a dirty tank top clearly showing the edges of scar tissue radiating out from where the arc reactor used to be.

“Sorry,” Dean apologized.

“Nah, it’s my fault. Should have warned you.” Tony stepped back up to Dean and put a hand on his shoulder, leaning forwards and peering around Dean’s shoulder into the room to see Sam still asleep. They stood for a moment before Dean nodded sharply and turned around.

“Let’s go eat.” The hunter and the mechanic walked down to the kitchen, following the smell of coffee that was still percolating despite the late hour of the day.

“Hey,” Bruce greeted from the island, sitting with a tablet and some paperwork spread in front of him and a mug of coffee and an empty plate at hand. “There’s breakfast casserole. And coffee.”

“Aw, yes.” Dean pulled out two plates, cutting two generous slices of the egg dish and handing one plate to Tony, who passed over a cup of coffee in return. Dean slid into the seat across from Bruce, who pushed aside his work and accepted a coffee refill from Tony.

“And how are you this morning, Dean?” Bruce asked. Tony smirked.

“What?” the physicist demanded.

“You’ve got just a little bit of your doctor voice on.” The genius said, pointing his fork at Bruce before scooping up another mouthful of eggs.

“I do not,” Bruce rolled his eyes. “Not a real doctor, remember?”

Dean smiled into his coffee cup as the pair argued back and forth before the banter petered out as both of them took a drink at the same time. “I’m good,” Dean answered Bruce’s original question.
“Better. I think this is the most I’ve slept in one night in… like, years.”

Bruce nodded. “You should work on that.”

Dean looked at him incredulously; was he serious? He was a hunter-- a sleep schedule that was totally FUBAR came with the gig. Then Bruce grinned. Dean crumpled up his napkin and threw it at him. “Like that’s gonna happen.”

“It should,” Bruce argued, still smiling. “Speaking of, is Sam still asleep?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Wrapped up in the blankets and sleeping like a baby. Finally.” He rubbed one hand down of his face. “It’s been a hell of a few weeks.”

“I imagine so.” Bruce looked at his watch. “We should probably wake him up soon and make him eat and drink something and then he can go back to sleep.”

Dean nodded; as much as he hated the idea of waking up Sam from his much needed sleep, he had been around the block enough times to know that letting Sam get dehydrated would only make things worse. Besides, he had seen his brother eat precious little in the last week and a half and not much in the few days before that either. He had helped move Sam from bed to chair to car to gurney to bed again and could tell that Sam had lost weight in that time of not eating, losing not just the thin layer of fat but also muscle and probably bone density. “Okay. I’ll get him after I’m done eating.” He took a few more mouthfuls. “Where is everyone?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s Tuesday. Pepper’s downstairs working, Natasha, Clint, and Steve are out recruiting and training for New SHIELD, Thor’s on Asgard.”

“Why aren’t you at work?”

Tony faux-glared at him. “I am. My job today is taking care of you two.”

Dean frowned at the blatant declaration that he and Sam needed to be taken care of but Bruce cut in, soothing his pride. “Tony and I work in our own labs on Tuesday,” the physicist explained. “So our schedules are pretty flexible. We get up early, have brunch around now, and then head back to the labs.”

Their late breakfast (or early lunch) finished with Dean filling Tony in on details; their last few hunts before everything had fallen to pieces, Sam slowly losing sleep, how he had woken up that first terrible night with Sam gone and his cell phone ringing, answering it but instead of Sam it was the hospital, telling him his brother had been hit by a car and had quite a lot of drugs in his system and that he would not be released from the hospital.

Finally, Dean finished scraping his plate clean and stood. “Bruce, if you want to figure out what he should eat, I’ll go get Sam.” Bruce nodded and got up, crossing to the fridge and starting to pull out items. Tony took Dean’s plate and his own and set them in the sink before following Dean down the hall back to their bedrooms.

Dean pushed open the cracked door the rest of the way. “Jarvis, lights at half, please,” he requested and Jarvis began to slowly bring the lights up, half of the light coming from the ceiling fixture and half from the tint of the windows fading slightly. Tony stayed in the doorway, watching as Dean crossed to the room and sat on the bed near Sam’s thighs, fairly far from his brother’s face, giving him plenty of space. “Sam. Sammy, wake up, kid.” Dean reached out and gently but firmly gave Sam’s hip a shove. “Wake up, Sam.”

Sam mumbled something and rolled over in the bed, Tony smiling as one hand flailed free of the
pillow and shoved at Dean’s hand. “None of that, Sam. Get up or I’ll bring back the ice cubes in the
bed.” Dean wrangled the rest of the blankets off of Sam, who made another incoherently sleepy
noise but stretched and cracked his eyes open, taking a moment to observe his surroundings. His
forehead creased as he took in the white and blue walls, the neat and stylish furniture. Dean and
Tony both saw his eyes hover for a moment on the photograph before flying back to Dean. “Hey,
Sleeping Beauty.” There was worry in Dean’s eyes, but the corners of his mouth turned up.
“Welcome back to the land of the living.”

“Dean?” Sam asked. “Wazzgoingon?” He slowly pushed himself up and coughed once, voice
rasping a little bit. “Are we in the Tower?”

“Yeah. Do you remember anything?” Dean replied with a question of his own.

It gets hazier, the more recent.” His eyes suddenly widened. “Lucifer.”

The small smile Dean had been sporting dropped from his face and the creases of his forehead
depthened as they watched Sam sweep the room with his eyes, just as he had on the plane, and then
look back at Tony and Dean. “Is he there?” Dean asked.

Sam shook his head. “He’s gone,” he responded, awe creeping into his voice. “How-- what
happened?”

“We fixed it,” Dean said. “Back up. Did you just say you ganked a ghost? In the hospital?”

Tony cut in. “Stories later. Sam, are you hungry?”

Sam’s stomach growled so loudly Tony could hear it from the doorway and the younger man’s neck
flushed. “I guess that answers that. I don’t think I’ve really eaten much lately.”

“Yeah, you’ve lost weight,” Dean confirmed, standing. “Let’s get you down to the kitchen and see
what Bruce has determined is Sam-worthy. ” He reached out and took Sam’s arm, helping him to his
feet and keeping him balanced as he swayed.

“Woah,” Sam said, closing his eyes tightly and then opening them again; they seemed unfocused for
a moment, staring into space.

“Easy.” Tony swooped in to Sam’s other side, reaching out and up to Sam’s shoulder. “Your blood
pressure is probably really low. It’ll get better after you eat and then sleep some more.”

Between the three of them, they managed to keep Sam balanced and standing as they headed out of
the room and down to the kitchen. “Bruce? Hey,” Sam greeted the scientist, who was starting to
assemble a plate of food for him.

“Morning, Sam,” Bruce replied, putting a jug of something back into the fridge as Sam pulled the
chair out and Dean hovered while Sam sat himself down. “Hungry?”

Sam took a deep breath. “Yeah, starving. It’s been -- a while. Since I’ve eaten.”

Bruce nodded sympathetically and slid a plate towards Sam. It didn’t look very exciting to Dean;
some scrambled egg, a small pile of sliced apple, a few slices of bacon. A glass of orange juice and
another of water. “Start with that,” the doctor advised. “Go slow. We’ll see about more after that.”

Dean could tell that Sam was trying to take it slowly, but he was still eating much more quickly than
normal, shoveling forkfuls of egg into his mouth. It only took him a few minutes to clear the plate,
which he then stared at mournfully. However, the drooping of his eyelids gave him away.

“More sleep for you, Sam. Then more food.”

Sam didn’t even argue, just carefully stood and let Dean shore him up as he padded back to the room.

The cycle repeated; they let Sam sleep for a few more hours and then woke him up and fed him something. The next time Dean woke him, about five in the afternoon, Sam took a shower before going back to sleep. Nobody else had been around except Dean-- there had been a meeting called at SHIELD and Pepper was still at work. The third time, around ten that night, Bruce let him have seconds of the pasta and meat marinara along with a protein shake. Steve had been there eating again as well-- Sam forgot how much the soldier ate. He hadn’t said anything about Sam’s mental situation, but from what Sam had picked up from Dean, the soldier had helped retrieve him from the hospital so he probably knew all about it. Sam hadn’t seen anyone else who lived or frequently visited the Tower-- they were either working, sleeping, or purposefully giving him space to recover; Sam suspected it was a combination of all three, depending on the person. (He was also fairly sure he had heard a faint “ew” from the air vent when Bruce had managed to convince Sam to include spinach in the protein shake. So that meant at least Clint was around and where Clint was, that generally meant Natasha, too.)

The second morning, Sam woke up on his own. It had been a little more than thirty-nine hours since he had been saved by Castiel. He looked around the room without Dean or someone else there for the first time, smiling at the family photo and nudging the bag of his belongs that Dean had dropped in his room a little more firmly onto the chair. Sam stretched and then headed for his bag and the bathroom, feeling better than he had in weeks. He was awake of his own accord, he was hungry but not in a starving way, and it was quiet.

He showered and shaved, careful not to catch the just-healed scrapes on his face with the blade, and dressed in jeans and one of his shirts that had apparently been laundered since they had arrived. Real clothing, not sweats.

Sam left his room, feet padding softly down the hall to where he could hear a few voices and someone whistling something fairly tunelessly that may have been “Cheer Up, Charlie” from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. He emerged from the hallway to find Steve (the whistling one) making pancakes, Pepper sitting at the table with Tony, both with half-full plates and a tablet between them. Dean was rummaging in the fridge, calling items over his shoulder to Bruce who was manning a blender full of fruit.

“Morning,” Sam said, drawing all eyes to him. There was a moment of silence before grins broke out all around.

“Morning, Sam. Good to see you up.” Pepper smiled from the table, setting down the tablet and standing to smooth her skirt before meeting him in the middle to give him a hug. Sam returned it; it was incredible to see them all without having to worry about watching them suddenly die in front of him, Lucifer standing and laughing. He followed her back to the table and sat across from Tony, whose hair was sticking up in all directions just as it had been whenever it was that Sam had last seen him… a few hours ago? A few dozen hours ago?

“Um,” Sam started as Steve slid a plate with a few pancakes across the table to him. “How long was I asleep?” He started to butter a pancake. “Actually, when did you come get me? How long was I in the hospital?” He thought back, but his memories were disjointed --Lucifer taunting him with a
megaphone from his seat on the table, being wheeled down a hallway, lights flashing above him at regular intervals, trying to close his eyes and jumping as firecrackers hit the ground behind him, Lucifer in an exaggerated doctor’s get up, poking and prodding him with sharp things-- and he couldn’t get a good read on time.

Dean, who had been alternating the last few second between looking Sam up and down and pulling things out of the fridge for Bruce, who was cutting them up to add to the magically silent blender, closed the fridge. He came back over to the table, taking a few more pancakes and adding them to an empty plate that already had traces of syrup and drowned them with more, and pointed his fork at Sam. “Eat. Bruce has cleared you to eat pretty much as much as you want as long as you’re careful.”

“And you get plenty of protein and calcium and vitamins,” Bruce added, starting the blender. “You need to gain back some weight.”

“Answer the question, Dean. Wha’ ‘appened?” Sam asked, muttering the last few words around a mouthful of food and nodding in thanks to Steve, who set a glass of juice in front of him. Now that he was finally totally awake, he wanted some explanations.

Dean grimaced. “Cas happened.”

Sam’s eyes went wide. “Cas is alive?”

Dean nodded and started to explain, with occasional interjections from Steve, who had indeed been part of Sam’s rescue squad, as Sam thought. Sam finished eating, the food settling into his stomach, leaving him pleasantly full as he sipped from the smoothie Bruce had made him.

“I don’t remember any of that,” he said when Dean finished.

“What do you remember?” Dean asked, spearing a piece of pancake fiercely. Sam could tell he knew that the decision to leave Castiel in the hands of Meg and the hospital staff was the right one, but that didn’t mean Dean liked it.

“It’s a little shaky, especially the end. Um… Lucifer was there pretty much the whole time. I didn’t sleep. I didn’t eat very much. Oh, I ganked a ghost.” Dean looked up from his plate and both Steve and Bruce had the same raised eyebrows.

“You killed a ghost in a mental hospital while the Devil followed you around?” The soldier asked.

“Yeah?” Sam said. “Old habits die hard. There was a girl, her name was Marin. She was a teenager, in there because they thought she had set a fire and tried to kill herself,” Sam remembered. “She stole a candy bar and brought it to me. Twice, I think. It’s a little fuzzy. I found out that her brother had died. Standard stuff. He told her to kill herself, but she didn’t and he started the fire.”

Dean’s forehead wrinkled. “You said something about killing a ghost yesterday, but didn’t explain. How’d you…? I mean, I’m pretty sure they didn’t let you leave the hospital and go dig up a graveyard or anything, so…”

Sam shrugged. “Marin said he was cremated, but she had a bracelet that he’d made for her and bled on. She stole a lighter, I told her what to do, she made the salt circle because when I made it… um. Lucifer kept breaking the line. And then we burned the bracelet and that was that.” Sam looked into the depths of his smoothie. “I wonder what will happen to her.”

“Rule number one, Sam.” Dean was watching him with a mixture of pride and sadness. “But at least you took care of the crazy ghost part. She can do the rest, I’m sure.”
“She sounds nice,” Bruce agreed. “She brought you a chocolate bar?”

Sam nodded. “She was nice. Didn’t deserve to be there.”

“Neither did you, Sam,” Dean pointed out.

“Neither does Cas,” Sam countered.

Dean looked down. “No, he doesn’t. But I think… he saw it as penance. Or something.”

Steve nodded agreement. “He was acting like it was payment for what he did to you. Bringing down the wall. I’m not saying he was or wasn’t right to punish himself, but he wanted to save you, Sam.”

“And speaking of the wall, how’s your head, Sam?” Bruce asked.

“Uh, good, I guess.” Sam said. “I mean, I can remember what it was like the last couple months and I can remember when I was soulless--” he grimaced “-- and I can remember…” his voice wavered a little but he pushed on. “And I remember the Cage.”

Dean frowned. It was clear he had hoped that Sam wouldn’t be forever remembering his time in Hell the way Dean did. “All of it?”

“Yeah. Michael and Lucifer and me. A really long time.” Sam shrugged. “But it’s like regular memories. Like before,” Sam struggled to explain. “I couldn’t control them and I was remembering all the time and it was really overwhelming. Like there were tens and hundreds of years of memories coming back all at once so I didn’t have any recall control and then Lucifer showed up--”

“As a sort of manifestation of them.” Bruce caught on. “There was too much for you to deal with, so your brain made a sort of avatar to hold the memories but it wouldn’t work indefinitely which is why you were going crazy.”

Sam nodded. “And now, it’s like I have all the memories and they’re there, and if I wanted to, I could recall them normally, the same way I could remember what happened on a case or when we were kids and I jumped off the shed.”

“So Castiel put up a different wall?” Steve asked. “Wasn’t that what you had before?”

“No,” Bruce said. “If Castiel had put up a new wall, Sam wouldn’t be able to remember anything. I think it’s maybe more like Castiel healed Sam enough to put the memories in the proper places and use them normally even though there are so many of them. Right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Seems so.”

“Wait,” Dean cut in suddenly. “Sorry, but-- you and Michael and Lucifer?” A little spark of hope caught in Dean’s eye. “Not Adam?”

“No,” Sam replied. “I wondered the same thing at first-- I mean, it was him, Adam, I mean, that Michael was possessing, but I think it was because of Castiel.”

“How?”

“Cas motoloved Michael while he was using Adam as a vessel, remember? And then Michael reformed. I think when Cas lit him up, Adam died. Then when Michael came back, it was just Michael looking like Adam but Adam wasn’t there.”

Dean slowly nodded. “That makes a weird sort of sense. I guess--” Dean frowned into his coffee cup
“I guess we may never know, but do you think that Cas...do you think Jimmy Novak is still there? I mean, Michael disintegrated him, too. So when Cas reformed, he would have reformed as Castiel without Jimmy.”

Steve looked like his head was starting to hurt. “Who’s Adam?”

Dean’s hand clenched around the handle of his coffee cup. “Our half brother. Dad couldn’t keep it in his pants,” he added bitterly.

“He called us,” Sam said. “Years ago, now, because something had taken his mom. Bruce would remember.” The younger hunter gestured at the insides of his wrists, where Steve could just see the very faint outlines of thin, faded, scars running the length of his forearms. He remembered Bruce asking how they had healed the first time the rest of the Avengers had met the Winchesters brothers but had never asked how they happened. “Turns out it was actually a pair of ghouls. Adam really was our brother, but they had killed him and his mom to get revenge on our dad for killing their ghoul parent.”

“Then during the Apocalypse, the angels brought back Adam. As a fix.” Dean took a swallow of coffee and set the mug down none too gently. “I wouldn’t say yes so they were going to have Adam do it instead. Michael possessed him and until now I thought he would have been in the cage with Sam and company. It sounds bad but--” Dean’s voice grew more rough. “--I tried not to think about it too much because there wasn’t anything I could do to get him out. But I guess he was never in there, so. That’s something.”

A third Winchester brother. Steve couldn’t even imagine. The two he knew fit together like a matched pair. There wasn’t room for anyone else. He wondered if Adam had been more like Sam or Dean, or some combination of the two… or someone else entirely.

He was shaken out of his contemplation of the Winchester family by Pepper asking Sam “You jumped off the shed?” with a smile touching her lips.

Dean grinned and Sam threw his napkin at his brother. “He thought he could fly,” Dean said.

“Hey!” Sam defended. “You jumped off first! And you told me that I was Superman and that I could fly if I really wanted to.”

There was a stifled laugh from Bruce, who muffled it neatly by taking a drink of his coffee.

“Yeah, but you’re the one who believed me,” Dean said.

“Dean, I was seven. You could have told me that the moon was a glowing basketball and I would have believed you,” Sam retorted, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, I’m just pointing out the facts.” Dean raised his hands in mock offense. “Besides, I’m the good guy here; didn’t I take you to the hospital on my bike?”

“Yeah, but then I had to explain to Dad why I had a broken arm, not you.” Sam glared at him. “And I don’t remember you having to stay at the hotels in desperate boredom for the next three cases because you had a broken arm and couldn’t handle a shotgun.”

Pepper frowned. When she had asked about the shed, she hadn’t expected to get another glimpse of the Winchester’s childhoods. Hunting, at least at the age of seven and eleven. Able to wield shotguns with proficiency. A father who, while not physically abusive (she thought), certainly didn’t spend as
much time with his sons as he should, telling them they were valued and special and teaching them things like how to play baseball and read and write. From the sound of it, Dean had gotten a little of that from Mary Winchester, Sam had gotten most of it from Dean, and the rest had come from Bobby Singer.

Her deep thoughts as well as the ongoing lighthearted sniping between the brothers, with Tony egging them on, were interrupted by a loud alarm and Steve’s phone ringing. Immediately, Tony, Bruce, and Steve stood, taking last bites and sips of drinks before heading off in different directions, Steve on his phone.

The alarm turned off once they all had left the room and Dean and Sam turned with raised eyebrows to look at Pepper, who had continued during all this to eat her pancakes as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. “It’s the Assemble Alarm,” she explained. “Steve’ll be getting a little bit of preliminary information about the location of the rest of the team while they change and then they’ll head to the helicarrier or headquarters for a briefing.” The CEO shrugged. “It changes a little; sometimes they meet here, or at a different base. Depends on the location of the emergency and where the majority of them are when the call comes through.”

It was only a few minutes later when Dean’s phone rang. Sam’s eyebrows went back up. “It’s really grand central hotline in here today.”

His brother shrugged and answered it. “Hey, Garth.”

While Dean held a conversation with the other hunter, Sam finished his breakfast and started clearing the dishes left by the assembled Avengers. A moment later, Tony and Bruce both reentered the room. Bruce was now wearing a pair of what looked like ordinary sweatpants and a light t-shirt but Sam was sure that he had caught a glimpse of what looked like a skintight synthetic material peeking over the waist of the sweatpants. Probably something that would stretch with Bruce, at least to an extent, he surmised. Tony had changed out of his work suit and tie and into a fairly form fitting black bodysuit that reminded Sam of a diver’s wetsuit. It covered his arms down to the elbow and his legs to the knee and the neck cut off in a short collar that looked tight enough to not get in the way of anything but loose enough to not be strangulatory. Dean hung up the phone and wolf whistled.

“Looking sexy, Tony.”

Tony flipped him off but also grinned and pivoted on the spot, giving them a three-sixty view of the obscenely tight bodysuit. Steve-- or, Captain America-- entered a moment later, rolling his eyes but smiling himself. Dean looked him over; it was the first time they had seen Cap in person-- it had always been Steve Rogers before. He had to admit, Cap looked pretty intimidating, wearing padded body armor in a dark navy, the star on his chest a dusky grey and the iconic shield just visible over the edge of his shoulders. Steve tucked his phone in a pouch in the militaristic utility belt at his waist.

“Stop showing off, Tony. We all know that Bruce is the real muscle here.”

“Or I will be when we get there, at least,” Bruce quipped and Tony pouted.

“We’re headed to the helicarrier. Natasha and Clint are already there; Thor’s out of town.”

Another round of laughs; Sam got the impression that “out of town” meant “not actually on the planet Earth.”

“Be safe, all of you.” Pepper stood, setting down her coffee cup and heading over to give Tony a kiss.

“Hate to ditch, but we’re leaving, too,” Dean cut in.
“Garth?” Sam asked.

“He’s fine. But he’s getting reports that sound like vengeful spirits, bodies torn to shreds, and he already salted and burned the body. Says he’s never seen anything like it.”

“Looks like we’ve got a job, then.” Sam stood and headed over towards Steve, extending a hand. “Steve, nice seeing you. As always. Thanks for backing Dean up and coming to get me.”

The super soldier took Sam’s hand, shaking firmly and looking him in the eyes. “Anytime, Sam. Keep us updated on the Leviathan situation and take care of yourself.”

Sam nodded, went to shake hands with Bruce, and was startled when the scientist pulled him into a hug instead. “Be careful,” Bruce said.

Sam pointedly looked him up and down over at Tony and Steve, who were ready for battle. “You too.”

He traded with Dean, who had just finished letting Pepper smother him in a hug, and reciprocated when she put her arms around him. “Get lots of sleep, Sam. And eat up.”

“I will,” he assured. “We’ll stop plenty to eat on our way to… Dean, where are we going?”

“Junction City, Kansas,” Dean replied. “Practically in the old stomping grounds. We’ll stop in and check on Cas on our way over,” he added, looking at Steve. “And we’ll call to let you know how he is.”

The last round of hugs and farewells and exhortations to be careful and safe went around and then everyone was going their separate ways. Dean and Sam watched in barely disguised awe as Tony walked the length of the armor platform and the Iron Man suit assembled around him, Bruce and Steve taking a different route, the Avengers’ quinjet (when did that get back? Dean wondered) suddenly flashing by the window with Steve at the controls.

An hour later, the common floor was empty. Pepper was back at work, the Avengers had assembled, and Dean and Sam Winchester were on the move.
7:21 pm, Eastern Time
Missed Call: Sam Winchester
“Hey, Steve. I don’t know if you guys are back yet from fighting wherever you were going when we left the tower. But just so you know, we stopped to see Castiel. Meg is still there; she managed to get a job and seems to be doing a good job of looking after him. He’s-- well. He’s pretty much catatonic. Just sits and stares. We’ve decided to leave him, since it seems pretty safe to let him be there and it’s central enough we can check in every once in a while.
…
Yeah. So, thanks again for the rescue. And hope you all are well.”
Call Ended

11:45 pm Eastern Time
Missed Call: Dean Winchester
“Tony? It’s me. We need you to track Dick Roman’s -- oh, fuck -- Sorry, we need you to track Dick Roman’s movements, planes and whatever, if you can. He’s kidnapped a friend of ours. If you can find him… hopefully he’s still alive. We found what Roman was looking for, stole it from him. It’s a tablet, a very powerful object, and the guy we’re looking for, Kevin, is a prophet. He can read the tablet and we know how to kill Dick, but then they-- no, what?-- Anyway, they kidnapped Kevin and have the tablet. But we need to find him. Asian kid, eighteen or nineteen, about five eight. We’ll keep you updated on our end.”
Call Ended

4:11 pm Eastern Time
Missed Call: Sam Winchester
“Hey. I need some… I don’t know. Help, I guess. Dick is dead. I’m on my way to the tower. I’ll be there in… a few hours, probably.”
Call Ended

Jarvis always kept an eye (metaphorically, of course) on the Winchester brothers, for a variety of reasons. First, they were good for Sir, who worried about them as if they were his own children or siblings, closer family than cousins. Secondly, they were good at what they did and when they were taking care of the strange beings of the world, that meant Sir was not out trying to take care of the strange beings of the world. Jarvis appreciated the Winchesters’ ability to not drag Tony into situations he wasn’t prepared for; no matter how much the AI had grown since his creation, Jarvis’ prime directive was still to protect Sir and upholding that would have been harder than it already was if the Winchesters let Sir participate in their activities. Thirdly, Jarvis rather liked the Winchesters. Despite their jobs and general suspicion for things “unnatural,” they had always treated him and the rest of the bots as people (or more like pets, for the bots) and not like machines, a trait that Jarvis appreciated in people.

So the Artificial Intelligence was duly concerned when Sam and Dean Winchester left a series of voicemails, ending with a short message from a Sam Winchester who sounded rather flat, dull, and very unlike himself.
He watched Sir flop onto a chair, Sam’s words echoing around the room as the message ended. “I need some… I don’t know. Help, I guess.”

Also, Jarvis considered, just Sam? No Dean? That could mean many things, most of them well outside the parameters for a good situation.

Jarvis was observing when Sam arrived, the sleek black Impala looking… not quite as sleek. Sir, who was waiting in the garage, winced at the state of the vehicle. “What in the name of…” The driver’s side window was gone, the paint was scratched from the front headlights all the way back to the windshield on both sides, and there were two bullet holes marking the driver’s door. It was the worst shape he had ever seen the precious car in. Sam opened the driver’s side door and pulled himself out and Jarvis began to run scans-- Heart rate: 64 bpm. Respiration higher than average and ragged. Signs of exhaustion. Minor injuries only.

Additional Note: Sam Winchester is alone. Dean Winchester not present.

“I need some… I don’t know.”

“Is he--” Jarvis’ attention was drawn back to Sir as Tony’s voice stuttered to a halt, the genius taking a step forwards as he scanned Sam critically up and down. Jarvis continued to make notes, based on past observations of Sam Winchester and interactions with other humans. He didn’t look like he had been crying, he wasn’t drunk like he had been when he arrived at the Malibu mansion after burying Dean almost four years ago. Sam just looked tired, bone tired and stressed and just thinner than was healthy for a man of his age, height, and frequent physical exertion.

Sam nodded, then sort of shrugged. “I don’t-- It all happened so--” he shrugged again.

“Okay.” Tony nodded and Jarvis watched, monitoring Sir’s vitals as he brought his erratic breathing into check. Damage control. Sir shook his head. “You two die more than anyone I know.”

A small smile touched Sam’s lips, but it only emphasized the gaunt look of his face. “Know a lot of people who die often?”

“Well, no,” Tony admitted. “There is Cap, but he didn’t actually die, everyone just thought he had. And Fury, who I’m sure is still alive even if Natasha won’t admit it. And Steve’s friend Bucky.”

Sam pocketed the Impala keys, Jarvis automatically tagging them for ease of convenience. Small things like car keys and cell phones were rarely lost in the tower. “Mind if I stay here for a while?”

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Sam asked, almost timidly, as if he was worried Tony would say no and kick him to the curb. Jarvis would have rolled his eyes if he could; as if Sir would turn him away.

“Of course, Sam.” Tony led the way towards the elevator. “You can stay as long as you need.”

That night, Sam filled them all in, Jarvis recording and adding to their files of supernatural events as pertinent details emerged. They heard about Kevin, the Advanced Placement student who could read the word of God and who Crowley, King of Hell, had taken away. They heard about the tablet that Kevin had translated and how it had told them that Dick Roman could be killed, and how Dean and Sam had obtained a bone from a dead nun. They heard about Castiel, who was still crazy but was awake and functioning, at least in some fashion. (Jarvis added this to the folders chronicling Sam’s own battle with madness evident in the brother’s last visit.) Sam talked for almost an hour, finishing with their assault on the Kentucky SucroCorp location with Meg and Castiel, where Sam had found Kevin, Dean had stabbed Dick Roman through the neck, and then Sam had watched his brother and Castiel disappear in a spray of black ooze.
“So now what?” Mrs Potts-Stark asked. “Try to find them? Castiel and Dean and Kevin?”

Sam sighed. “It won’t be easy. Dean and Cas… well. If they’re. You know. Dead. Then there’s nothing we do. Heaven and hell don’t really like me, so there’s no finding them there. And when I called his phone I got a disconnected line, so it’s not working anymore, wherever they are.”

“So we wait,” Tony summarized grimly. “If they’re alive somewhere, they’ll find a way to contact us.”

Sam nodded and took a sip of his beer. “And Kevin’s situation is even worse. Crowley has him locked away somewhere, but there’s no way to get to him. I can’t even call him because that’s a direct signal to Crowley that we want Kev back. And then we’ll never get him out.”

Tony groaned. “This sucks.”

“Tell me about it,” Sam said. He tipped the can idly sideways and watched the light reflect off the rounded surface and sighed again. Dean was dead, most likely, since he hadn’t contacted Sam by now. It was so different from last time, when they had a year to prepare, to hope and plan and scheme to save Dean from the hellhounds. This time, Dean was just gone.

And then it hit him. Dean wasn’t just gone, Dean was dead. Gone from the face of the earth. This wasn’t just them having an argument and splitting up to hunt on their own for a while, this was permanent. Dean wasn’t going to call him and ask to meet somewhere, they weren’t going to apologize and go back to the way things had been. Dean was with Ash and Ellen and Jo and Bobby, hanging in his own personal heaven, and Sam was still alive, alone, half a person.

Jarvis tracked Sam Winchester, his concern increasing as Sam’s face seemed to crumple slightly and the bottle in his hand tipped sideways. He watched the angle of tilt become more and more precarious and the estimated grip strength of Sam’s hand decrease until the bottle slipped from the young man’s hand.

There was the sudden shattering of glass and Sam startled out of his reverie to realize that Tony and Pepper were looking at him, faces full of concern, and Sam had dropped the beer bottle. He looked at it on the floor but couldn’t find it in him to apologize or lean down to pick up the shattered glass. Sam just closed his eyes for a second, gathered himself, and then opened them to offer to clean it up.

“I’ll take care of it,” Pepper said firmly before he could say anything. “You need to go to bed. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Sam knew he should argue, but he couldn’t find it in himself. He pulled himself out of the chair and was met with Tony, who gave him a rough hug. “We’ll find Kevin. And Dean’s with Castiel, wherever they are.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed without feeling. “I hope so.”

Sam left the room, the line of his shoulders despondent. Jarvis spoke quietly. “I will send one of the bots to clean the bottle, Mrs Potts-Stark. Don’t worry about it.”

She sighed, but flashed a small smile at his nearest sensor array. “Thank you, Jarvis”

And so began a long year for all of them.

The first weeks were especially bad; Jarvis had thought that Sir’s sleep habits were bad, but not too bad compared to the Winchesters, even when he had monitored them before. Now Sam’s nights were much worse, with the hunter often going to sleep and resting for only a few short hours before
struggling awake or dragging himself back into awareness, screaming. He would get out of bed, 
heart rate elevated, and most nights would either go to the kitchen and drink, go the the range and 
shoot, or walk out onto the “car wash,” his fond name for the Iron Man assembly rig, sitting with his 
legs dangling off the edge precariously and watching the city until the sun came up.

Sometimes, Jarvis would wake Pepper or Tony, particularly on nights when Sam Winchester seemed 
to be struggling to escape his nightmares. Stumbling down the hall in the dark, one or the other 
(usually Tony; he woke more easily and went back to sleep faster than Pepper) would enter Sam’s 
room, carefully shaking Sam awake. It took Sam almost slicing Tony’s face open to get the hunter to 
stop sleeping with a knife under his pillow, though Jarvis knew the hunter still kept one in the 
nightstand.

One week into his stay, Sam had accidentally scared Steve into dropping a full mug of coffee. 
Apparently, Sir had neglected to tell the other Avengers that Sam was at the Tower, Mrs Potts-Stark 
had assumed Mr Stark would inform them, and Jarvis really should have realized a heads up might 
be necessary. However, none of them did and thus Captain Rogers, spending a few days in the 
Tower before returning to his Washington apartment, walked into the living room to see Sam dozing 
on the car wash platform, legs hanging off the edge.

(In hindsight, Jarvis admitted to himself, it did look very precarious, as if Sam was dead or 
unconscious and not just stealing back a few moments of precious sleep. Jarvis always kept a closer 
eye than usual on Sam when he was on the platform because careful as he was, Sam had a tendency 
to doze sitting up instead of lying down like he was that time and the AI was always a little afraid he 
would have to use the assembly rig to snatch the hunter from falling to his death.)

Steve had made a very un-supersoldier-ish gasp when he saw Sam lying on the platform and 
dropped the full mug of coffee in order to sprint towards the assembly rig. Sam, who had jolted out 
of his doze at the sound and rolled over onto more secure ground, reached towards the small of his 
back for a weapon that wasn’t there before reorienting. Jarvis was losing some audio in the cool 
morning breeze outside but just from the shape of his mouth, he could tell that Sam was 
amatically forming the word “Dean.” Steve skidded to a halt before he ran into Sam and knocked 
them both into space. “Are you okay, man?” Sam asked, slightly groggy.

“Am I okay? Are you okay?” Steve returned. “I thought you were unconscious out here!”

Sam let Steve shepherd him back inside and past the remains of Steve’s coffee cup, which the small 
cleaning bots were already cleaning up.

“It’s okay. Just dozing.”

This clearly didn’t make things any less confusing to the soldier, who took the time to pour them 
both coffee before asking the sixty four dollar question. “Why were you sleeping on the assembly 
platform for the Iron Man suit?”

Sam dropped his gaze and wouldn’t meet Steve’s eyes. “I’m not-- sometimes when-- just 
nightmares,” he mumbled. “I go sit. Don’t worry, Jarvis keeps an eye and makes sure I don’t fall.”

“What about-- where’s Dean?” Steve asked.

Jarvis tracked the pressure of Sam’s hand on the coffee cup, the stress on the handle turning red on 
his sensors before Sam visibly relaxed his hand and took a deep breath. “Dean’s missing. And 
probably dead. We think. Cas, too.”

Steve winced; he knew what it was like to loose a brother. “I’m sorry.”
“Me too.” Sam took a gulp of the coffee. “Anyway, Dick Roman is dead and another friend is missing so we’re keeping an eye out for him.”

“You’re living here?”

“Yeah, I’m not--” Sam stopped, shaking his head. “I don’t quite know what I’m going to do with my life anymore.”

“Are you going to stop hunting?” Steve asked, standing and walking over to pull a carton of eggs out of the fridge. Sam left his seat and joined him, finding the frying pan and handing it over before starting to slide slices of bread into the toaster.

“I always wanted to be normal,” Sam sort of answered after a moment, eyes on the toast. “But hunting… it’s sort of what I do now. I don’t-- I don’t know if I can do it without Dean. What else is there, though? Going back to law school? I’ve been to hell, I don’t know if Stanford is really on my radar anymore.”

“I know the feeling,” Steve agreed. “Like you don’t fit into the world anymore. What are you doing these days?”

“Reading. Wandering around the tower. Jarvis and Tony are helping me fix the Impala up since she was pretty messed up when we went after Dick.”

Sam was stopped from continuing by yawning hugely, making Steve frown. “When’s the last time you got a good night of sleep?”

Sam didn’t seem forthcoming, so Jarvis spoke up. “In the last seventy eight hours, Mr Winchester has slept for fifteen hours.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Nightmares?”

The hunter sat back down, taking a sip of coffee and letting his shoulders slump. “Yeah. About Dean, about hell. About Dean in hell. It’s… not exactly something you get over.”

“You should talk to Sam,” Steve suggested.

“Wilson?”

“He works at the VA,” Steve said.

“I’m not a vet,” the hunter argued.

Steve rolled his eyes and flipped the egg over. “Please. You’ve probably seen more combat than most of the guys who go through the military. My guess is you could use a little time to talk to someone.”

Sam laughed, a dry, low laugh. “Dean and I got ourselves committed to a mental hospital once on a hunt. All we had to do was tell the truth. Ended up being a Wraith that was killing the patients.”

Steve gave Sam one of those “not sure how worried I should be” looks and slid him a plate of eggs. “Eat,” he commanded in a voice that reminded Sam of John Winchester-- it brooked no argument. “Jarvis has Sam’s number if you ever want to talk to him. Or the rest of us-- we’re not exactly therapists, but we’re probably better than nothing. I think Bruce comes home from his trip to Sri Lanka soon and he’s pretty good at this stuff.” Steve dug into his own plate of food.
“Thanks,” Sam said quietly a few minutes later. “For the eggs and the advice.”

“I’m not done yet. If you want, we know a lawyer who could probably talk to you about getting back on the law horse. Or just to talk.” The grin on Steve’s face let Sam know that this probably wasn’t the ordinary run of the mill practitioner of the law.

“He… works for SHIELD? New SHIELD?” Sam guessed. “Or he’s some sort of super powered crime fighter by night while lawyering by day?”

“Closer than you might think,” Steve responded, making Sam return the “wtf” look Steve had given him earlier. “He usually meets up with us once every few months or so, along with his business partner. We’ll introduce you.”

“Um. Okay. Sounds good.”

At that moment Tony stumbled into the kitchen, hair askew and shirt dirtied with engine grease, blinking once in Steve’s direction. “Why are you in my kitchen?”

“Good morning to you too, Stark. I got back from a mission last night and this is where Agent Plaskey dropped me off. I’m supposed to talk about the refit of the obstacle course on the NS base in Texas.”

“And apparently Sam Wilson needs to be paying Steve to talk him up. Plus I’m going to get introduced to a lawyer vigilante at some point?” Sam cut in.

Jarvis made a note to warn Mrs Potts-Stark that it seemed they would be having a dinner party soon.

They did, in fact, have a dinner party soon; it took Pepper all of three hours to latch on to the idea and all of eight days to put it into action.

And that was how Sam Winchester found himself lounging in the living room, a cup of coffee in one hand a fancy custard dessert in the other, feeling slightly out of place among superheroes, and having dinner. The whole crew was there; Bruce, who had just gotten back from his Red Cross trip, Pepper and Tony, of course. Steve, who had a rapidly healing stab wound in his shoulder, Clint, who was sporting second degree burns to one calf, and Natasha, who had miraculously gotten off without injuries from the trio’s tussle with some Hydra agents who they believed had been harboring Steve’s friend Bucky. Sam Wilson, who Sam hadn’t forgotten about since his conversation with Steve, although they hadn’t spoken yet. Thor was gone, having stopped by the previous week, greeted Sam like a warrior and expressed his grievance and concern, but had to leave before the dinner party because Asgard was celebrating the anniversary of his father’s coronation.

At dinner, there had also been Matthew Murdock and Franklin “call me Foggy” Nelson, who Sam had been looking forward to meeting with equal amounts of enthusiasm, melancholy, and trepidation. It was an interesting reminder of the profession he had once been pursuing, a harsh reminder of the possible life he had lost (along with Jessica), and a slightly harrowing reminder that no matter how much Jarvis and Tony covered their tracks, his job— or old job, he still wasn’t sure— was extremely less than legal and he was a felon a dozen times over.

More interesting was the vigilante part; while the “Nelson” of Nelson and Murdock seemed like fairly ordinary (very nice) guy, his partner, Murdock, was a little less so. Blind, white cane and all, but also quick as a cat; Sam saw him catch a falling piece of silverware and while he was sure the guy was telling the truth about the blindness, it was clear he had something special going on. The
duo talked about their time in law school, bantered with Sam a little about a class he had taken as an undergrad in Stanford all those years ago, and invited him to come see the office and maybe sit in on a case, even if he wasn’t interested in pursuing law anymore. Sam thought he might actually take them up on that; it would be a new experience, at least. They had left after dinner, something about finishing work on a case, but assured Sam that Jarvis had their number when he decided. He could practically hear Dean’s snort at the idea of spending a perfectly good day sitting in a courtroom--

And there it was again.

It had been fifteen days since Dean had vanished -- died-- and it was still haunting him at all hours.

It hadn’t really gotten any easier, waking up in the morning or going to sleep at night. He had, at Jarvis’ and eventually Tony’s insistence, started sleeping more during the last week, taking naps and forcing himself to go to bed at reasonable times, even if he woke up in the middle of the night. He knew Tony and Pepper were grieving too, saw it in the lines of Tony’s shoulders as he smoothed the dents in the Impala’s bodywork and the moments Pepper’s hand lingered a little too long on his shoulders sometimes.

But for him, it was different; even when waking up after a nightmare, he still found himself reaching out towards the door, the place where Dean’s bed had been in every seedy roadside motel they had ever slept in since he was six months old. Still found himself thinking about how much Dean would be enjoying watching the new Star Trek movie that had come out or the rerun western marathon that had been running recently. Still woke up with a gun in his hand and his brother’s name on his lips, the fire and ice of hell burning his skin and Lucifer’s fingers tracing up his spine. Still had moments where he pulled out two beers instead of one, started to turn around and ask what Dean wanted to eat for dinner, or looked to argue who got the shower first. Still had moments, like right then, when he thought about how much Dean would love the steak they had eaten, would have loved the homemade quality and the fact that there was a lot of it.

“Sam?” Pepper’s voice broke through to Sam. Someone touched his shoulder and he jerked slightly, dropping the spoon that had been hovering over his mug for several moments.

“Dean,” his mouth formed the name but no sound left his lips and in that instant, the room was too small, there were too many people looking at him with compassion in their eyes and the complete lack of Dean sitting next to him or across the room, laughing at the foot of Natasha’s comfy chair or smirking at Bruce was so overwhelming Sam couldn’t help it. He reached out and set the mug down before he clamped his hands together, shoving his nails into the old scar on his hand and pushing until he drew blood but nothing changed.

It was as if the world had gone silent; he took a few deep breaths. Slowly, Jarvis’ voice filtered in, repeating the information he sometimes gave Sam when he woke up from his nightmares. “It is the seventeenth of May, 2016. It has been fifteen days since you arrived here, Avengers Tower.”

“Kevin in missing,” Sam replied, his standard response. “Dean is dead. It’s been too long for him to be just missing, anymore. Dean’s dead.” He pulled his hands apart and looked at the tips of his fingers, coated in blood from his other palm. It was real. Dean was dead.

Sam ran his less bloody hand through his hair, pushing it away from his face. Dean would probably have made him cut it soon, or at least get a trim. But not anymore. The Avengers watched anxiously as Sam Winchester closed his eyes and took a deep breath in and out before opening them and glancing over at Jarvis’ nearest sensor arrays. “I’m going to need to make some calls.”

“They will be untraceable,” Jarvis promised, picking up on Sam’s intent. “Even from what remain of the leviathan.”
“Thanks, Jarv.” Sam absently let Clint take his left hand and douse it in antiseptic, not even flinching when the stinging liquid hit the small cuts. Clint twisted it this way and that before apparently deciding that it didn’t need a bandage and taking Sam’s other hand to clear the blood off. The hunter stood. “Thank you for dinner, Pepper.” He smiled at her, one side of his mouth quirking up for a moment.

“Anytime, Sam,” she reached out and held his hand for a moment. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

The wry smile returned. “No,” he said before heading down the hall. They could hear his voice as he headed off. “Jody? This is Sam Winchester. Yeah. First, the leviathan are gone…”

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That night was bad. Every dream that Sam had been trying to avoid crashed in on him, leaving him voiceless and unable to protest as he thrashed into consciousness. Apparently, despite the severity of the dreams (Lucifer cutting the tendons in his hands Dean’s chest cut open by hellhound claws) he hadn’t been visible enough that Jarvis had woken someone else up to come rescue him from himself. Sam tried unsuccessfully to slow his uneven breathing, rubbing one hand across his face to find a thin sheen of tears on his cheeks.

He pulled on a pair of sweatpants and left the room-- even just looking at his bed was flooding his mind with images from his nightmares. Padding into the kitchen on quiet feet, Sam silently pulled a full bottle of whiskey from the shelf, poured himself a generous glass, and drained it. The alcohol burned its way to his stomach but didn’t do anything to warm up the frigid memories of the cage. He started pouring another glass but just gave up and took a swig from the bottle, heading for the elevator.

“Garage, Jarvis.”

“Mr Winchester, should I wake Sir or Mrs Potts-Stark, or one of the others to assist you with whatever you need or--”

“Garage, Jarvis.” Sam’s voice echoed off the metallic walls and the doors closed silently, Jarvis taking him down without another word.

The doors slid open and Sam was stumbling his way across to the Impala, popping the trunk and yanking out his brother’s duffle bag. Sam had never gotten it out of the car, even when they had been working on the body, choosing not to touch what remained of Dean’s possessions.

He sank to the ground, his knees half giving way underneath him as he collapsed into an awkward half sit, half kneel, the bag on his lap and the bottle on the floor next to him. Unzipping it, he swayed, the puff of air that had swept out of it warm and musty and smelling unmistakably Dean, like detergent and gunpowder and leather and that same aftershave he had worn for years. Sam started rummaging through the bag, looking for-- he didn’t know, exactly, but for something, pulling out worn shirts and pairs of jeans and Dean’s pearl handled revolver and dirty socks and a tattered copy of Slaughterhouse Five until he just sort of listed sideways, left hand bunched up in one of Dean’s jackets, the other clutching the grip of that revolver, feeling the wear years of use had left on it, a perfect measure of Dean’s right hand and god he couldn’t breathe and something was running down his face.

He reached up and touched his cheek, pulling back and frowning at the red on his fingers before remembering the broken skin on his other palm; he had reopened one of the small cuts. Sam let his forehead rest on the rear bumper of the Impala, giving up and letting himself cry.
Nobody commented the next morning when Sam exited the elevator, eyes red and puffy, carrying a mostly full bottle of whiskey, and wearing one of Dean’s leather jackets over his sweatpants and sleep shirt.

Slowly, Sam got better.

He didn’t talk to Sam Wilson, despite Steve’s suggestion. It felt too personal, too private, to just tell someone he didn’t know about the years of hunting, about how he felt guilty about how he didn’t feel guilty anymore, like hell had absolved him of his guilt and now most days he just felt empty inside. It was as if somewhere between getting his memories back and Dean dying someone had taken a knife and hacked out a big part of his being, leaving him half a person who wasn’t sure what to do with himself.

Sam was open to suggestions, but even so it was a bit of a surprise when Pepper suggested at a group dinner that Sam join the Avengers.

He didn’t fight with them; even now, a low profile was much more desireable than the fame of superhero-dom. It became more of a freelance activity, an actual paying job that meant he consulted when the supernatural appeared and collaborated occasionally with New SHIELD’s growing research division whenever they wanted to know details on the aftermath of the events. Sam trained with the Avengers on occasion, letting John Winchester basics honed by years of street fighting skills be tested against the finely tuned training possessed by Steve, Clint, and Natasha in particular, although all three were more than willing to fight dirty if it came to it, something Sam had found out the hard way. He participated in group sparring, especially when the entire team wasn’t present, filling in for Thor, Steve, or anyone else who was on a mission at the time.

The fighting reminded him of Dean, of years spent sparring with him while John supervised and of the times when Sam would go running, coming back to the room to find Dean asleep or eating or doing god knew what on Sam’s computer.

While he technically lived at the tower and did spend a lot of time there, he left for weeks at a time, traveling and hunting and always keeping one ear to the ground for news of Kevin Tran, either from heaven or hell. Tony seemed to be fairly nervous about his solo hunting but half the time he wasn’t actually solo; he was shoring up an ailing hunter or helping out someone who didn’t know what they were up against. Occasionally, he worked a case with a SHIELD agent, but he never enjoyed those jobs; they always left him feeling a little like he was training people, training them for a job he had never wanted, a job with high mortality rates and too many innocent victims.

It made him think of John taking Sam and Dean with him on hunts, Dean lingering behind to correct Sam’s grip on the pistol quietly while John scoped out the scene.

It had been nearly four months since the day Sam had been left alone in the SucroCorp building when he finally got a call from Kevin Tran. Sam had been the only one around and he was glad of that; the call had startled him and he had knocked a pile of papers off the table, something Tony never would have let him hear the end of. In his haste to pick them up, it took him a second to recognize the voice on the other end of the line.

“Kevin!” Sam almost dropped all the papers again. “You’re alive! Where are you?”

Kevin laughed, distorted a little by the phones. “I’m alive. Gave Crowley the slip a few weeks ago. I’m hiding out in an old church in Iowa.”
“I’m coming to get you. You… probably won’t believe where I am.”

Sam gave Kevin a general explanation; that he was living in Avenger tower, hunting and working from there. Kevin, while he thought it was kind of Sam to offer, refused to move back to the tower, even after Sam drove out to see where he was living. However, Sam managed to convince Kevin to accept the untraceable Stark Industries phone and debit card so that he could improve his standard of living a little; the church was a wreck. Kevin swore he’d call if anything happened to him or his mother, since that’s why he was staying in the area.

“Besides, I’m doing my own research,” the prophet said. “Busy, busy, busy. But I might come and visit sometime. I mean, Avenger tower? Can’t say no to that.”

It had been six months before Sam had given up on bringing Dean back. Somewhere, Dean was living in the afterlife. If Sam had learned anything from their past experiences, it was that bringing Dean back from the dead would cost a price too high for Sam to pay-- the apocalypse was over now, and the demons probably wouldn’t pay particularly much for his soul in terms of years. But slowly, so slowly he never noticed until it was nearly gone, the sting of his brother being gone stopped hurting so much every time he smiled and Sam Winchester gradually became happy, or at least a little more whole.

It was all much more stable than the last time he had lost Dean. There was a whole ‘nother family supporting him, willing to let him hit something until his knuckles bled and then patch him up afterwards, willing to give him space when he needed it and words when it was too quiet.

Christmas had been hard for him, despite the best efforts of the Avengers and company. It was the first Christmas Sam could ever remember spending without even a word from Dean. Even while he had been away at Stanford, ostracized from the father who had told him to never come back, a package always arrived from Dean, a new jacket or a gift card with a note scribbled out in Dean’s neat, all caps handwriting. Sam had spent this Christmas hoping, praying for a miracle, that Dean would walk through the door, Castiel behind him, alive and well. But he didn’t.

It was just as bad a month later, when it was Dean’s birthday. Sam didn’t bring it up, didn’t even make a comment in passing. Somehow, Pepper and Tony knew and they didn’t push him to be social, to talk, to eat, to relax.

But he was still happy, despite the sad moments. He had the Avengers, no demons whispering in his ears about blood and stopping the Devil, and he had Kevin Tran to be at least a little responsible for.

By the time they made it to Sam’s birthday, he had adjusted fairly well. Still, he was more than a little surprised when there was cake and gifts and music. It was the most ordinary birthday he had had in years.

The day the text arrived was a Saturday. The whole gang was there, except Thor, who was visiting Jane; Clint and Natasha in from a mission and staying at the tower instead of SHIELD, Steve and Sam back from inspecting the construction of the New SHIELD training grounds and Avenger Facility, Pepper and Tony just returning from a trip to see the arc reactor in the Japan factory. Bruce had been editing some of Sam’s chicken scratch notes on shapeshifters. It was a lounging day, with everyone sprawled on sofas and comfy chairs and on stacks of pillows on the floor, absently watching a movie while an intense game of poker happened in the middle of the room.

Sam’s phone was face down on the table and nobody paid much attention to it when it chimed softly. The hunter laughed at something Clint said, popped a grape in his mouth, and then picked up the
cell. An instant later, he was on his feet and all eyes were on him.

“Sam?” Tony asked.

“No fucking way!” Sam responded, a grin lighting up his face like the sun. An instant later, he was headed down the hall, tossing the phone in Steve’s direction as he went. Steve’s enhanced reflexes snatched the phone out of the air and he flipped it around to read the message out loud.

“Unknown number,” Steve started, eyes flicking over it and a smile forming on his own face. He cleared his throat and read: “Hey, Sammy. Whitefish, Montana.”

Natasha gasped. “Dean.”

Tony whooped. “He’s alive!” He leaned over and kissed Pepper as the room erupted into cheers and high fives.

Sam practically skidded back into the room a second later, the bag that he always kept packed for hunting emergencies slung over his shoulder and Dean’s full bag on his back. He scooped the Impala keys off the kitchen table and came to retrieve his phone.

Steve handed it to him, returning the bright smile. Pepper stood and gave him a brief hug. “Sam.”

“Yeah?” Sam asked, already halfway to the elevator.

“Bring him home.”

Sam did, in fact, bring Dean home.

But it took a while.

8:42 Eastern Time
Missed Call: Sam Winchester
“Hey, Tony. He’s here. He seems to be pretty good, but jumpy as hell. No sign of Cas. Apparently, he’s been in purgatory for a year with every godforsaken monster on the planet. I’ll have him call you later.”
Call Ended

3:12 Eastern Time
Missed Call: Dean Winchester
“We need you to run a search for Kevin and Linda Tran. There have been some… problems. Kevin had to leave and then there was an auction for the demon tablet and Mrs Tran sold her soul so that Crowley wouldn’t get Kevin and then both of them disappeared but Crowley still has the tablet. But we need to make sure Kevin is okay. We’re following up some leads, but can you run some fancy face trace or something on your end? Thanks.”
Call Ended

4:15 Eastern Time
Missed Call: Sam Winchester
“Hi Pepper, it’s Sam. Just wanted to say thanks for dinner the other night and to give you all an update: Cas is back. Long story. And we found Kevin and his mom, along with some other tablet-y things. We’ll give you the full story later.”
Call Ended
9:26 Eastern Time
Missed Call: Sam Winchester
“Um. This is going to sound incredibly weird, but did Dad ever talk about his dad when you knew him? When you were young? Because. Um. There may have been some time traveling and we may have Henry Winchester, our grandfather and your uncle, doing research back in our hotel room. Call me back.”
Call Ended

8:54 Eastern Time
Missed Call: Dean Winchester
“Hey. I’ve got good news and bad news. Bad news is, Henry is dead. It’s complicated but there was a demon, basically, and… he’s dead. But the good news is, we have a place to live now. Apparently, the Winchester family are legacies to an organization called the Men of Letters. Real geek fest, Sam’s in his element. Anyway, there’s this bunker in Kansas that used to be their headquarters. It’s incredibly fortified against just about any supernatural thing you can think of. Huge library, tons of slick weapons. Coffee machine’s crap, though. You guys will have to come visit sometime, as a thank you from me for taking care of Sam while I was… gone. Dinner on us. Okay. Gotta go; there’s a coffee machine to be bought.
Call Ended

Chapter End Notes

Takes place in the time between 7.22ish and early season 8-- I didn’t like what they did with Sam not looking for Dean AT ALL and that he had totally abandoned Kevin. That didn’t seem like Sam to me. Even though he wanted a normal life, he’s not going to leave Kevin or anyone to possibly die while he lives happily. So I’m changing it.
Dean’s phone chimed softly from its place on the table. He scooped it up, juggling it in one hand while opening a bottle of water with the other and thumbed the lock screen.

Message From: Tony
Big problems. Need a place to hide out for a day or two. With team.

Part of Dean mentally groaned. This was not something they needed right now, between the Trials and Kevin’s disappearance. But it was Tony and the Avengers and for Tony to be asking, something big must be going down, so he scooped up his phone and sent a return message.

The Bunker. Lebanon, KS. Geographic center of US.

Dean also attached a picture of the aquarian star on the door, knowing Tony would match it when he arrived at the bunker. He left the phone on the counter and headed into the War Room, returning a moment later when it chimed again.

Will be there ASAP

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Despite the complete desperation of their situation, the Avengers couldn’t help being curious to see where Dean Winchester had directed them to when Tony had asked for shelter two hours ago. They knew— in a roundabout sense, at least— that the Winchesters generally lived out of their car and motel rooms but had recently gotten a place of their own of some sort. They didn’t know much about it, but it seemed fairly obvious that was where they were heading, since Tony had told Dean it was the whole team and they couldn’t all fit in the Impala.

“Power plant?” Bruce asked quietly, peering out the window, curiosity overcoming guilt for a moment.


Clint set the quinjet in a deserted lot, hugging one of the power plant’s larger buildings and they stumbled out into the watery evening sunlight. “Where now?” Thor asked.

Tony pulled out his phone and started tapping away as the the others looked around. “Hmmm,” he
repeated a moment later. “I can’t track their cell phones any closer. It’s like a little bubble. Actually, I can’t find us either. But…” He went back to his phone, the others waiting with various levels of patience. “Dean said the “geographic center of the US.” If he really meant the exact center, that would be a half mile or so… that way.” He pointed to the north.

The Avengers started heading in that direction, carefully picking their way through rubble and crumbling buildings. Five minutes later, Clint stopped. “There.” His eyes had seen what the others hadn’t: the flash of light off the chrome of a very familiar car, mostly hidden through the trunks of scruffy trees. They worked their way over, stopping in front of the building.

It was tall, four or five stories, and built on and into the hillside. The upper stories looked empty, unused and abandoned like the rest of the power plant. But the car out front was undeniable, sleek and clean. As they walked closer, the real destination became more clear. A series of steps led down to what looked like an underground service door, set into a heavily fortified archway. It was engraved with a faded and scratched mark: intersecting triangles forming a sort of star. “This is it,” Tony said with certainty, pulling out the phone and comparing the photo Dean had sent him with the symbol; it was a perfect match all the way down to some dents in the door around the mark.

They descended the stairs and crammed onto the small landing. Natasha managed to extricate an arm from the melee and knocked on the door. It took nearly thirty seconds until the sound of several locks were heard and the door swung open to reveal Dean Winchester.

There was a moment as they all sized each other up. Dean looked more tired than ever to the Avengers, lips pursed and lines over his eyes.

The Avengers… Dean wasn’t sure what had happened to them, but it couldn’t have been anything good. Hunter’s eyes swept over them, taking in Natasha’s dishevelment and the cloaked fear in her face, the guilt coating Bruce with hunched over shoulders and hands scrunching the arms of a hoodie slightly too big for him. Steve’s almost permanently deep scowl, the slightly empty look in Tony’s eyes, the frustration that Thor was practically radiating, and the set lips of Clint as he held Natasha’s elbow lightly… it was a bad situation.

Dean stepped back and held the door open. “Welcome to the Men of Letters Bunker. You can come in, no checks, but I need you to… not talk and be pretty quiet for a couple minutes.” And he vanished into the building. Tony took a few steps after him but stopped in awe, danger forgotten for a moment as he took in the building. Soon, all the Avengers were silently filing down the stairs, looking at the ancient computers, the map table, the switchboards and the symbols carved into the walls. There was a closed set of double doors that led off of the room straight ahead. Something dinged quietly behind them and they all turned together to see Dean slip from another room behind Thor back into the war room, nudging past the demigod with a hot pack and a bottle of water in his hands.

“Dean, where’s Sam? Why can’t--” Clint elbowed Tony in the ribs, cutting him off and tracking Dean as he walked over to the wall and hit a switch, taking the lights down to half their brightness and leaving the Avengers in the dim room before he pushed open the double doors on silent hinges. Through the darkness of the room they could just make out the edges of shelves topped with strangely shaped objects along with the outline of Dean, who seemed to be heading for a couch not far inside the library. The group shuffled sideways of its own accord until everyone could see what Clint could. Dean knelt fluidly by the end of the couch where Sam’s head was, face pressed into a cushion at one end, setting the bottle of water on the floor and touching Sam’s shoulder lightly. He said something too quiet even for Steve to make out and Sam responded with a muffled groan. The older brother nodded and tucked one end of the heated pad into his back pocket before standing and walking to the wall, switching on a small lamp and creating just enough light to see the doorways out
of the room. Dean returned to the couch and hovered as Sam slowly sat up.

The younger Winchester suddenly seemed like a boy a third of his age, displaying an innocence that the Avengers hadn’t seen through the whole year he had lived in the Tower; he blinked blearily once, seemingly without registering the presence of the Avengers in the bunker, before standing and swaying, one hand stretching towards his brother automatically. Dean reached out and took his bicep, carefully guiding him out the room. The Avengers stood awkwardly, looking around the dimly lit library and taking in the large telescope, the table piled with a few books, a closed laptop, and a series of notebooks, the shorter bookshelves topped with decorative swords and other weapons. Despite the severity of the situation, Tony smiled just a little at the sight of a framed photograph on top of one shelf-- Sam and Dean standing with the Avengers, Pepper, and the rest of the crew after Pepper and Tony’s wedding. A few minutes later Dean returned, Sam-less and without the hot pad or water bottle, turning the lights back on and gesturing to the furniture before flopping gracelessly on the sofa Sam had just vacated and scrubbing his face with one hand.

“Hey guys. How’s saving the world going for you?”

“What’s wrong with Sam?” Tony asked immediately, sitting directly across from Dean in a wingback chair.

“Short story, he’s got a migraine. We’re nearing the end of day two but it looks like it’s getting better; I think it’ll be gone by tomorrow. I’ll spare you the long story until later. What happened to you guys?” Dean looked around again.

Steve spoke up, voice thin and lined with steel. “Stark,” (Stark, Dean noted, not Tony) “Created a murdering robot.”

Tony didn’t respond, just looked away and casually perused the bookshelves. “And?” Dean asked.

“And we ran into a pair of enhanced.” Clint added. “The girl can change what people see, weird mind control crap.” Dean looked around again. That would explain a lot of the looks because, in general, life for the Avengers? Not good-- plenty of crappy history all around.

“Well, you guys can stay here for a few days until you get that sorted out. We’ve got a ton of space. Just... don’t touch the books unless you put them back where you got them from and don’t go anywhere that’s not clearly residential because there’s all sorts of nasty stuff around.” Everyone nodded or at least didn’t argue, which Dean took for consent. “Guest rooms, this way.” He led them off down a hallway, feet tapping on the tile floors as he quietly pointed out his room and Sam’s right next door before taking them into a series of small one-bed rooms. “Showers are down that way-- our water pressure is great.”

Clint spoke up. “I can go with you tomorrow as back up.” Dean nodded.

“See you in the morning, then.”

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It only took Bruce about five minutes to get the coffee going-- someone, probably Dean, had replaced the ‘Men of Letters’ coffeepot with a very nice modern one. The man himself and Clint had headed out fifteen minutes before, Clint looking like a child at the possibility of driving the Impala. Natasha joined Bruce, finding a mug of her own and pouring a cup of coffee before rummaging around and finding three quarters of a carton of eggs, a half loaf of bread, and butter. She started to crack the eggs into a bowl, Bruce silently pulling the toaster towards himself and loading it with
bread. Steve wandered in a moment later, wearing the undershirt from his uniform and a pair of workout shorts he had borrowed from Dean. “Where’s Thor?”

“Still asleep,” Steve answered with a shrug. “He stayed up and wandered around for a long time-- I heard him go to bed early this morning.”

Quiet footsteps echoed down the hall and all three superheroes turned to see Sam Winchester walk into the kitchen, barefoot and hair disheveled, but upright and moving under his own steam. He blinked, apparently realizing for the first time that the Avengers were in his kitchen. “Um, hi?”

“Morning, Sam,” Bruce smiled as the younger man ran a hand through his unruly hair, tidying it slightly, before pulling a bottle of water from the fridge and slumping with it at the kitchen counter. “Migraine gone?”

“Yeah,” Sam responded before doing a double take. “Wait, when did you guys get here?”

“Last night,” Natasha replied, sliding a plate in front of him. “We’ve got… problems, and Dean said we could stay for a day until we figured it out.”

“What’s Dean?”

“He and Clint went to the store.”

Sam nodded slightly in an ‘oh’ gesture and took a sip of water, looking down at the plate. “Fork?” Natasha pulled one out of a drawer and pushed it across the table to him, the eyebrows of all three guests shooting up as it it slid by Sam and off onto the floor, the hunter tracking it slowly and looking down at it as if it were a million miles away.

“Wow,” Bruce said as Steve retrieved the fork and handed it to Sam, who took it with a combination of embarrassment and exhausted acceptance. “That must have been one hell of a migraine.”

“It’s more than that,” Sam said quietly, putting forkfuls of egg in his mouth. “What did Dean tell you last night?”

“Nothing, really. Just that we should stay in the residential part of the building and that you two have problems of your own, like always. Didn’t even tell us where the building came from.”

“Like always,” Sam muttered. It was quiet for a moment as he ate, ignoring the eyes on him. Natasha quietly took back his plate when he finished. Sam stood to head back into the library and the world went fuzzy; he could feel himself sway and a firm hand grip his shoulder before his vision cleared.

“I’m good,” he said and Steve released him. “I’ll fill you in once Tony gets here. For now, what’s up with you guys?”

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“Anyway, that’s where we stand. Trial two is done, trial three is a mystery, our prophet is missing, and Sam is getting worse all the time.”

Dean had gone shopping dozens of times since he and Sam were kids, but he had never tried to feed the Avengers before. Every time he put something in the cart, Clint would add two more of them. When Dean had quirked an eyebrow at him, he had simply said: “We eat a lot. Remember Christmas? Don’t worry about paying for it, I’ve got one of Stark’s cards. But we’ll be here at least a day, until Natasha can contact Fury and we can hopefully come up with a better plan, so we’re going to need a lot of food.”
“Fury? I thought he was dead?” Dean asked, throwing a few boxes of noodles in the cart.

“Nah, he faked it to get Hydra off his back. They wouldn’t try again if they thought he was dead, so he’s laying low, helping take out the rest of Hydra.” Clint picked up a jar of tomato sauce, reading the label before switching it out for another brand. “Anyway, what are you guys doing about the Trials? We could probably help try to find your prophet, if you want. Kevin, right? I remember Sam talking about him.”

The hunter shook his head. “We’ve searched electronically every way we dare and we’ve got a hunter’s search out on him. Kevin is on his own but he’s got as much supernatural protection he could want from the angels, if he asks for it.”

“And Sam?”

Clint watched as Dean’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know anymore. He was tired after the first one, but it wasn’t that bad. Now…” Dean shook his head, desperation starting to bleed into his eyes. “He’s exhausted all the time, sleeps at least eighteen hours a day. His immune system is totally shot. He tries to pretend he’s not that bad, but he can’t fool me. I’ve been taking care of him since I was four.”

Clint touched Dean’s shoulder lightly. “It’ll work out. It always has.”

“Not without problems,” Dean countered.

Sam had set the Avengers to work in the library, sitting at the main table and sending Bruce, Natasha, and a newly awake Tony to fetch things from shelves for him. He had explained the process of the Trials and although he tried to downplay how badly the Trials were affecting him nobody looked like they believed him, probably because he had misjudged and knocked a stack of books off the table right about then.

Steve and Thor had gone on a run, Sam cautioning them not to go too far from the supernatural protection of the bunker. The others had followed Sam to the library, where he began to question them about the AI, the scepter Tony and Bruce had found it in, and the abilities it had possessed during the Battle of Manhattan. They set to work, Sam on the computer and using his rapidly growing knowledge of the Men of Letters’ library to find records of similar occurrences.

They had been working for only half an hour or so when Sam’s phone rang; he looked at it, visibly refrained from rolling his eyes, and picked up. “I’m fine, Dean,” he answered without preamble. “Yeah, the migraine is gone. Yes, I ate. Natasha and Bruce and Steve saw me. Dean.” His tone was flat. “I’m—” there was a brief moment of bone deep sadness in Sam’s eyes. “What year is it?” He took a second to calculate. “I am thirty goddamn years old, Dean. You may be four years older than I am, but I am still an adult.” Despite his claim, Sam handed the phone over to Natasha, who took it with a grin at the consternation on Sam’s face.

“Hello, Dean,” she practically purred into the phone. “Yes, Sam did eat. Eggs and toast, plus a bottle of water. Uh-huh. We’re working in the library, focusing on the scepter. Sam thinks the AI in the scepter might be something more. An hour? Okay, see you then.”

She ended the call and handed Sam his phone back. He took it with a glare that didn’t faze the Black
Widow at all. “A fucking adult,” Sam muttered and shook his head, as if still arguing with Dean. “And technically I’m the older brother if you go by, like, soul time.” Natasha raised her eyebrows and Sam elaborated. “He spent forty years in Hell (four months topside for me) but I was in the Cage for a really long time. Plus, the deeper you go, the weirder time gets. If you consider soul time from Hell in both of our ages, I’m at least… oh, four hundred years older,” Sam pointed out flippantly.

Tony gasped quietly; while Sam had apparently come to grips (at least somewhat) with his time in the Cage, Tony hadn’t and he hadn’t known how long Sam had been there, at least not in terms of soul years. He was still getting over what had happened a minute ago, with Sam not knowing how old he was. Before he could comment on any of the new information, Sam sucked in a breath of his own and stood carefully, looking at a sheet of paper. “What if… mental manipulation…” He took the paper and strode out of the room, bare feet slapping the floor as he quickly walked down the hall, the three assistants trailing him.

They stopped at a door and Sam opened it, double checking something around the frame; at closer inspection, the trio could see that it was a series of supernatural warding marks carved into the wood. The room itself was large and dusty; apparently Sam and Dean hadn’t yet gotten there in their efforts to clean the bunker. Rows of metal shelves held files, boxes, and crates, the heavier wood rectangles often carved with runes and symbols. “Right around… here.” Sam pulled out a thin envelope from a stack of similar files and blew off the dust. Someone had written on it with a fountain pen in a spidery hand: “Djinn-- photos.” Sam fumbled to open it and slid the top sheet out; a set of old photographs. They were all of arms and torsos and eyes, covered in patterns and glowing-- Bruce gasped-- the same bright blue of the Tesseract and the scepter. “Okay. I think I figured something out,” Sam said, somewhat obviously. “Come back to the library.”

When they were all seated, Sam spilled the contents of the envelope carefully on the table. More photographs; some blurry shots taken from a great distance, some clearly from the heat of battle, and a series of six photographs of a djinn. Sam didn’t know how they had been obtained for the Men of Letters because the djinn was clearly still alive but either docile or tortured into behaving because it -- he -- was bare chested and bare armed, glaring into the camera with eyes glowing blue and sigils wrapped down its arms as if it was about to display the full extent of its power.

Sam picked up his phone. “Dean? Do you know-- yes, I’m fine.” He gave up on restraining himself and rolled his eyes. “Do you know if Charlie is using the same phone number? Is her email the same? Great, thanks. See you in a bit.”

“What’s up, Sam?” Bruce asked.

In response, Sam waved a paper at him. Natasha spread it on the table; it was a quick drawing Steve had done on the scepter before he had left to go run, his firm artist’s hand perfectly outlining the grace of the deadly blade and the beauty of the eerie etching along the shaft.

“I don’t think that Tony’s AI was really an AI. I think it was something else entirely.” Sam laid the drawing of the scepter along one of the photographs of the djinn’s arm and used a fine tipped evidence marker to circle symbols along both the arm and the scepter. “Look how the markings overlap on both. They’re-- at least partially-- binding runes that keep the magic from leaving its vessel except on the vessel’s terms or the terms of someone controlling it.”

Sam reached over to his laptop and typed out a quick email. Natasha read it out over his shoulder. “Are you anywhere near the bunker? Need quick consult, important. --Sam.”

“Who did that go to?” Bruce asked.

“Friend of ours. We had a run in with a specific type of djinn recently and I need to ask what it was
“He got attacked by the djinn?”

“She.”

“She? I thought you said Charlie when you were talking to Dean?”

“I did. And if she ever gets wind that you assumed she was a guy, you’ll be chastised about gender roles and naming stereotypes faster than you can try to apologize.”

His laptop notification interrupted the conversation. Sam grinned. “Great. She’s actually in the area, on her way to California. She’ll be here in a few hours.” He turned to look at the trio. “Can we get a photograph of the scepter from somewhere or will they all be gone with the rest of your computer files and equipment?”

Natasha pulled out her phone and sent a quick text. “Done. Fury will bring a copy.”

“Fury?” Sam raised his eyebrows. “He’s coming here? Wait, I thought he was dead?”

“Decoy.”

“Ah.” As someone who was supposed to be dead himself (several times over) Sam didn’t question that particular turn of events.

“Can we have an outline on djinns or are you going to wait for everyone else?”

“I don’t want to get you too excited in case I’m wrong, but djinns are able to manipulate what you see around you, to the point where it you can touch and taste things and it seems real. Dean got caught by one once and it replicated what his entire life would have been like if the Azazel had never killed our mom and Dad had never started hunting.”

“Wow. Nasty stuff,” Bruce said.

“You have no idea. In the meantime, they drain you dry and then you’re fairly peacefully dead while dreaming happily about sugarplums and fairy dust. Not a bad way to go. I’ll let Charlie explain, but these djinns--” he tapped the photograph “--are a little different.”

They all stood and stretched, the excitement of the moment wearing off a little. “Is Charlie a hunter?” Tony asked. “I don’t think you or Dean have ever mentioned her before.”

Sam shook his head, draining the rest of his water and walking with Tony towards the kitchen.
“She’s a hacker, a genius. She worked at Roman Enterprises and helped us out during the fall. You remember that we got access to the private server?” Tony nodded. “She did it from Dick’s office. Broke her arm and headed out. We met her on another case, she warmed up to us and then stopped by to get some help with the djinn. She’s really sort of a hunter in training, although personally I like “Woman of Letters” better.”

Sam dug through the cabinets and pulled out a bottle of vitamins, shaking two into his hand and swallowing them with a sip of water from a mug. “She’s probably going to be really excited to meet you, by the way.” He considered for a moment and smiled slightly. “And Natasha.” Sam drained the rest of the mug and set it in the sink only to find Tony looking at him, face inscrutable.

“How bad is this for you, really.”

“It sucks,” Sam sighed. “But it’s the least we can do to shut the gates of Hell.”

And Tony couldn’t really argue with that, even if he didn’t like it.

“I’m going to take a nap. Wake me up when Charlie or Fury get here.”

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Dean and Clint were back in forty-five minutes with Steve and Thor in tow, each carrying several grocery bags. They loaded them into the kitchen, Dean clapping Tony on the back in greeting. “How’re things here?”

“I think Sam had a breakthrough,” Tony replied. “Your friend Charlie is coming to talk about something with the djinns you ran into. Sam’s taking a nap on the sofa, we’ve just been wandering the halls, I think Bruce is reading a book about something or the other in the library. Fury is on his way but Natasha is the only one who knows when he’ll get here.”

“Right. Well, sandwiches for lunch and a big dinner. God, I love having a kitchen.”

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Sam was awake again and everyone was eating a late lunch (well, almost everyone was eating a late lunch. Sam was just pushing around a few slices of apple and even Dean’s glares couldn’t make him eat any more) when Dean’s phone chimed. “Yo, bitches,” he read off and then grinned. “Charlie’s here.”

He stood and strode to the door, Sam on his heels and trailed by all six members of the Avengers. Dean opened the door and immediately had his arms full of vivacious redhead. “Good to see you too, Charlie. How’d you get here so fast?”

“I actually was on the way to California, but I was in the area because there’s something very wrong with all the big computer systems and I was wondering if you had something to do with it.” She asked, one eyebrow raised, talking to Dean even as she gave Sam a hug and looked him up and down. “You look tired. Do you know the next one yet?”

He shrugged. “Still haven’t found Kevin.”

Dean spoke up. “And about those computers… I think there’s someone who could tell you about that better than we can.” Charlie caught the smile in his voice and spun on the spot to see Tony grinning and waving.

“What… Tony Stark? Is in your bunker?” She looked back over her shoulder at Dean, eyes wide.

“Not just Tony,” Sam nudged her and she expanded her tunnel stare from the billionaire to see the rest of them.

“The Avengers…?” She whirled to look at Dean and Sam, who now had identical grins on their faces. “How do you know the Avengers? How long have you known the Avengers? Do you know the Avengers or did they just show up?”

“Tony’s our cousin,” Sam blandly stated. “And long enough that we were at Tony’s wedding.”

“Your cousin is Tony Stark and you made ME hack the computers in Dick’s office?” The level of indignation in Charlie’s voice was reaching unheard of levels when Tony stepped forward.

“They did try, but even with Jarvis, I couldn’t do it because he had it set up on the personal server.”

“And we were trying to keep Tony out of it professionally because the next thing you know Dick probably would have held Pepper or us or someone hostage for the suit,” Dean gently told her.

Charlie deflated a little at that and turned back to face the Avengers. “Fine, I forgive you.” She headed towards the Avengers and held out a hand to Tony. “Charlie Bradbury. Hacker and hunter in training. And Woman of Letters,” she added, looking at Sam and smiling.

“Nice to meet you, Charlie.” Tony flashed one of his thousand watt smiles. “Tony Stark. May I introduce the Avengers?”

They all went around and said hello, Charlie beaming. “I’ve read the entire comic run they came out with after the Battle for Manhattan. And—” she looked at Steve “—I have the entire 1942 run of ‘Captain America.’”

Steve smiled. “That was a good set. Sold out in the stands. Not too weird now that you’ve seen the
“real person?” he asked, holding out his arms as if for inspection.

“Even cooler,” she reassured. “And besides, I read all the weird Supernatu--”

“Charlie!” Dean yelped. “No!”

“Supernatural what?” Tony asked, eyes gleaming.


“Chuck Shurley,” Dean muttered. “And now they’re online. I swear, if we ever run into him again…”

“Wait, his name is Chuck Shurley?” Charlie asked. “Do you know him?”

“Well, we did. He might be dead, nobody’s heard from him in years. But yeah, we met him. He’s actually a prophet. How do you think he knew all that crap?”

“Well Dean, that crap is your life so you had better give it some respect.”

Thor rumbled a laugh and started talking to Charlie about how she reminded him of the maiden-friend of his Lady-love.

By the time Dean had gotten Tony off the Supernatural books and made him to swear never to read them (not that he thought a promise on something like this would hold Tony back), Sam was dozing again, head on the table. Dean nudged him awake. “Hey Sleeping Beauty. No naps on the table, it’ll be killer on your back. Do you want to share your djinn brainwave with the class?”

“Right, right,” Sam mumbled, shoving Dean sideways with sleep-relaxed muscles before taking a deep breath and beginning. “Charlie, when the djinn attacked you, you said it fed on fear, right?”

“Yes,” Dean said. “Even when I was in Charlie’s djinn-dream, it modified the dreamroot enough that it pulled a little bit from me.”

“Okay. So get this: I was looking through the library and Dad’s journal and found that same page you did about the bastard djinn offshoot. And I was just thinking about it and then Steve had drawn a picture of the scepter…” Sam handed Dean the drawing. “It sort of all came together. There’s a file on them in one of the storage rooms and we went and got it and look at the colors, the design on the shaft of the spear.”

Dean looked it over. “So you think that between the markings, the color, and the effects…? Somehow the djinn magic is the same sort of thing that powers the scepter.”

“Yes and no,” Sam said. There was a sparkle in his eyes that Dean hadn’t seen in a long time, something that came from discovery for the sake of it. “Djinns die when you sever them from their magic. That’s what the blade dipped in lamb’s blood does; it doesn’t matter so much how you stab them because what you’re really doing is cutting them off from the magic.” He tapped the drawings. “The magic is part of them, but it also is them, like part of a soul. The being itself is the magic, the magic is the being.”
Thor inhaled suddenly. “The runes which mark the scepter-- they bind the magic to the stone.” His face turned stormy and he suddenly seemed much more menacing, despite being an inch shorter than Sam. He turned to face the other Avengers. “I need answers from Heimdall. Leave when you will and I will rejoin you when I am able.”

“Thor,” Steve called once, but then gave up and let him go, the demigod’s cape billowing out behind him as he strode from the bunker.

“Well then.” Charlie said into the silence. “Does he do that often?”

“More than we’d like,” Bruce muttered.

“Anyway.” Sam cleared his throat. “Yes, the runes bind the magic to the vessel. But the magic can also be released by whoever controls it. The scepter controls the magic by binding it to the stone, but it also can be used by the person wielding the scepter. Loki, for example. And the magic can be passed on and around-- like when he used it on Clint and the physicist--” Sam nodded in Clint’s direction “-- but when the magic was released it returned to the vessel to rebind with the rest of it, like a severed soul.”

Bruce cut in, half raising a hand. “So what Tony and I thought was an AI really was… magic? Magic that is at least a little self-aware?”

“And it can be benevolent or malicious, just like the djinn. It seems to rely quite a bit on who’s controlling it.” Dean added.

Charlie leaned forwards and looked at the pages of symbols again. “So just like my djinn was a mean one and yours from years ago was a nice one (even though they were both trying to kill us) the magic was the same.”

“So, I don’t know what you’re going to do about the magic but whatever you try, you need to make sure you bind it properly,” Sam commented to Bruce and Tony. “Once Fury gets here--”

“--tomorrow morning--” Natasha cut in.

“--tomorrow morning with photos of the scepter, I’ll use the drawing and the photos of the scepter and the djinns to come up with a series of runes that you’ll need to use to contain the magic somehow. No matter what you do to beat Ultron, it won’t be any good if the magic is out of control.” Sam finished his lecture and coughed roughly, taking a sip of water before raising his eyebrows. “Questions?”


“So in summary…” Dean looked around at five-sixths of the Avengers, Charlie, and Sam, who muffled another cough. “You all are here at least until tomorrow morning and then you’re off to save the world. Charlie, thanks for coming on such short notice to answer, like, two questions for Sam.”

“I was hacking NORAD again and there’s totally someone poking around. Since that’s where I hid all my backup information, I’m going to keep moving until this is over.” She caught Dean’s frown. “Don’t worry, Dean. If I can handle Dick, I can handle this.”

Dean huffed but didn’t argue, just stood when she did. “Do you want dinner before you go?”

She shook her head. “Thanks, though. Another time.” The redhead turned. “Nice to meet you,” Charlie said to the Avengers. “Too bad I didn’t know you existed before now because this was really cool.” She shook hands with Tony. “Thanks for helping the boys.”
Tony snorted. “I think they’ve probably helped us more than we’ve helped them. You ever need a job, kid, stop by SI.” Charlie looked pleased. Natasha gave her a hug and a grin, which made Charlie look even happier before she looked around.

“Sam, take care of yourself.” Sam nodded and pulled Charlie into a hug.

“Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

“Always,” she said.

Dean picked up her bag and walked her to the door, everyone watching from the lower lever. They couldn’t hear, despite the good acoustics. (Steve probably could hear, but he was keeping his mouth shut.) But they saw Dean give her a long hug and a kiss on the head before she headed out the door and they saw the small smile on both Dean and Sam’s faces.

Sam was rudely awakened from yet another nap on the couch later that afternoon when Castiel appeared on his hand, which was dangling off the sofa and onto the floor precisely where the angel materialized. It only took a moment for the whole situation to collapse into chaos as Sam suddenly was fully aware, hunter’s instincts kicking in and bringing him into the land of the waking. He yanked his smushed hand towards his body and out from under the weight on top of it. Castiel, not expecting the ground beneath his feet to suddenly shift, lost his balance, crashing into several chairs at the nearby table on the way down and knocking a pile of pile of books onto the floor with one flailing arm. Steve and Bruce, who were perusing some of the bookshelves across the room, came running but Sam held up an arm to stop them, taking in the sight of the angel sprawled on the floor, one hand clamped tightly on the across the outer third of his left pectoral muscle but not hiding the blood seeping through the white dress shirt below and starting to stain the perpetually present trench coat.

“Cas, are we in trouble?” Sam asked in a manner much calmer than Bruce expected he would have been, if he had been roused from a nap by an angel landing on his hand.

Castiel shook his head, pulling himself to his knees and swaying slightly. “No.” He took a deep breath. “I needed to confer with you about Kevin… and I needed a moment of respite from the other angels. Naomi is not happy that I possess the tablet and will not hand it to her garrison.” He removed the hand that was pressed over the side of his chest for a moment and frowned at the redness of the palm. Bruce started to take a step towards him, then seemed to remember who -- what -- Castiel was and stopped. Gracefully, Castiel leaned forwards and began to use the blood to draw a sigil on the floor (thankfully, Sam thought; if he had done it on the table or the wall, Dean would have been pissed).

When he finished, the angel relaxed slightly. “Hello, Dean,” he said without turning around. Dean frowned at him and at the sigil from the doorway as Castiel stood.
“Are we expecting company?” He asked, striding towards Cas.

“No,” was the repeated answer. “It is merely a precaution. The bunker is warded against beings of evil intent but not angels specifically. I would recommend, by the way, that you ward several of the rooms against angels, as a stronghold. I wouldn’t put it past Naomi to come here for you, as she would assume you know where I have hidden the tablet.” He grimaced and the blue eyes grew slightly haunted. “They have begun killing people, to try and find me and take the tablet.” As Castiel spoke, he carefully removed the angel blade, overcoat, suitcoat, and tie from the outfit Jimmy Novak had always worn, laying them on the table behind him. Bruce took another step forward, as did Steve, as the angel unbuttoned the dress shirt and pulled it off, revealing a deep but clean gash through the edge of his pectorals and along his side under his arm. Dean lifted Cas’ arm out of the way slightly and Sam and the others could clearly see what the two hunters knew to be the grace of an angel, leaking out of the cut along with the blood.

“Angel blade,” Dean commented to Bruce. “Nasty weapon.”

“The blue shimmery… stuff?” The physicist—turned—doctor asked.

“Grace,” Castiel responded. “It is a gift, given to angels by our Father. It allows us to—” he hesitated. “Be, perhaps. It is what makes us angels. An angel without its grace would simply be human, trapped in their vessel.”

He reached across his body with his right arm and probed the wound carefully before closing his eyes and neatly sealing it with a hum and glow that always seemed to accompany the angels using their power; Sam could practically see Bruce’s eyes getting wider by the minute when Castiel pulled his hand away to reveal unblemished skin.

Sam had been standing long enough and sat back down on the couch, coughing into the crook of his arm and closing his eyes as a wave of dizziness washed over him. He waved Dean off when he looked at him, but Dean didn’t look convinced. “You’re running hot again.”

Sam sighed. “I know.”

Cas swayed on the spot. “I will spend the night here and go tomorrow morning to… keep running.” Dean nodded and pointed down the hallway and Castiel left, picking up his clothing off the table and disappearing down towards the bedrooms.
“Well, that was fun,” Sam said. “I’m going to lay back down now, if you don’t mind.” It took him twice as long to say this as it should have, since he had to stop in the middle to cough.

“Hang on, you need to drink something first,” Dean commanded firmly.

Sam didn’t argue, just waited on the sofa as Dean left and Bruce took a few steps forwards to look at the warding that Castiel had drawn on the floor.

“Is Castiel actually going to sleep? I thought he didn’t do that?” Steve asked.

“He doesn’t,” Sam told him. “But he sort of… passes out sometimes, if he’s running low on juice. It’s not really sleeping.”

Dean came back in, handing Sam a bottle of water and a couple of aspirin, which Sam took with a sigh. “Thanks.” He drank part of the bottle and stood carefully, Dean, Bruce, and Steve watching as he left, headed in the direction of his bedroom. Dean’s shoulders slumped once Sam was out of the room.

“I’m going to start dinner, if anyone wants to join me.” He headed towards the kitchen, Bruce following and Steve staying in the library.

An hour later the Avengers, minus Thor, and Team Free Will, minus Sam, had assembled in the kitchen, dragging in a few extra chairs and one of the small tables from a bedroom to accommodate the large group. “You’re not going to wake Sam for dinner?” Clint had asked. Dean had just shaken his head.

“He needs to sleep a lot these days.”

Tony leaned forward, gesturing with one of his fries. “How bad is Sam, really?” His forehead creased when Dean didn’t immediately answer. “He told us about the Trials and obviously he’s struggling, but he’s playing it down. How bad is it?”

“It is very bad,” Castiel answered instead. “The Trials have never been undertaken before and so it is uncertain what the extent of the damage is. But it is bad enough that I... am unable to heal Sam’s
wounds.” He frowned down at the full plate in front of him and picked up a fry, popping it in his mouth.

Dean raised his eyebrows at him.

“It’s... good, I suppose.”

“You can’t really taste them, can you?” Dean frowned.

“No,” Cas rolled his eyes. “You know this, Dean. Molecules.”

“I don’t know why I even bother,” Dean responded, reaching over and pulling Cas’ plate away to replace it with his empty one and pushing the full dish in the direction of Steve, who was already finishing his first burger.

“Yeah,” Dean returned to talking to Tony. “It’s bad. We don’t know where Kevin is and Sam is-- pretty much breaking down.” His voice dropped.

“Don’t worry,” Natasha tapped Dean’s elbow. “Sam is strong. He’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.” Dean muttered.

The evening was quiet, Dean telling them about how they found the bunker, their meeting with Henry Winchester, and showing them around several sections of the bunker while steadily losing people in each section of the building. Tony and Natasha didn’t even make it past the telescope, now that it was dark enough to see the stars. Bruce peeled off at a section of books in a storage room on middle eastern monsters, Steve stopping to explore the full exercise room deeper in the bunker.

The next morning Sam made it out of bed and into the kitchen at the end of breakfast, still looking tired, with messy hair, a t-shirt and sweatpants. “How long?” he asked, coughing.
“Sixteen hours,” Dean responded. “It’s tomorrow.” The older hunter took a second to look his brother up and down. Sam was still flushed and coughing, his voice rough, and he didn’t eat the bowl of oatmeal that Clint slid in front of him, just pushed it around. Natasha’s phone chimed.

“Fury will be here within an hour,” she announced to the group at whole. Cas, who was sitting off to the side, immediately clicked into what Sam liked to call his “buffering face,” gazing blankly into the distance for a moment.

“He is a mile and a half away. On foot,” the angel announced. Everyone looked at him and he stared back, not adding to his answer.

Dean had finally had enough of watching Sam push around the oatmeal in the bowl without eating it. He hadn’t been eating enough and while he was willing to tolerate it to a certain point (who really wanted to eat when they were sick, after all?) but wherever that point was, they had just passed it; there was no way Sam had eaten more than a fraction of his typical healthy self. “Sam.”

“Dean,” Sam repeated with the same tone.

The Avengers listened as Dean kept his voice light but the meaning serious. “Don’t make me hold you down and shove it in your mouth. We are not having a repeat of the Great Hunger Strike of ‘97.”

Sam didn’t meet his brother’s eyes. “Not hungry, Dean.”

“I don’t care, you need to eat.” Sam didn’t respond, just took a very, very, tiny nibble off the end of the spoon before dropping it in the bowl.

Dean threw his hands in the air. “Fine. Let’s go.” There were raised eyebrows all around as Dean reached out and clamped a hand around his brother’s bicep, pulling him to his feet and out of the room. As a group they followed as Dean took them down a series of hallways that Clint recognized but nobody else did. Finally, they entered a long room and Tony gasped; it was an underground shooting range, set with half a dozen stations and human targets. Nobody spoke as Dean pulled a pistol from his waistband and checked it carefully before raising it and shooting twice, both bullets neatly striking one of the targets through the forehead.

“You know the rules. Same as last time,” Dean commanded in a voice harder than diamond, handing the weapon to Sam.
The tension in the room grew with every second it took Sam to move into position, holding the gun with two shaking hands, then one, then two again. When he fired, the sound seemed to shock the group into absolute stillness as the first bullet struck concrete at shoulder height several inches outside the target and the second barely clipped the edge of the paper the figure was printed on.

Sam lowered the gun, shame and fear and fever heat and exhaustion radiating off of him in almost tangible waves. “Come on,” Dean said, voice suddenly much softer. “You need to eat, Sammy.”

Sam handed him the gun and made an obvious attempt to smile. “What happened to the days of ‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’ to solve arguments?” he asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“I’m giving it up for a while,” Dean said, smacking him lightly on the shoulder and grinning, making Sam’s smile more genuine in the process. “You always win.”

Dean steered them back into the kitchen, taking away Sam’s now-cold bowl of oatmeal and sliding him some toast and slices of apple along with another bottle of water. “How long until Fury gets here?” Dean asked the room at large as he hovered, supervising his brother as he took a few careful bites of toast.

“Fifteen minutes maximum,” Natasha responded, looking at her phone.

“Right, I’m going to raid the first aid kit. Again. I’ll be back.” Dean gave Sam a look as he picked up a piece of apple and put it down without taking a bite.

Sam pushed around his apples, picking one up and taking a small nibble. He wasn’t much for eating anymore; he was just so tired all the time and it made him nauseous and feverish and have headaches and colds… as he was reminded when he coughed violently and almost spilled the water. He ignored the eyes that he could feel boring into him (or just mildly gazing in his direction, depending on the person) and picked up the toast again just before Dean came back into the room.

Sam looked up as Dean tossed a bottle in his direction. He tracked it slowly and so was still looking at Dean the moment his brother remembered how terrible Sam’s reflexes were at the moment, throwing hand closing in a ‘oh, shit’ gesture as the white medicine container flew by Sam. It didn’t hit the floor, however, because Steve reached over with his enhanced reflexes and caught it.

Sam took a moment to be jealous of Steve’s perfect physique and total health before remembering that those enhanced reflexes were going off to fight an evil robot soon and he was going to stay here
and take a nap instead. Of course, the reason he was going to take a nap was because he was exhausted from capitol--t Trials to close the very gates of Hell, but still. It was hard not to be even a little jealous of Steve, even on a good day.

Steve handed the bottle to Bruce, who started reading the label. Dean pulled a thermometer out of his pocket and the Avengers watched as the brothers repeated the “Sam,” “Dean,” conversation.

“When did we get a thermometer?” Sam asked, the end of the sentence muffled as Dean overrode his protest and pushed the thermometer into his mouth.

“I got it a few weeks ago when you started getting sick. Shut up and keep that in your mouth,” Dean said, pointing a finger at his brother. Sam acquiesced, crossing his arms like a petulant toddler and making several of the older Avengers (Bruce and Tony in particular) hide their smiles.

“Nicholas Fury is here,” Castiel announced and a knock at the bunker door confirmed. Sam protested inarticulately around the thermometer, probably about yet another someone coming in while Sam was suffering the humiliation of being taken care of by other people (heaven forbid, Bruce thought), but Dean just gave him a look and went to open the door. He returned a moment later with Fury behind him, looking less intimidating than usual without his signature black coat and eye patch. Dean looked and found that Bruce had rescued Sam from the thermometer and his brother had returned to picking at the toast and apples. Sam coughed a few times and took a sip of water.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Sam asked. “I mean, we know I’m dying, but how badly am I dying right now?”

Tony shot Sam a look that said he didn’t find Sam’s flippant remark funny. “One-oh-one-point-six,” Bruce read off. “High, but not dangerous.” He opened the container of medication that Dean had thrown earlier and shook out three of the pills. Fury watched with raised eyebrows as Sam accepted the medication and washed it down with another swig of water.

“Long time, no see, Nick,” Tony said. “Did you bring Sam’s paperwork?”

“Of course, Stark. Why else would I be here?”

“To help us stop the world destroying robot?”
“That you built? Artificial intelligence. You never even hesitated.”

Dean cut in. “How about we skip to the part where you’re useful?”

Fury reached into his jacket and pulled out a sheaf of large folded papers, sliding them across to Sam. The hunter unrolled them and started flipping through, only half listening to the rest of the conversation happening. He cut in a moment later. “I’ll be in the library.”

He stood, gripping the edge of the table until he was steady and knowing Fury was watching, trying to figure out what was going on. Sam wasn’t about to tell him; he didn’t trust Fury as far as he could throw him and it was bad enough that the spy was in the bunker. Most of the Avengers and Dean followed him into the library, leaving Tony behind with Fury for a moment.

Steve started pulling photos together, conferring quietly with Sam about some of the sigils. Fury and Tony emerged a moment later, Tony looking just as unhappy as he had when they had arrived. “So get this,” Sam started. “The sigils on the djinns and the scepter are definitely the same. That means everything I figured out yesterday is probably right and the AI… Ultron, I guess, is not just science, he’s also magic.”

Fury spoke up. “Ultron took you folks out of play to buy himself time. My contacts all say he’s building something. The amount of Vibranium he made off with, I don’t think it’s just one thing.”

“What about Ultron himself?” Steve asked.

“Ah. He's easy to track, he's everywhere. Guy's multiplying faster than a Catholic rabbit. Still doesn't help us get an angle on any of his plans though.”

Tony spoke. “He still going after launch codes?”

“Yes, he is, but he's not making any headway.”

The genius frowned, cocking his head. “I cracked the Pentagon's firewall in high school on a dare.”

Fury shrugged. “Yeah, well, I contacted our friends at the NEXUS about that.”

“NEXUS?” Steve asked, eyebrow raised.

Sam was the one who answered. “It's the world internet hub in Oslo, every byte of data flows through there, fastest access on earth. And?” he asked

“Ultron's fixated on the missiles, but the codes are constantly being changed.”
Many pairs of eyebrows went up. “By whom?” Natasha neutrally questioned.

“Parties unknown.”

Dean spoke. “You have an ally?”

“Ultron’s got an enemy, that’s not the same thing.” Fury shrugged. “Still, I’d pay folding money to know who it is.”

“Right,” Tony said. “I might need to visit Oslo, find our unknown.”

The red-headed assassin leaned forwards against the table. “Well, this is good times, boss, but I was kind of hoping when I saw you, you’d have more than that.”

“I do. I have you.” The ex-director took a moment to look around at the group. “Back in the day, I had eyes everywhere, ears everywhere else. Here we all are, back on earth, with nothing but our wit, and our will to save the world.” You could have heard a pin drop. “So stand. Outwit the platinum bastard.”

Sam saw the small grin on Natasha’s face. “Steve doesn't like that kind of talk.”

Dean raised his eyebrows at Sam, who just shrugged and muffled a cough.

Steve rolled his eyes. “You know what, Romanoff?”

“So what does he want?” Fury prompted.

“To become better. Better than us. He keeps building bodies.” Steve responded.

Tony half raised a hand. “Person bodies. The human form is inefficient, biologically speaking, we're outmoded. But he keeps coming back to it.”

Dean got what Sam called the “Irony Smirk” on.

“When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you amazingly failed.”

To everyone’s surprise, Castiel spoke up for the first time since Fury had arrived. “Humanity does not need to be protected, it needs to evolve. It always has. I remember when you began your evolution. Ultron's going to evolve.”

Fury raised his eyebrows at the angel. “How?”

There was an instant of silence broken only by Sam coughing and the rustle of papers. “Well,” Sam said. “His current form probably isn’t holding the magic too well. Nobody saw any runes, right?” Everyone shook their heads in negation. “It would have been hard to do on short notice. But if he wants better containment and better ability to control the magic then he’ll need a better body marked with the runes and he’ll have to build it. Can he do that?”

Bruce spoke up. “Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?”

“Cas?” Dean asked.

“She is currently in... Seoul,” the angel said.

“So. You’re really an angel.” Fury looked slightly disbelieving but his voice was steady.

“Yes.” Castiel looked confused at the question. “I am.”
“Do the wing thing, Cas?” Dean asked. Castiel gave Dean a look that said he knew Dean wanted to see it again just as much as he wanted everyone else to see it but obliged anyway, taking a few steps back before the lights in the room flashed and the white light illuminated him from everywhere and nowhere. There was a collective gasp as the shadows of the wings came into view, the massive wingspan distorted against the shapes of the columns and bookshelves behind him. Castiel held the position for an instant before the wings flicked and were gone. He came and sat back at the table as if everything were perfectly normal.

Steve, who hadn’t batted an eye because apparently he had taken Castiel’s healing the previous afternoon as well as the initial time they had seen him and he had cast out demons as signs well enough that Castiel was the real deal, moved the meeting along. “Okay,” he said, picking up one of the papers in front of Sam and studying it again. “I’ll take Natasha and Clint.”

“He’ll be more powerful than any of you,” Sam interjected.

“Maybe all of you,” Dean pointed out. “An android designed by a robot.”

Steve sighed with exaggerated (but only a little) exasperation. “You know, I miss the days when the weirdest thing science ever created was me.”

Fury spoke up again. “I’ll drop Banner off at the tower. Do you mind if I borrow Ms Hill?”

“She’s all yours, apparently.” Tony just looked at Fury for a second. “What are you going to do?”

The ex-director shrugged. “I don’t know. Something dramatic, I hope.”

Dean snorted at that. “Be careful; supernatural beings have a nasty habit of being meaner than they look.”

“You could come with us, Mr Winchester. We could use another pair of hands who know how to deal with the supernatural,” Fury suggested.

There was a pause. Dean couldn’t deny he was tempted; a chance to fight with the Avengers? In actual battle? That would just about outdo the fact that Sam had been living and training with them for a year while he had been in purgatory. But Sam… he was in bad shape. And Dean couldn’t leave him and go off to fight with superheroes, not when they had a chance at closing the gates of Hell.

“I can’t,” Dean finally replied. “There’s too much at stake here. We need to find Kevin and get these Trials done.”

“Dean--” Sam started to protest.

“Dean--” Sam started to protest.

“Sam. If the Avengers--” Dean gestured at the large group of super powered humans-- “win or lose this battle, there’s going to be just as much batshit madness in the supernatural world as ever and we still have to try and stop it. We’ve got to close the gates.”

Sam huffed. “Fine.”

“Besides,” Dean added, reaching out and ruffling Sam’s hair in a way he knew Sam hated, “if anyone can fight with the Avengers it should be you. You’re the one who could lift Thor’s hammer, after all,” he said, the last sentence having the feel of a joke which had been bandied about by Dean.
for some time, a sentiment confirmed by Sam’s huff of annoyance.

The reaction in the group was instantaneous. “WHAT?” Tony asked loudly.

“Please, you didn’t even get to try, you were busy chasing Mrs Tran,” Sam replied to Dean. “I bet you could have. I bet they all could,” he gestured at the Avengers. “The legend probably isn’t even real, it’s just heavier than people a thousand years ago could lift so they thought no one could and came up with all that ‘worthy’ stuff. We all know I’m not worthy.” Sam looked around for some support. “Right?”

But everyone was busy looking at him in awe. “Well, if anyone can finish a bunch of trials to close the Gates of Hell, it would be you, Sam,” Clint finally said. “Congrats.”

“What?” Sam asked, looking at Dean who was just as confused as he was.

“You’re wrong, Sam,” Bruce kindly explained. “The ‘worthy’ thing isn’t just a myth. It’s true. And none of us can lift Thor’s hammer.”

Sam’s eyes had grown huge. “What?” he repeated, as if unsure he was hearing correctly.

“We were talking about it just a few days ago and Thor let us try. None of us could lift it.”

“Although,” Natasha cut in, “I could swear it shifted when Steve tried.”

Steve shrugged, neither confirming or denying.

“It’s not just science, Sam,” Tony told them, sounding slightly peeved that he hadn’t been able to science Thor’s hammer into his understanding. “It’s magic. Which is science! Strictly speaking. But it’s true, the thing about it only working if you’re worthy.”

“But I’m not worthy!” Sam protested. “I’m a mess!”

“Aren’t we all?” Dean muttered.

Cas spoke up. “Sam, you were able to contain Lucifer and fight him down as a vessel. Holding an
“Exactly! The Devil himself chose me as his vessel! I had demon blood in me for years and probably still do! I’m not worthy of anything!” the younger Winchester objected. He probably would have continued to do so if he hadn’t started coughing, doubling over as his body was shaken by dry, rasping coughs.

“Easy, Sam,” Dean mumbled, handing his brother a bottle of water as Sam slowly straightened.

“Thanks,” Sam gasped, taking a careful sip before setting the bottle by his feet.

“Anyway,” Steve said. “Now’s not the time.” He eyed the brothers with a trained soldier’s glance. “As much as both of you could probably fight with us, you’ve never trained as a duo and we don’t need to be learning how you fight while we’re fighting.”

“Steve’s right,” Natasha sighed. “Now’s not the time. But someday, maybe.” She winked at Dean, who couldn’t help but grin.

Fury stood. “We need to go. Now that we know more about what’s going on, we need to light a fire under Ultron’s ass. He’s going to be working fast to build that new body and we need to slow him down.”

Everyone followed suit, standing and starting to gather their various weapons from where they were scattered around the bunker. Sam called Tony over.

“Look, it’s going to be crazy. But if you guys can help it, you shouldn’t let Ultron touch you. Who knows what he can do with that magic. Also, if you can just break some of the runes on him, you might be able to free the magic and he’ll just drop dead. You can’t count on that working, though, because if I were him, I would hide the runes under plates of armor, like written on the inside of his skin. Your best bet is to be wearing him down and getting to him before he can build that new body.”

“Thank you, Sam.” Tony reached out and took his younger cousin’s hand for a moment. “And… he hesitated. “I know I’m not one to talk because I’m just as much a mess as you are… but. You are not worth nothing, Sam Winchester. Look at me.” Sam had dropped his head, disbelief written all over his face. “I know you probably don’t believe me, you think I’m lying because you’re family. No, Sam.” He gripped Sam’s hand so tightly it probably hurt, but he didn’t let go. “You are worth
something. I don’t know how much, I don’t know how little. But you are not nothing.”

The moment was broken as Clint walked back into the room with Dean, both loaded with water bottles and Clint’s weapons. “Drink up, Tony,” Dean said, tossing him a bottle.

It only took about half an hour or so for preparations to finish and there was once again a fully armed battalion of superheroes in the War Room.

“Good luck,” Dean finally said after a few moments of looking awkwardly at everyone and trying to pretend nobody was worried. “Nobody die. I expect a full report with no deaths.”

“Yes, sir,” Clint responded, shaking Dean’s hand. “No deaths.”

“Be careful,” Sam added. “It’s tricky stuff, Djinn magic.”

Natasha stepped forwards and carefully pulled the bigger man into a hug. “You be careful too, Sam. Take care of yourself.”

There were a few more handshakes and hugs as everyone began to pile out the door until only Sam, Dean, and Castiel remained.

“I should go as well,” the angel said. “It probably hasn’t been wise for me to remain this long in the bunker.” He reached out and gripped Sam’s arm for a moment. “Be safe, Sam,” he stepped back and looked at Dean. “Take care of him.”

Dean nodded and without another word, Castiel vanished.

“Just you and me, Sam.” Dean looked around the empty, echoing hall.

“Don’t worry,” Sam suddenly sounded much more confident than he had in weeks. “Everyone will be fine.”

“Yeah? How do you know?” Dean asked, voice skeptical but smiling all the same.
“I just do.” Sam caught the grin and sent back a lopsided smile of his own.

“Is it because you’re worthy?” The smile had been upgraded to a smirk.

“Shut up, Dean. You jerk.”

“Bitch. Come on, you need to eat.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Sorry the ending may seem a little abrupt, I ran out of ideas. And on that note, I have a lot of general stuff, but it doesn’t seem to kick in until season ten so if you have season nine ideas, hit me with them! Thank you all for the reviews; you are so incredibly inspirational.

Also, updates will now be fairly sporadic for the next few months; I leave tomorrow morning to go back home, where I will have limited internet access. I’m also going to be traveling in Europe for a month so I won’t be updating for the month of July!
He had known something wasn’t right. All day he had been feeling the wrongness like broken glass in his joints and metal filings under his skin. But he couldn’t put his finger on it, couldn’t pin it down and attribute it to something other than the echoes of the silent tower.

Tony set down the scraps of metal he had been fiddling with, trying to streamline, to make everything just fast enough, strong enough, that nobody would ever die again on his watch. The pieces clinked softly together, the noise drowned out by the music Tony had been blaring for hours, trying to fill in the invasive, malevolent silence creeping under doors and around tables, collecting like a poisonous fog on the floor.

There wasn’t anyone there to reprimand him. Bruce, gone, living quietly somewhere unknown. The new Avengers, Steve and Natasha whipping Rhodes and Wanda and Vision into shape somewhere. Jarvis, gone.

Jarvis would have, by now, made him stop working, cutting off the music and sending him to get some food and stop brooding.

But Friday, bless her little Irish circuits, wasn’t Jarvis so the music just kept playing, Tony kept brooding, and the revamped Mark IV was coming together nicely.

Pepper would have made him eat something, too, if she was here. Or the Avengers would have.

But Pepper was off on a meeting, which was almost a relief at this point; he still loved her and she was still his better half but times were becoming more and more frequent when they would squabble about their relationship and the respective safety of both parties. The Avengers were at the compound, trying in various measure to adapt to their new team members’ presence and the old team members’ absences. Vision had replaced Tony on air support, Rhodey was approaching an official induction into the group as well. Bruce’s bulk force as the Hulk hadn’t really been usurped yet, but Wanda Maximoff seemed like she could do a lot of damage once she was trained up.

She was a tricky one-- Tony had heard her story, how she and her brother had been trapped by one of his bombs. He had avoided talking to her one on one ever since, unsure how she would react to him. At any rate, she had just lost her brother and the last thing she needed reminding of was the guy who was pretty responsible for his death.

So these days, the tower was empty. The new Avengers hadn’t gotten around to visiting their technical advisor in his home; Tony always went out to them. And while Steve had promised to continue team dinner night at least once a month in the tower, that day simply hadn’t come around yet that month.

The music carried on and Tony kept working until the phone calls started rolling in.

Jarvis would have known, when he was categorizing the incoming calls, to bring the one from Dean Winchester to the top of the line, shuffling even new SHIELD and the Avengers below him.

But Friday wasn’t Jarvis and a week and a half of full operation hadn’t taught her everything Jarvis had known so when the music finally faded and the call came through it was Steve, his Captain America voice in full power.
“Stark!” Steve’s voice rang out, assured but with a line of panic underneath. “What’s going on? This wasn’t a scheduled event, I’ve got Jane Foster on it, but Thor’s still gone--”

“What? Wait, what?” Tony repeated. He waved with one hand and Friday pulled up the news, even as Steve fed him information about falling debris across the world and off the chart energy readings from Dr Foster and wow, that was impressive. The images looked like shooting stars, but low, large, as if they were simply appearing and falling to the earth without coming from space first. It was unnatural, unscientific, almost… Tony swore. He would have know that glowing white-blue light anywhere.

“Steve, give me ten. I don’t know anything for sure, but I would bet... “ He looked at the screen again. “I’ll be right out.”

Steve agreed and hung up, leaving Tony to fumble at his clothing, preparing to suit up.

“Boss, you’ve got calls coming in from--”

“Not now, Fri!”

The suit slid around him and two minutes later, he was wrapped in the latest functioning Iron Man suit and flying out towards the compound as fast as he could manage.

Steve was waiting for him in the doorway, backlit by the bright interior of the training building and tension visible in the lines of his shoulders and the fold of his arms.

The suit peeled off Tony, cutting off the ringing phone in his ear. “Come on, come on!” Tony groaned. He looked at Steve. “Anything new from Dr Foster?” he asked as his ex-teammate led him inside where the others waited in the ready room, looking nervous and tense.

“Nothing new,” Steve said, shaking his head. “What about you? I mean, that color…”

He trailed off, but Tony should have known that Steve would have seen it as soon as Tony had, that distinctive white-blue light that had radiated around catching the artist’s eye and making the connections to the powers exhibited by the only supernatural being they knew.

Tony nodded in agreement. “Castiel. It’s the same color. I’ve been trying to call Dean and Sam for the last couple minutes but neither of them will pick up. I could just track their phones, but they have little enough privacy as it is. Plus they’re probably a little busy at the moment.”

“Boss, I have record of two missed calls and a voicemail from Dean Winchester,” Friday piped in from the overhead speakers, making Tony’s heart sink. He had missed them.

“Friday, all calls from Sam and Dean Winchester are priority one. Play the voicemail.”

Tony sank onto the couch next to Natasha as the voicemail began. There were a few seconds of crackly silence and road sounds, the purr of the Impala unmistakable even through the phone line.

“Timestamp: 10:12.” Nearly an hour previous, just after the falling stars had started.

“Hey, Tony.” Tony’s stomach dropped and he buried his face in his hands at Dean’s voice. His cousin sounded tired, bone deep exhausted but at the same time there was a fear in his voice and a quick intensity even in the two words.
“Look, um. Sam’s… we didn’t finish the trials. It would have killed him. The last step,” Dean elaborated. “I couldn’t let him do it, but he was so sure, so ready—” Dean stopped and took a deep breath. “I couldn’t let him, but he almost passed out and I had to get him to a hospital.” A scratching sound, like a hand being run over a scruffy chin of stubble. “Okay. Um. The sky. I’m sure you saw it. Metatron, he’s an angel, and he tricked Cas into thinking he was doing the right thing, but he must have been lying and now I think the angels have been cast out. I…” His voice broke.

“I think I did the right thing. Oh, god, I hope I did the right thing. I called an angel, I prayed for one and I let him possess Sam so he can heal Sam. He’s gonna be pissed, but if he’s alive then…” Dean trailed off.

“I’m going to get some coffee, then I’m going back to the hospital. He might be awake by then. I hope this works. Anyway, we’re going to need somewhere to crash for a few days and I was--”

Tony cut the call with a sharp wave of his hand at Friday and picked up his phone, already dialing. “Dean?” he asked carefully, the Avengers looking on. “Dean, oh thank god.”

Steve, Natasha, and Rhodey’s shoulders relaxed immediately. Everyone else still looked concerned and confused in equal measure.

“Can you make it to the tower or should I come pick you up?” Tony asked, something in his voice saying he might go pick them up regardless of how Dean responded. “Okay. Are you sure? How long?”

Tony hung up the phone and buried his face in his hands, taking a deep, long breath and letting it out slowly. He ran his hands through his hair and looked up to find six pairs of eyes looking at him in various levels of concern. “They’re on the way. Sam… I don’t know. I don’t know, damn it!” Tony closed his eyes for a second and opened them when a light touch brushed across his shoulder. “They’re coming to the tower for a little bit. Hopefully, I can wrestle some more details out of Dean but it seems like the sky thing--” he gestured vaguely upwards “--isn’t an immediate concern.” He stood. “I need to go.”

Steve nodded. “Keep us in the loop. They probably won’t want us around the Tower; you know how fierce Dean gets when Sam’s hurt really badly.”

“Well do, El Capitino,” Tony said, although his voice was missing its usual levity. “I’ll call you when everything’s sorted out.”

He headed out, letting the suit fold back around him and nodding in the Avengers direction before taking to the skies. Fifteen minutes later, he was back at the tower, surveying the partially fixed rooms where Ultron had attacked with the Armored Legion. Tony sighed. He had some cleaning to do.

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“The Winchesters are here, Boss,” Friday stated a little unnecessarily as the elevator doors were already sliding open and Sam and Dean stepping out.

To Tony’s surprise, Sam was actually looking a sight better than he had last time Tony saw him, sick and exhausted from the Trials and still trying to run himself off his feet. Now, it looked like he had gotten in a street fight, a few cuts and bruises littering his face and he still looked tired. He had lost weight, too, and Tony had a sudden parental urge to make him sit down and immediately eat something.
“Hey, Tony,” Dean sounded just as tired as Sam looked but when he reciprocated to Tony’s hug, his arms were wrapped so tightly around the genius it almost hurt.

“Hey,” Tony replied. “You guys look like crap.”

Sam laughed tiredly and let Tony hug him, too. “Gee, thanks. I’m not really surprised, though. Things have been crazy.”

“It’s late, I think,” Tony said, looking out through the floor to ceiling windows at the dark sky. He had been busy and lost track of time, again. “Friday, what time is it?”

“It’s 12:04 am, Boss.”

That caught Sam and Dean’s attention. “Where’s Jarvis?” Sam asked.

Tony’s face closed off. “Jarvis is gone. Long story.”

Neither brother looked sure about how to respond to that— did you console someone over the loss of an artificial intelligence, even if that intelligence had been a friend of sorts?

“Anyway,” he continued, “I’m sure you want to get some sleep. Your rooms are in the same place as before, Ultron didn’t get anything on that side. Any more bags you want up here?”

Both shook their heads and Sam flashed Tony another brief smile before heading off to one of the rooms. Dean lingered a moment and Tony was glad because that meant he wouldn’t have to ask Dean to hang back.

“Dean, what happened?”

Dean ran a hand down his face and collapsed onto the couch. “I had to make a decision. I stopped the Trials; we-- me and Cas-- figured out that for him to do the last Trial, he would have to die. The angels were falling and I asked them for help and one came.”

“And he healed Sam?” Tony asked hopefully.

“Umm… no,” Dean said, shiftily, looking down at his hands. “He wasn’t strong enough so he had to possess Sam so he could heal him from the inside out while he got his strength back.”

“You mean,” Tony said, voice rising. “Sam’s being possessed by an angel right now? And he doesn’t know?”

“Uh, yeah.” Dean let his head drop back to the back of the couch. “I know, it’s all just a big shitshow. But it was the only way to save Sam’s life.”

“He’s going to be mad at you when he finds out.”

Dean shot straight up and poked Tony’s chest with one finger. “You can’t tell him. Can’t.” The sudden move seemed to have drained him because he sat back with a sigh. “If he finds out, he’ll kick out Ezekiel and then he’ll die because he’s not healed yet.”

There was a second of silence as Tony tried to formulate a response before Dean went on, voice suddenly so soft Tony could barely hear him. “You should have seen him, Tony. He was so ready to give up the goddamn ghost. ‘It’ll kill you, Sam!’ ‘So?’” Dean mimicked and Tony knew he was right. He was every bit as selfish and family starved as the Winchesters and if Sam being mad at them was the price they had to pay to keep him alive, so be it.
“Fine,” Tony said. “I’ll keep it on the down low.”

“That’s all I ask,” Dean replied, relief palpable in his voice.

“What about the angels? Falling from the sky?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know. Haven’t heard from Cas yet.”

The conversation lapsed until Tony stirred. “You should go to bed.”

Dean sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

“Don’t worry, Dean. Everything will be better in the morning.”

Tony tried to sound reassuring, but he was fooling no one, including himself.

Forcing himself to act like he didn’t know his cousin was currently possessed by an angel might have been the hardest thing Tony had ever done.

He ate breakfast, chatting with Sam about how he was feeling and what had happened on his end of things since he had last met the Winchesters. Tony explained the events of Sokovia, what had happened to Jarvis, and how the Avengers now continued without Tony as an official member.

Sam looked a little better every hour and by the second night Tony couldn’t resist: he had to ask.

“How do you remember what happened in that church?”

Sam’s face became solemn and serious and (if Tony was reading it right) almost a little ashamed.

“Parts of it. I was with Crowley and we were trying to cure him, but it was all going wrong. I had to confess my sins, Dean was off with Cas, but then he came back and…” his voice faded out. “I was dying, I think. We got out the car… the angels were falling…”

And suddenly, as suddenly as if a switch had been flipped, it wasn’t Sam any more. He straightened up, adding a few inches to his height that Sam usually kept hidden under a partial slouch so he didn’t look as intimidating. His eyes flashed a bright electric blue for a fraction of a second and he looked down his nose at Tony in a way Sam never, ever did.

“How Anthony Stark,” Sam’s voice said, but a shade deeper, “Please do not make me regret allowing Dean Winchester to come to your home.”

Something lit in Tony’s chest, a feeling of wrongness. “Allowing Dean Winchester?” he asked. “It’s his home as much as it is mine. You don’t get a say in allowing anything. You’re just there to heal Sam.” Tony let his distaste for the angels (which had never really diminished ever since they had tried to get Sam and Dean to say yes to Michael and Lucifer and fight to the death) bleed into his voice quite clearly.

Sam glared at him and Tony suddenly understood how intimidating Sam could probably be if he wanted to. For a moment, Tony wondered if he was going to end up as a pile of ash on his own fancy carpet before Sam took a step back. “Be careful, Stark.”

And then it was suddenly Sam again, looking a little confused. “You all right, Tony?” he asked. “You look worried.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Tony gathered his wits with alacrity and turned to open the fridge and pull out a
bottle of water. “Just tired.”

“I could have sworn…” Sam trailed off and shook his head. “Never mind.”

Tony didn’t tell Dean what happened, but he wasn’t very surprised when Sam and Dean came to breakfast the next morning with their bags packed.

“Got a hunt,” Sam said, smiling a little.

Dean looked like he had many reservations that he wasn’t going to voice. “And then we’ll probably go back to the bunker. Thanks for letting us stop by for a few days, though.”

Much to Tony’s frustration, he didn’t get to talk to Dean alone before the brothers left, Sam (and thus Ezekiel) alway around for the next hour.

And so he didn’t hear what was happening until Castiel showed up on his doorstep.

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The elevator chimed, making Rhodey and Tony look up from their project in confusion. The elevator didn’t usually chime, the doors just opened.

“Friday?” Tony asked, reaching as casually as possible for a half assembled hand repulsor on a nearby table.

“I have a man in the elevator, Boss.” Friday hesitated. “Image matches Jarvis records of Castiel.”

“Let him in,” Tony said, standing and heading towards the door. He was pulling out his phone and ready to call Dean about the probably bloody and unconscious Castiel and impending disaster until the doors slid open to reveal Castiel. Who looked tired and a little dirty and who had scrapes on his hands and cheek that looked like nothing worse than road rash instead of supernatural attack.

“Castiel?” Tony asked. “We good?”

The angel took a deep breath and his forehead creased. “I need… some help. But I think we are, as you say, good.”

“Do I need to call Dean?” Tony followed up.

Castiel hesitated, clearly torn. “No,” he finally said. “Dean has… I think the proper slang would be ‘kicked me out’ of the bunker.”


Cas grimaced. “His reasoning was… unclear. I am… human, right now. For all intents and purposes.” He glanced at Tony. “Metatron, in the final trial. He stole my grace, and I am thus-- not very useful at the moment. It is possible that is the source of Dean’s animosity.”

“No, Cas, wait, what?” Tony was having a hard time processing. Cas had his grace stolen? So he was pretty much a human? Dean had kicked Cas out? Without a good explanation? “Okay, you know what? I’m calling him, that idiot. Rhodey, can you go look at Cas’s hands and get him something to eat? I’ll be right there.”

Castiel didn’t look very happy that Tony was going to call Dean, but Tony wanted answers more than he wanted Cas to be happy so he waited until the angel gave in and followed Rhodes out of the room.
A moment later, he was listening to the ringing on the other end of the line.

“Yo,” Dean said. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Tony hissed down the line. “What’s up is that your angel friend, Castiel, just showed up at the Tower saying that you quote ‘kicked him out of the bunker’. What the hell, Dean?”

“He showed up at the Tower?” There was a loud sound that may have been Dean’s head colliding with something solid. “Damn, Tony. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for him to show up there, I--”

“Dean, you complete fucking idiot, I don’t care that he’s here, what I want to know is why you kicked him out.”

There was a long silence.

“Dean, answer me.”

“Because of Sam,” Dean said finally. “Damn it, Tony, do you think I really wanted Cas to go?”

“Well, you need to call him later and tell him that because he’s been here for all of five minutes and I’m pretty sure he thinks you hate him and that usually you only keep him around because he’s useful.”

“Wait--”

“Also,” Tony steamrollered on. “What the hell were you thinking just sending him out?” He started pacing the lab, unable to get rid of all his nervous energy just by talking to Dean. “He doesn’t know the first thing about living among humans, Dean! Nothing! His hands were all scraped up and I send Rhodey off to clean them up and Cas looked at me like cleaning a wound was the weirdest thing he had ever heard of! He has no papers! No social security number, no passport, no birth certificate, no record of ever having lived and you expected him to be able to GO OUT AND LIVE AS A HUMAN?”

There was silence again and Tony hoped it was sinking into Dean just how badly he had fucked this up.

“So what happened?” Tony pressed.

“Ezekiel,” Dean responded, seeming a little relieved that Tony was no longer yelling. “The angels are-- were, I don’t know-- after Cas. We can’t let the angels find Sam as long as he’s possessed by Ezekiel and still healing. It’s been a couple weeks, it can’t be much longer. But Ezekiel said that if I didn’t send Cas away, he would leave and Sam would die.”

Tony met this speech with a silence of his own. “Dean,” he finally said. “I don’t like this.”

Dean sighed. “Me either. But whatever it takes to keep Sam alive, I’ll do.”

“Does Cas know about Ezekiel?”

“He knows that I called Ezekiel to come heal Sam, but doesn’t know that meant--”

“Sam getting possessed?”

“No.”

“I still think he should know. But I’ll wait and let you call and tell him yourself. Fine,” Tony said,
“For now, he’ll be here. We can get him forgeries of the paperwork he would need and can teach him how to, I don’t know, brush his teeth or whatever.”

“Thanks, Tony. I’m sorry.”

“You damn well better be,” Tony said and then hung up feeling both vindicated and slightly guilty.

He went upstairs to find Cas sitting at the kitchen island staring at a cup of coffee as if it had the mysteries of the universe written across it. “Cas,” he said, and the angel— not angel, human— looked up.

“You’re staying here, at least for a bit,” Tony explained, sliding into the seat next to Rhodey and across from Cas. “We’ll get some paperwork around for you and all that good stuff. You probably shouldn’t actually work for new SHIELD or anything but you don’t have to have a job anyway—”

“No,” Castiel said. “I need one. A human job.”

“Are you-- like, here? Or?”

Castiel shook his head. “I will find one. Somewhere, on my own.”

Tony rolled his eyes. It looked like this was going to be more complicated than he thought. “Fine. But we’re still getting you paperwork— you’ll never get a job without a social security number and a driver’s license. Plus, all that important human stuff like how to apply for a job.”

Castiel appeared to think this over, then nodded. “Alright. If you think it’s really necessary.”

In the end, it all was really necessary and more. Castiel spent only about two weeks at the Tower, secluded away from prying eyes as Tony (with some help from Steve and Natasha) obtained a complete set of paperwork under the name of Steve Novak.

(“What do you want to be called?” Tony asked. “We can put Castiel if you want, but it’s not exactly a common name and if you really want to be a little more undercover…”)

Cas thought for a moment. “I like the name ‘Steve,’” he said seriously and Tony had to keep from snorting because an ex-angel named Steve of all things? But that was what Castiel wanted and that was what went on his paperwork.)

And then Tony woke up one morning and Cas was gone. A note on the kitchen table read simply “thank you” in an elegant script.

Tony had given Cas several Stark Industries credit and debit cards so it wasn’t too hard for him to follow Cas electronically; Cas rented what seemed to be a small apartment in the midwest and a few days later, income started trickling in from a gas station chain payroll. Tony just shrugged. If that was what Cas wanted to do, that was what he wanted.

Cas began to call Tony on occasion just two weeks after he had left the tower. Rhodey thought it was hilarious that Tony, of all people, frequently found himself giving life advice to Castiel. Tony thought it was depressing as hell because this meant Dean still hadn’t contacted Cas and Cas still thought he shouldn’t call Dean, even to ask about things like what the best flavor of Pringles was.
Tony had been on the phone with Cas for the entirety of Castiel’s first shopping trip in an actual grocery store away from the Tower because Cas had ventured into a superstore and panicked about the huge number of options and which was best. Tony had talked Castiel into buying apples and not buying an industrial pack of toothpaste for the next twenty years and shuddered a little when he hung up the phone because somewhere along the line Tony had become responsible and he wasn’t sure if he liked it or not.

Tony’s phone would ring once a week or so and he would answer to find Castiel on the line, sometimes worrying about something (I saw a stray cat out in the rain, do you think it would be acceptable to the man who owns this appartment if I brought it in?) sometimes just very excited about whatever was happening (Tony! I was watching a show on television designed to help people paint and it is amazing how far humanity has come. I remember watching your ancestors draw on cave walls and I must say the quality has really improved since them!)

Occasionally, Tony would glean a bit of information which usually lead to him leaving Dean long, loud, or strongly worded voicemails. He learned that Cas was doing occasional hunts, just in the area. He heard all about it after Cas ran into Sam and Dean and left Dean a particularly dynamic message about Dean’s treatment of Cas during the whole fiasco. Somewhere along the lines, he learned that Kevin was back in the bunker with Sam and Dean, which pissed him off to no end because really? Kevin could be there but not Cas?

But overall, Tony couldn’t help but feel a little proud of Cas. Which didn’t make any sense because what right did Tony have to be proud of a guy who used to be an angel? And was now just a human doing normal human things? He was proud of Cas doing crap like budgeting enough to buy a car a few months in with Tony’s help (although he was horrified by the color) and volunteering on occasion to work at a homeless shelter.

It was all going fairly well, except for Tony’s gnawing worry about Sam and Ezekiel and Dean and Kevin and Cas and… well, everyone. But other than that.

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Tony had finally convinced Dean.

Not to get Sam to kick Ezekiel out, although Tony had tried and lost that argument several times. But instead, to get Dean to send Kevin to New York.

Kevin had spent several weeks at the bunker, as best as Tony could figure out from details Cas had let slip; the ex-angel seemed to have had a little communication with either Dean or the prophet.

It had taken Tony longer than anticipated to get Dean to send Kevin out. Tony had been sure that Dean would jump at any chance to get Kevin away from the hunter’s life, but Dean seemed to have resigned himself to Kevin being marked as unique and staying at the bunker, helping with various projects and more recently working to retranslate several tablets.

“Damn it, Dean!” Tony had burst out with on several occasions. “He’s a kid! A smart kid! Come on! Let him come be out here, work an internship, have a normal life here in New York!”

But Dean had always refused for weeks and weeks until Tony had dragged Kevin himself into it. The kid seemed excited enough to come out to New York and Tony was excited to have him out; a genius who knew plenty about tech and science and the supernatural: how could Tony resist?
He could protect him out in New York between the warding he had put on the Tower plus some nifty bits Castiel had added and the Avengers and who knew what else. And Dean finally, finally, agreed.

So Tony had been bouncing around the Tower for a week, getting around a room and space in the workshop and hacking into things to delete the fact that Kevin Tran had gone missing from his college and then he and his mother had died because that was confusion he didn’t need floating around.

And then everything happened at once.

Dean called him to let him know; it was going to get crazy.

“Kevin and I have been working on one last project and I’ll let him give you the details, but it involves Sam.”

“What!” Tony had asked. “What about--”

“Not so loud!” Tony could practically hear Dean rolling his eyes. “But yeah. Hopefully all will go well. Kevin will be on that plane regardless and I’ll let him fill you in because I gotta say, it’s some fine work.”

Tony knew he probably shouldn’t but he sent Kevin a text message: “Heard you were working on some big project:)”

“Wouldn’t you like to know. I heard Dean say I could tell you about it tomorrow so you’ll have to wait.”

“(“

“:)”

And that was the last thing Tony ever heard from Kevin Tran.

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Tony was getting in the car to go to the airport when his phone rang.

“Hey, Dean! Get Kevin on the plane alright? I know you hate airports.”

There was only silence.

And a harsh sound like a muffled sob.

Tony stopped his motion in the tracks, stilling the key in the ignition of the car before he could turn it on. “Dean? DEAN?”

“Kevin…” Dean’s breathing was loud and rough. “He’s dead. Gadreel killed him.”

“Gadreel?” Tony realized his hands were shaking. “Who? What… Dean, what happened?”

Dean spilled the whole story; how he had talked to Castiel and figured out that Ezekiel was really an angel named Gadreel, that the project he and Kevin had been working on was a way to expel Gadreel from Sam, how Gadreel had figured it out and killed Kevin while Dean watched.
By now, both Dean and Tony were well and truly crying. “I-- this morning, I gave him a hunter’s funeral. He deserved it.”

“Yeah,” Tony managed. “He did.”

There was a long silence as Tony thought about his room upstairs, the empty but neat bedroom where Kevin Tran was going to live, the new phone waiting on it, the few Avengers in the loop who were waiting eagerly to meet him.

“What will you do now, Dean?”

Dean’s voice hardened. “I'm going to do what I always do.”

“Um, which is…”

“I'm going to get my brother back.”

A text message, some time later.

“Got him.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey gang!

Sorry this took so long. Busy summer, plus we've arrived at the few story arcs of Supernatural that didn't hold my attention as much. But I've worked in a thing that always bothered me: Cas, an ex-angel being able to get a job and support himself without paperwork or anything and no human experience. (By the way, if you feel like dissolving into a puddle of sadness, read NorthernSparrow's “A Winter's Tale” about Cas.)

Hopefully I will be able to update once a month or so? My class schedule is insane this semester, lots of math and physics. But thank you for waiting and reading, as always, and reviews will be appreciated and suggestions considered!
Hey, y’all. Long time, no see! For more notes, see the end.

An exchange of terse texts:

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
He’s fine. As fine as usual. Haven’t told him about K yet.

From: Cousin T
Dean, stop changing my contact names. Glad to hear it, though. Are you going to tell him?

From: Tony S.
Hey, Sam. Hear you’re doing better?

From: Sam
You should have told me, Tony.

From: Tony S.
I know, Sam. But I was worried about you getting better and dying.

From: Tony S.
I’m sorry. For not telling you.

From: Tony S.
I should have.

From: Tony S.
I’m sorry.

From: Tony S.
Sam?

From: Cousin T
Sam won’t answer my texts.

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
He’s pretty pissed with both of us right now.

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
I told him about Kevin. He’s working through a lot of shit.

From: Cousin T
When are you going to stop by here or Malibu?

From: Cousin T
I need to apologize
From: Cousin T
Dean?

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
Sorry it’s been so long. Got caught up in a couple cases. Had to gank a high level demon. Name’s Abbadon.

From: Cousin T
Are you both okay?

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
We’re fine.

From: Dean-is-cooler-than Sam
Sam texted you yet?

From: Cousin T
No. And is that a “Winchester fine” or an actual fine?

From: Dean-is-cooler-than-Sam
Little bit of both. Hope to see you soon. Say hi to the Avengers+Pepper for me

Steve, Natasha, Tony, and Sam backed together, raising their respective weapons as wave after wave of monsters came towards them. “ANYONE?”

Natasha let out a yell of pure frustration as she swung her legs around and took another… man down to the ground, reaching out and twisting its head sideways until the long, brittle neck snapped. The men around her let out loud screams as one, screeching at inhuman pitches as they redoubled their attacks. They had been attacking in waves, wave after wave of tall men with inhumanly long necks and gaping lipless mouths who tried and tried to kill them, only to be taken out by the Avengers. The strange thing, the little bit of Tony’s brain that was still acting with perfect clarity noted, was that no matter how many they killed, the bodies never piled up. It never happened while Tony was looking at any given attacker, but when he turned away the dead men seemed to vanish into the ground and be replaced by another wave of new, identical attackers.

“Nothing!” Sam said, using his wings to spiral his body in a tight circle and clearing the area immediately around the tight circle of superheroes.

“Nothing,” Tony said, blasting one of the encroaching men off the rock formation next to the road with a repulsor and pivoting.

“Nothing,” Natasha said, twisting to check behind them. “Still got more incoming!”

“Something,” a deep voice said out of the darkness; a pair of humans bloomed from nowhere and both Sam and Dean Winchester were there, hacking their way through the multitude of replicated men, already covered in scrapes and bruises. It was the first time Tony had seen them or even talked to them outside text messages in nearly eight months. If he hadn’t been so preoccupied with the attacking people, he probably would have smacked both boys then and there for making him worry so much. As it was, he only was able to size them up out of the corner of his eyes as they fought.

Sam had the middle length knife Tony had seen him use on demons clutched in one hand and what looked like an iron rod in the other, slashing out with both at anything that got in his way.
Dean, on the other hand, had something new: a knife about the length of his forearm that he switched from a forehanded slashing motion to a backhanded slash or stab intermittently. It was jagged on one edge and a smooth curve on the other, not symmetrical, but it wasn’t until Tony had a brief lull in the attack and had more than a fraction of a second to look at it that he realized what it was made of, a thrill running down his spine.

Teeth and bone, the teeth jagged but also blunt by design and not age, Tony though, the backside sharpened to a brutal edge. It was dark and polished and big; it would have had to come from a fairly large animal. No matter the animal in question, it was a wicked looking weapon and Dean was wielding it with an alarming alacrity.

“There!” Someone shouted, bringing Tony out of his half examination of the knife across the battlefield. It was Sam, who had worked himself into a position of higher ground and was surveying, sharp eyes picking out a pattern that only he and Dean had known to look for. “Twelve and two o’clock, Natasha! Three, Sam and Steve! Dean, twelve, four, and six! Tony, eight and four!” Sam called the pattern out as they appeared and the chosen fighters didn’t hesitate, hitting and shooting their way through the chosen replicants.

Natasha hacked her way through the two Sam called out, having run out of juice for her Widow’s Bites and not having a chance to reload her weapons. She watched as she killed the two men and the surrounding attackers faded into nothingness like holograms in Tony’s lab the moment she ended the first two. She spun on the spot, still on her guard, and took in the scene as her fellow fighters did the same and most of the pack faded into nothing.

Dean was still fighting, though, ignoring Sam’s instruction and leaping through groups of replicating men with what could only be defined as bloodlust, slashing veins and hacking into chests with a ferocity that moved beyond concerning and into alarming. There was no telling how long he would have continued, because at that moment, three gunshots rang out and the rest of the men surrounding Dean vanished as Sam’s bullets moved through the heads of the three monsters he had originally called out for Dean to kill.

It took Tony a moment to find his voice. “Dean? Sam!”

He crossed the rocky hillside, the armor unpeeling from around him and reforming to stand guard. Stopping in front of Sam, he took a moment to look his younger cousin up and down. To his relief, Sam really did look fine, or as fine as the Winchesters ever were. Just a few bruises. But it had been such a long while since he had seen Sam healthy, it was a welcome change. Tony took a half step forwards, asking silently with this eyes. Sam gave a small nod and reciprocated as Tony pulled him into a hug.

“I’m still pissed,” Sam informed him. “But we have few enough friends as it is to lose any more.”

“God, Sam, I’m so fucking sorry, and I don’t know what to say but I’ll--”

“Not now,” Sam said. “We’re moving on.”

Tony nodded, although it didn’t make him feel any less guilty. He was pretty sure it would be better if Sam let him pour out his months of accumulated guilt, but it didn’t look like that was going to happen anytime soon. He turned instead to Dean and found to his surprise that he was still holding the knife in one hand, knuckles white, face blood splattered, and eyes focused on something far away. “Dean?” he asked, and he could both see and feel Sam tense in his periphery, the others coming to full attention. Something in Dean’s eyes flashed and for a brief second, Tony thought he was going to lash out, to attack one of them.
“Dean,” Sam’s voice was sharp and stern, although the authority didn’t mask the concern. “Drop the blade.”

Dean’s hands shook visibly and he closed his eyes.

“Dean,” Sam repeated.

Dean nodded, eyes still closed, and a moment later, his fingers slowly relaxed and the knife slipped from his grip to drop on the ground. With his left hand he reached up and rubbed roughly at a patch on his right arm, hidden under his sleeve. A moment later, Dean opened his eyes.

“Dean?” Tony asked.

“Tony, good to see you,” Dean said. He sounded tired, but the small smile on his lips was genuine and he moved with ease to let Tony hug him. “Avengers,” Dean nodded at the assembled group. “Long time, no see.”

“Hello, Dean, Sam.” Natasha nodded back.

“Not technically the Avengers,” Steve said, “but good to see you anyway.”

“Did you come looking for something?” Sam asked, kicking one of the handful of bodies that hadn’t melted into nothing.

Steve looked at him in confusion. “Yeah? How did you know?”

“The monsters,” Dean said, picking up the knife from the ground and tucking it into his waistband. “They’re called Calling Men or sometimes Hollow Men, after the TS Eliot poem.” He caught the look Clint sent him. “I read!”

“Anyway. They send a sort of signal, like a mental link,” Sam picked back up. “Makes you think they have something you’re looking for. It doesn’t work on most people, because they don’t want something badly enough. It’s not like ‘looking for car keys’ it’s more like ‘looking for an abducted friend,’” he added, looking at Steve knowingly.

Steve nodded in affirmation, understanding where Sam was going with it. “I thought Bucky was here. It was like I just knew and so we came because Tony was getting strange readings but he couldn’t quantify them.”

Tony wasn’t done asking questions. “What’s with the fancy new knife?” he asked Dean.

His cousin’s face closed off so fast Tony could practically see the walls being thrown up.

“It’s nothing important--”

“Don’t you lie to me, Dean,” Tony snapped. “It’s clearly important.”

Dean was clearly unhappy and looking as if he wished he wasn’t there, throwing sideways glances at Sam, who didn’t look at all remorseful about making Dean answer.

“I mentioned Abbadon to you, right?” Dean finally said.
“Yeah,” Tony replied, thinking back to the sporadic string of text messages. “A demon, right?”

“One nasty bitch,” Dean confirmed. “She was brought here to kill Henry Winchester-- that weird time travel thing, remember how we told you about the bunker?-- and then she tried to take over Hell to rule the world and everything else. So we had to stop her and got some help from Crowley--”

“King of Hell,” Sam cut in.

“--and since Abbadon was technically a knight of hell, we needed a way to kill her since the ordinary crap wouldn’t work. We got the blade to kill her.” Something in Dean’s voice told Tony and the trained spies that there was more to the story but Dean sure as hell wasn’t going to tell it right then.

“Okay,” Tony decided. “There’s clearly more, but I’m starving and you two both look like you could use something, too.”

Sam and Dean held one of those silent conversations that Tony could never quite understand but a second later, Dean nodded; they would come.

“This way, then,” Steve gestured; he had been watching the whole thing unfold in bemusement.

Steve, Sam Wilson, Natasha, and Tony led the brothers back to a large, black SUV. Sam grinned and gestured around the corner of the huge rock formation the car was half hidden behind. “The ‘pala’s around on the other side.”

“Great,” Steve said. “Do you just want to follow us back to the safe house?”

“Safe house?” Dean asked.

Natasha nodded as she finished stashing her various weapons about her person. “We’re set up to spend several nights at one of the old SHIELD safe houses. We thought we’d be here a lot longer, doing infiltration and intel. Before we found the monsters, of course.”

“Ummm, okay,” Sam said. “Yeah, we’ll just follow you there.” The SHIELD agents nodded and started piling in their car. Tony didn’t move. “What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“I’m driving with you,” Tony replied. The words were nonchalant but the overly casual tone betrayed Tony’s usual stubborn methodology around the Winchesters: he wasn’t going to leave it alone until he had answers.

“Fine,” Dean said, rolling his eyes and sliding into the front of the car. “Let’s go.”

Tony let the armor unfold from around him and opened the door for it, smirking as FRIDAY animated it and it got into the car just as a person would. Tony slid in behind the armor, leaning forwards to look through the windshield and direct as Dean pulled out behind the armored vehicle the other three avengers were in.

They drove in awkward silence for fifteen minutes until Steve (who was driving the other car) pulled off the road and onto a narrow side road, the impala slipping through the trees behind him. Suddenly, a building loomed out of the darkness, filling the space in front of them with a solid mass of stone and concrete, low and sturdy. Sam let out a low whistle. “What’s this, a nuclear bunker?”

“Actually, yes,” Tony said. “SHIELD built a half dozen across the country back at the height of the cold war. They’re not stocked for a nuclear war anymore but they’re handy shelters and agents used them enough that all of them have a good supply of food and water that’s decent, if not five star.”
“I think we can live with decent,” Sam replied, lips twisting wryly as Dean turned off the car and silence filled the air.

They all got out of the car and followed the spies and soldiers into the building, Tony’s armor trailing behind them with Friday in control.

It was dark and dingy and nothing fancy, especially compared to the elegance and practical beauty of the Winchester’s Men of Letters bunker. But it was warm against the rapidly cooling night air and Natasha immediately went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee, the smell of which percolated through the hallways and lent the musty air a more lived in feeling.

Tony led them through a conference room, an empty weapons locker, and what looked like a storage closet before arriving at a lounge of sorts. He flopped onto an overstuffed couch and waved Sam and Dean to the other chairs and sofas. Natasha reappeared with a tray of snacks and steaming mugs, which were gratefully received by all parties.

A moment later, when everyone was sipping drinks, Tony pointed dramatically at Sam and Dean. “Okay. Talk. Were you really in the area? And what’s with the new knife?”

To Tony’s concern, Dean didn’t even do what he usually did when Tony pumped him for information, which was sigh, look dramatically put upon, and eventually answer the question. He just took another sip of coffee, face hardening into a completely blank mask that even the two spies couldn’t read. Sam cleared his throat and Dean’s eyes shot to his brother’s, the pair having their third silent conversation since they had joined up with the rest of the gang. Sam clearly won because a moment later, Dean grunted. “Fine,” he said and set his mug on the table with an unnecessary amount of force, the drink sloshing up to the brim but not quite over the edge.

Sam’s shoulders (and by extension of the movement, everyone else in the room) tensed as Dean reached across his body and started to roll up his right sleeve. As Dean pulled his hand away, it came into view: a sigil that looked as if it were branded into his skin. It was a deep reddish brown, shaped like a backwards F of with an extra crossbar and practically radiating malicious intent from where it lay on Dean’s arm.

“Aren’t you gonna tell them, or should I?” Sam asked.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Go ahead, since you’re so excited about it,” he snapped roughly. Tony was taken aback by the sudden ferocity in Dean’s eyes and suddenly he was thinking about the fight they had just left, how Dean had ignored the instructions Sam had shouted and just kept plowing through enemy after enemy…

“Fine,” Sam said blandly, bringing Tony back to the present. “I will.”

And he embarked on a brief yet entirely insane story about Henry Winchester’s time traveling, a Knight of Hell, a knife made of the jawbone of a donkey, and Cain, the Biblical Cain himself, who was apparently a beekeeper now and who transferred the mark from his own arm to Dean’s so Dean could kill Abbadon, and who Dean had apparently killed with the very blade.

“Wow,” Wilson finally said, as Sam finished. “That’s some crazy shit.”

Dean snorted. “You’re telling me.”

“So now what?” Tony asked. “The mark, I mean.”

Sam’s face, however, silently told Tony, Steve, Sam, and Natasha exactly what he thought about the Mark of Cain. Tony made a mental note to ask Sam later for added details because there were clearly some downsides Dean was leaving out.

Natasha stood fluidly, having caught Tony’s pensive look. “I’m going to call it a day. Nice to see you boys again,” she smiled at the Winchesters. “Will you be staying the night?”

Sam thought for a second, as if running through a mental checklist. “If it’s no trouble,” he said a moment later. “We don’t have anywhere to be right at this moment.”

Dean looked like he begged to differ but didn’t protest. “I’m gonna hit the hay, too” he added to Natasha.

Tony was fairly sure this was less because he was tired and more because he didn’t want to be left alone with a Tony Stark who wanted details and plans and to know what the hell that mark was still doing on Dean’s arm. But he didn’t say anything and just nodded and watched as Dean followed Natasha out of the room.

The minute his brother was gone, Sam sagged a little on the couch, reaching out absentmindedly to snack a carrot stick from the small piles of veggies and crackers Natasha had brought. He didn’t eat it though, just snapped it half. The sharp noise seemed to bring him to his senses and he popped the pieces of carrot in his mouth before meeting Tony’s eyes.

“Guess you can tell that things aren’t as great as Dean wants them to be, huh?” Sam’s smile was brittle.

“Wasn’t hard,” Tony responded, shifting his weight forward to lean his elbows on his knees.

For a long moment, Tony wasn’t sure that Sam was going to say anything, especially with Sam Wilson and Steve still there. His eyes had taken on that overcast look Tony had first associated with his hallucinations after being brought out of the cage and later with the despair of ever finishing the Trials. It was somewhere beyond the usual horror of what was happening, something more visceral and bone deep, something dark and desperate and bonded to every part of Sam’s being.

When Sam spoke again, it wasn’t what Tony had expected.

“I don’t feel guilty anymore,” he said, almost too quietly for the others to hear. He dropped his head and picked up his coffee mug, swirling around the last inch of now-cold coffee, eyes trained on it resolutely. “I don’t know if that’s wrong. I’m…” he trailed off and stared into the mug as if it held answers for him. “I’m not really sure about anything. But I told Dean… I don’t feel guilty about much of anything, now. It’s like--like I’ve done my time. Like because I jumped into the pit and spent years there, I don’t owe the world anything, anymore.” He looked up suddenly at Tony. “Is that wrong?”

All Tony could do for a moment was shake his head mutely because he was not prepared for this, damn it, but before he could even formulate some sort of response Sam was talking again.

“But Dean… I think he still feels like he owes the world. Owes them everything. Anything. Whatever it asks for. I don’t know!” Sam’s hands were visibly shaking now and he set down the coffee cup, folding his large palms together and trying to stop the involuntary motion. Tony caught a brief flash of anger and fear and sadness in his eyes before he closed them for a moment. “Dean’s angry all the time.”

“Is it the Mark?” Steve asked softly.
“Yeah,” Sam replied, his voice rough. “It’s changing him and he doesn’t realize it. But he’s so
willing to kill anything, these days, and he’s so mad, all the time.” He shook his head. “Sometimes,
when it’s really just Dean and not the Mark, I can tell he knows, he’s scared of what it’s doing to
him. He’ll never say, but it’s freaking him out, what’s happening.”

“Can we get rid of it?” Tony asked, ready to try something, anything, to keep that fear out of Sam’s
voice. Heaven-- and hell, too-- knew the brothers could use a little less fear in their lives.

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m trying to find a way. Any way. Castiel is helping. But
nothing yet.”

“Are you sure?” Tony prodded.

“Do you think he would still have it if I wasn’t?” Sam snapped. He closed his eyes and took a deep
breath, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Tony stopped squashing the urge that had been niggling in the back of his mind for
several minutes and switched couches, plopping down next to Sam and pulling him into a hug. Sam
sat stiff for a moment, unaccepting of the affection, until finally he half relaxed, pulling one arm from
between them to wrap around Tony’s shoulders.

“Thanks,” Sam said, lifting his head enough to include the others in his comment. “For letting us stay
the night.”

“Of course, Sam,” Steve said, smiling gently. “Anytime.”

“I should go to bed,” Sam pulled back from Tony. “See you in the morning.”

“It’ll be better then,” Tony agreed, starting to pick up mugs and pointing at the hallway Sam should
take to get a much needed night of sleep.

Only it wasn’t.

The morning for Tony Stark started at about four in the morning.

For Natasha Romanov and Sam Winchester, about six.

For Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers, only half an hour later.

For Dean Winchester, a comfortable seven thirty.

For most of them, they hadn’t planned on being awakened at such an uncomfortable hour after
staying up so late.

A storm front was rolling through.

Sam wasn’t really aware of waking up, exactly-- there hadn’t been a startle of wakefulness. He just
had that moment of being fully awake and realizing that he ached all over-- joints that had been
abused by one nighttime grave dig too many, long cuts and scrapes and breaks that had healed
poorly into rough scars and sore spots that he could ignore on a daily basis-- except today, of all
days.

He muffled a groan as he rolled over and blearily found the clock with his eyes: 5:56 am. If his
shoulder (a recent fight with a wendigo) didn’t hurt so much, he would have draped an arm over his
face but as it was, nothing would get better until he got up and found some tylenol. Or whiskey. Either or.

Sam forced himself out of bed, pulling on a pair of socks to protect his feet from the cold cement floors of the SHIELD bunker. His door squeaked loudly when he opened it and Sam winced-- the last thing he needed was to wake up someone else. A second later, the door across the hall opened and a tousled red head of hair popped out.

“Sorry,” Sam whispered. “Did I wake you up?”

Natasha shook her head. “Pressure system.”

Sam winced. “You too, huh?”

“All of us, I’m sure,” Natasha said, a flicker of a wry smile crossing her lips. “Although maybe not Steve.”

“Bastard,” Sam muttered, making Natasha chuckle lowly. Sam emerged the rest of the way into the hall, stopping to quietly open Dean’s door. Dean was still sleeping, blankets half on the floor, and Sam closed the door softly. No need to wake him before he woke on his own.

Natasha was out of her room by now and walked with Sam down to the area where they had all talked the night before. “I’ll start coffee,” she said. “Steve can help find meds. He usually wakes up pretty--” She cut herself off as she entered the seedy lounge just ahead of Sam and a second later, he could see why.

Tony was ensconced in one of the arm chairs, a high backed squishy monstrosity that almost swallowed him. The impression of the chair being much bigger than Tony was only reinforced by the way the genius was sitting-- half hunched over, one arm wrapped solidly around his chest, the other propping him particularly in the chair, breathing loud and harsh and echoing against the concrete and steel walls. Natasha crossed the room in the time Sam used to take this in, moving quickly and quietly despite the aching and soreness that Sam knew she had to be feeling as much as he.

The spy crouched fluidly in front of Tony. “Hey,” she said softly “Did you take anything yet?”

Tony nodded, chin moving up and down only a fraction. “Just tylenol,” he said, his voice softer and more exhausted than Sam had ever heard the exuberant businessman. “Couldn’t find the rest. Or the oh-two mask.”

“I’ll look for it,” Natasha said. She looked up and relocated Sam. “Sam, come here. Bring that footstool.”

Sam did as he was told, ignoring his own discomfort for the moment in favor of the bigger problem. Natasha shoved the high footstool up against the base of another chair. “Sam, sit in this. Put your legs on either side of the footstool.” Sam obliged. Natasha stood. “Sorry, but this is going to be sort of weird. It’s only going to be for a few minutes though, until I can find a physio pillow.”

Sam nodded, catching on. He leaned forwards as Natasha helped Tony stand, his breathing becoming even more shallow and erratic as he gained his feet awkwardly. A moment later, Tony was sitting on the footstool, legs crossing over Sam’s, almost on Sam’s thighs, and leaning forward just enough to rest on Sam’s shoulders without putting too much strain on his chest. One of Sam’s arms automatically wrapped lightly around Tony’s shoulders and the other dropped to the arm of the chair, keeping himself and Tony balanced, since Tony’s equilibrium didn’t seem to be the best at the
Natasha studied them for a moment, listening as Tony’s breathing steadied somewhat, pressure being taken off his lungs. “I’ll be right back,” she said softly. “Let me go find the med supplies. I know there’s a full stock.”

Sam nodded carefully. She left on quiet feet and there Sam and Tony sat for several minutes, the oddness of their position overridden by the nail-biting sound of Tony’s breathing. It almost made Sam’s chest hurt sympathetically just to listen, although that might have been the old aches of broken ribs. At any rate, he had never thought too much about the detriments of the arc reactor on his cousin’s health before-- Tony had always seemed fine, running about at a maniacal pace as he created and worked and lived. But this-- this was different, this was scary because it so clearly had happened before; Natasha knowing exactly what to do, Tony moving with her as she positioned him in a way to open his cramped lungs as much as possible, the way Tony was clearly counting his breaths, if the exact evenness of the shallow inhaled and exhaled near Sam’s ear were anything to go by. Sam felt a sudden wave of protectiveness-- Tony had taken care of them time and time again, through physical injuries and mental ones. It seemed like as good a day as any to repay a little of that debt to their only living family.

Sam flinched slightly as a loud clap of thunder signaled the real start to the storm, then had to keep himself from flinching again in guilt as Tony’s perfectly timed breathing hitched at the movement. “Sorry,” Sam said.

“‘s okay,” Tony breathed, his voice harsh.

“Damn,” a voice added from the doorway, and Sam cocked his head to see Sam Wilson standing in the doorway, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt just like the rest of them. Apparently this wasn’t going to be a work day. “Should have known it would hit you bad,” the flier said to Tony. He reached up, apparently unconsciously, and massaged a spot on the outside of his bicep. “Have you had any meds yet?”

“Natasha went to find the good stuff,” Sam replied. “She should be back soon.”

“I’ll help, I know where they are,” Steve’s voice added in as he entered, cautiously nudging Wilson out of the way. “Start the coffee, Sam?” The shorter man nodded and headed off and Steve walked quickly down the same hallway Natasha had taken earlier.

Only a short minute later, they both emerged. Steve was carrying the most impressive first aid kit Sam had ever seen and Natasha was holding a large blue pillow. It was tubular but fairly thick, with an odd wave in the middle. She set it down and disappeared for a moment before reappearing with an armless chair from another room, reclining the back and setting the pillow against it. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” he grunted back. Sam guided from the front and Natasha from the back as Tony sat up from where he was leaning and scooted one leg to join the other on the same side of the footstool before standing and crossing the few feet to the new chair. He sat cowboy style, leaning forward and adjusting the pillow until he was as comfortable as he could be.

“I’ve got meds,” Steve said. “Here’s tylenol for you, Sam, unless you need something stronger.” Sam shook his head and accepted the bottle, shaking a few small pills out and recapping the childproof lid. “Tony…” Steve handed Tony two different colored pills and the billionaire swallowed them without water, making Steve frown in disapproval and Sam Wilson hand Tony an open bottle of water.
“There’s a oxygen mask if you want it, Tony,” Natasha said. “But you should probably eat and then you can put it on.”

Tony nodded and let himself relax against the chair a little more.

“I’ll help with breakfast,” Sam volunteered and followed Sam Wilson and Steve around the corner, Natasha remaining to casually read an outdated magazine and keep a subtle eye on Tony.

“Where’s Dean?” Steve asked, starting to pull out pots and rummage through cupboards to see what was edible.

“Still asleep,” Sam replied, trying to keep the tone of his voice ambiguous. “It’s probably the Mark. Dulls most of any pain, keeps you going. He’s probably not feeling it as much as we are.”

“Well,” Wilson said, “this fancy man here probably isn’t feeling anything either.” He playfully punched Steve in the shoulder before dumping half a box of dry oats into a pot of water Steve had just set on the stove.

“Wait, that’s not--” Steve shook his head. “Those didn’t go in yet.”

Sam couldn’t hold back a snicker and Wilson mock glared at him. The hunter smiled innocently, an expression that had been rare to his face lately, and just went back to sorting cans of fruit.

They were almost done eating-- that is, Steve was on thirds, both Sams were finishing seconds, Natasha had pushed aside her empty plate for a refill of coffee, and Tony was nibbling cautiously on the oatmeal Steve had handed him-- when Dean finally appeared, hair rumpled.

He had had the presence of mind, Sam noted, to put on a long sleeve sleep shirt, hiding the Mark of Cain from open view.

“Morning,” Dean said, stumbling through the room. He didn’t seem to notice the way Sam was a little more careful with his movements despite the tylenol, the way Natasha slightly favored one elbow, or the glaring fact that Tony Stark was sitting relatively still, backwards in a chair, at an early morning hour, not talking, and still breathing uncomfortably loudly.

Dean dropped into a chair next to Sam, a plate in hand, and started eating. “What’s with--” he used his fork to gesture at the pile of medical supplies and Tony after he popped a bite of eggs in his mouth.

“The storm front,” Sam said, a sudden rumble of thunder seeming to punctuate his words.

“Huh,” Dean replied, and Sam could practically see him running a mental checklist of his own body. “That’s… weird.”

He rotated one shoulder, the one that had been dislocated roughly on a vampire hunt not too long ago, then shrugged. “Weird,” he repeated.

For once, Sam would have given anything to not be right, but no such luck. It was just one more change the Mark of Cain was forcing on Dean. Not that he minded Dean hurting physically a little less, but if the cost was an abundance of anger and unbridled bloodlust? Sam would take the former on the whole.

Sam watched for the next couple hours before the Winchesters said their goodbyes. Dean was civil
enough but more than willing to snap at anyone who gave him an opening. Helpful enough if Tony asked for something (Natasha wouldn’t let him so much as budge from the chair and forced the oxygen mask on him as soon as he was done eating. As much as Sam would normally side with Tony, he had to admit Tony’s lips were still a little less red than he would have liked and the mask definitely helped), but unlike the Dean Sam knew, his brother didn’t go out of his way to help his injured family member.

Sam sighed for the umpteenth time since this whole nightmare had begun.

They had to get rid of that Mark.

Chapter End Notes

There will be at least two more chapters of Dean with the Mark. I’m open to suggestions of what you want, especially regarding the situation in which Dean dies and the fate of one Charlie Bradbury.

If you ask a question in comments and have your inbox open, I will gladly answer them for you!
Tony was having a pretty good day. He had finished Friday’s updates, remembered to get flowers for Pepper’s birthday, and was working through a video call with a potential new supplier from New Zealand when his phone buzzed against his him.

It tooo two vibrations until his brain kicked in and his heart started pounding-- wasn’t just an email notification or a work message, that was the alert for the Winchesters.

“Excuse me,” Tony asked the young blonde woman on the other end of the video line, and she nodded, taking a few steps back from the camera and starting to shuffle through some papers. Tony stood and pulled his phone from his pocket and thumbed it open, heart dropping as a single text message slid into view on the small screen.

From: Sam
Call me

Some of his dread must have been visible on his face because an overly-loud shuffle of papers brought his attention back to the video screen, where the supplier was watching him with concern. “Do we need to reschedule this meeting for another time, Mr Stark?” she asked. “I could use a few days to, um, find the paperwork you asked for.”

Tony nodded, grateful for the excuse. “That would be helpful,” he replied, flashing her a Stark smile. “You’re a gem. Let me connect you to Mrs Potts-Stark and she’ll help you come up with a time that works for us both.”

She agreed and he closed the link, turning back to his phone and almost dropping it in his hurry to dial Sam. The younger Winchester picked up on the first ring.

“Can you track Dean?” he asked without preamble.

“Can I-- wait, you don’t know where he is?”

“Tony, this is life and death, I don’t have time for this!”

“Right, right!” Tony scrambled to pull up a screen on the nearest table. “Friday, search through the old phones, find the one registered for Dean Winchester. Locate it, now!”

“Searching.” Friday’s voice echoed through the room.

Tony drummed his fingers against the tabletop, the sound echoing around the room and only making Tony feel more and more anxious. He lifted the phone to his ear and could hear Sam breathing, just a little more rapidly than usual, on the other end of the line. “Friday’s searching, Sam,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“We’re hunting down Metatron. Cas and Gadreel are staging a coup in heaven and we’re hunting him down here.”

“But?”
“But the Mark.” Sam stopped talking.

“That bad, huh?” Tony asked. Dean had been noticeably angrier last time they had met and based on the gradual shortening of his text messages and the visible tension in Sam’s voice the sole time they had spoken over the phone since then, Tony didn’t think the Mark of Cain had been making Dean any better since then.

“That bad,” Sam admitted. “He, uh. Knocked me out and stole a car. I’ve got the Impala, but I don’t know where he is, if he went right for Metatron or what. And I don’t know exactly where Metatron is, so…?”

“Friday?” Tony asked.

“Searching, Boss,” Friday said again. Tony ground his teeth together. This was his fault-- when JARVIS had been attacked by Ultron and then become Vision, quite a bit of data had been lost. Nothing big-- nothing business related, or blueprints for anything important, or information about the Avengers-- but swaths of contact information, personal data, and a whole lot of bits and bobs JARVIS had picked up over the years were just gone. Tony should have worked on fixing those holes earlier but it had never seemed too important.

Until now, with Dean going after an angel who wanted to be God, juiced up on a mystical mark taken from the arm of the first murderer himself. Admittedly, that was all the information Tony knew and he got it from the short phone call with Sam a few weeks prior, but it was more than enough to set his teeth on edge and make his stomach turn.

“Got it, Boss.” Friday reeled off a string of coordinates, then converted it to an address. “It was moving at a good clip, more than normal driving speed, until just a second ago and then it slowed down. Best guess, he parked and is taking the rest on foot.”

“Did you get all that, Sam?” Tony asked.

The roar of the Impala starting over the phone line was more than enough answer. “Sam, I’m coming out.”

“No, you’re not,” Sam said. “Last thing we need is for you to get caught up in this.”

“Fuck you, Sam,” Tony all but growled down the line. “Dean may be your brother, but you’re both still my family and I’m not sitting on the sideline for this one. I’ll probably be there about the same time as you.”

He ended the call before Sam had the chance to formulate a response. He didn’t care. Tony had that feeling deep in his gut that this was going to be bad.

“Fri, start getting the suit around. Is Pepper asleep yet?” he asked.

“She’s in bed with a book, Boss.”

“Tell her to meet me at the assembly rig. It’s important.”

Tony left the room, shedding layers as he went. There wasn’t time to change into the close-fitting positive pressure suit he liked to wear under the armor, but it didn’t matter. By the time he made it down to the floor below, Tony was down to his pressed dress pants, socks, and a white t-shirt, ready for the armor to fold around him.

Pepper was waiting by the doors leading out, wearing soft pajamas and with worry written all over
her face. “What’s wrong, Tony? Is it the boys?”

“Yeah,” Tony replied, unable (despite the gravity of the situation) to stop himself from smiling a little at the way she called Sam and Dean “the boys”. “I don’t think it’s going to be anything good.”

He reached out and pulled her into a hug, resting his chin on the top of her head for a moment and feeling her fingers reach up as they had so many times before and brush quickly across the area where the arc reactor once sat in his chest. “I’ll keep you updated,” Tony said. “Depending, I might bring them back here, or to the Compound. Depends on what sort of medical attention they need and who’s at the Compound by that point.”

“Okay,” Pepper pulled back. “Be careful.” She smiled, eyes watery but standing strong as Tony walked out of the Tower, the suit fitting itself to his body.

“I always am,” Tony replied, knowing Friday would project it inside for him. “See you in a bit.”

Of course, nothing was ever that easy.

Tony landed on the Vermont-New York border a scant fifteen minutes later, skidding into what Friday said was a well-populated squatter camp and also the home source of several odd videos of a short man healing people. Tony could only assume it was Metatron and watched them with a combination of fascination and terror as they showed the clearly awestruck faces of the grimy people around the small man. Or angel, as it was.

There were a handful of them loitering about as he touched down in a clearing between the buildings, incinerating a few piles of dirty rags. “Where are they?” Apparently, angel-worshippers still held a healthy respect for people wearing full suits of automated, weaponized armor, because they immediately pointed him towards one of the taller buildings.

“Friday, armor off. Leave me one of the gauntlets and an earpiece. Sentry mode.” The armor unfolded, leaving his right wrist and forearm clad as he immediately took off for the dilapidated building, catching a glimpse of the gleaming Impala around the corner as he headed in.

Tony blasted the door off its hinges, unwilling as he was to waste another second before he found the Winchesters.

He rounded the corner, ears strained for sounds of a fight, but only hearing the dripping of water and a few scuffles that could have been rats as easily as humans. The feeling of dread was growing heavier in his stomach with every step he took.

Tony rounded the last corner and the pit in his stomach dropped out altogether.

There they were, a tableau taken straight out of a greek tragedy. Dean, half perched on a stack of crumbling wooden pallets, slumped limply against his brother’s shoulder. His face was streaked with blood and swollen around one eye and both cheekbones, evidence of fight where he was not the winner. Sam’s arms were wrapped around his brother’s chest and shoulder, face half buried in Dean’s hair in a posture reminiscent of how Tony had held Pepper hardly twenty minutes before. Sam’s face was wet with tears and a few smears of his brother’s blood, his shoulders shaking visibly as silent sobs tore through his large frame.

Tony’s heart clenched but he forced himself to take a deep breath and lock everything away for a moment. If there was one thing he was good at, Tony thought bitterly, it was shoving the emotions away. And for once, it might be a good thing-- excess emotion was not what Sam needed right then.
Tony forced noise into his footsteps as he crossed to room so he wouldn’t startle Sam. The younger Winchester didn’t even look up as Tony approached, didn’t even react until Tony knelt next to him and touched his shoulder.

“Sam?” Tony was rewarded with a small jerk of Sam’s head. “Let’s get him out of here, okay?”

“Back to the bunker,” Sam said.

“Nope,” Tony firmly contradicted. “You’re too far out. We’re too far out. We’re taking all three of us to the Avenger’s Compound for the night and then if you want him to be back in Kansas in the morning, we’ll fly you out then.” His tone brooked no argument and he could tell Sam was too far gone to argue even if he had wanted to.

Sam nodded slightly. “Okay,” he said, voice rough even on the single word. “The Impala’s right outside.”

“I know, the armor is keeping an eye on it,” Tony said. “Let’s get you standing.”

Sam carefully rose, keeping his arms wrapped around Dean’s chest and pulling his limp brother up with him, Dean’s head lolling down to rest on Sam’s shoulder like a sleeping child. “Let me, Sam,” Tony said, balancing them both for a moment as Sam gently turned his brother in his arms so Dean’s back was flush to Sam’s chest. Tony picked up Dean’s legs and the cousins carried Dean out of the building and around the corner.

A few pairs of eyes watched from the shadows as they crossed to where the armor and the Impala waited but none of the homeless vagrants moved to attack them.

Tony opened the back door of the Impala for Sam and Sam slid in, Dean cradled against his chest. He released his hold for a moment to reach into one pocket, silently producing the keys to the car and handing them to Tony.

Tony nodded, walking around the long vehicle to open the door for the armor, which sat, eerily human, in the passenger seat.

The car started, the rumbling of the big engine drowning out the harsh rasping of Sam’s breathing. Tony glanced in the rearview mirror; tears, which had stopped in the long few moments where Sam had been focused on moving his brother from the warehouse to the car, had started again, streaming down Sam’s cheeks and catching a few errant strands of long hair. Tony reached up and tapped his earpiece. “Friday,” he said quietly. “Tell Pepper to meet us at the Compound in two hours. Who all is there?”

There was a hum as Friday checked the records. “Records indicate that the residential section is currently occupied by Clint Barton, Natasha Romanoff, and Thor Odinson. Remaining Avengers and trainees are at the Canadian remote base and the Brazilian training camp.”

“Tell them we’re coming, will you? Have them clear out two rooms near mine.”

“Yes, Boss,” Friday responded.

Tony carefully pulled the Impala out of the complex, eyes firmly on the road. His hands held the cold leather of the steering wheel and his mind wandered; how many times had Dean’s hands done the same? How many fights had ended with Dean back in this very seat? Tony’s throat and heart ached from holding back the emotion and he forced himself to ignore everything but the hum of the road under the tires of the car and the darkening sky ahead.
Only a short hour later, Tony was pulling the big vehicle up to the steel and glass Avenger Training Compound. Despite the relative lack of people present (it was late on a Sunday night), parts of the building were glowing brightly, testament to the Avengers currently in residence. Thor was waiting for them at the innocuously normal door that led into the area the Avengers lived in on a day to day basis, backlit by dim light that rippled out into the night. Tony blinked once, slowly; it all felt so surreal, as if everything were twisting and melting and distorting just a little, the world turning into a Dali painting without Dean there to hold it together.

He pulled the car as close to the side of the building as he dared in the dark and let the suit of armor slide out before he turned the vehicle off, Friday taking the suit to store inside. Thor crossed the few feet of ground and met Tony in front of the rear side door. He reached out and clapped Tony on the shoulder before pulling the door open and helping Sam silently slide Dean out. The demigod scooped Dean’s limp body into his arms as if he weighed no more than a child. Dean’s head lolled and Tony’s stomach dropped but he forced himself to turn and grab Sam’s arm as Sam pulled himself into a standing position next to the car and swayed, eyes locked on his brother’s form.

Thor turned to walk into the building and Tony could feel Sam’s whole body tense under his hand as Dean’s body swung out of Sam’s view. “Come on,” Tony quietly said to Sam, gently pulling him forwards and towards the Compound. They away from the car, Tony reaching back from the hand not on Sam’s bicep to close the Impala door.

Sam didn’t stumble or trip in the darkness leading to the light in the doorway, his steps sure and almost robotic in their precision. When they stepped over the threshold, his face came into clear focus, eerily ghost-like in its paleness.

Tony tried to steer Sam to sit on the couch, but Sam apparently retained enough autonomy to keep following Thor and his brother. Natasha and Clint appeared from one of the rooms they passed, Natasha carrying a bowl of steaming water and Clint behind her with a stack of towels and washcloths. Their procession thus increased, Thor stopped at the room next to Tony’s pushing open the door to reveal a tastefully decorated room with a large bed and a soft throw rug taking up much of the hardwood floor. Carefully, Thor lowered Dean to the bed, the hunter’s body sinking slightly into the soft mattress.

Tony nudged Sam towards a chair, but Sam sat instead on the edge of the bed, his breathing still loud in the otherwise silent room.

Thor took one of the washcloths, dampened it, and began wiping blood from the arm closest to him. Natasha began to follow suit but as her hand neared the smears on Dean’s face, Sam’s hand shot out to intercept, grabbing Natasha’s hand and the cloth just before she reached Dean’s skin. Tony tensed, but Natasha clearly understood what Sam wanted, relaxing her hand and sliding it out of his grip, leaving behind the washcloth. Sam took it and began doing what Natasha had been about to begin, slowly cleaning the blood away from Dean’s bruised and swollen and grey face.

He hadn’t said a word since they had arrived and hadn’t put together more than a single sentence since Tony had found him cradling Dean’s cooling body in that warehouse and it was starting to scare Tony.

Tony remembered last time Dean had died and Sam had come to live with them. It had been different, vastly so, but so had the circumstances of Dean’s “death”; he had just vanished, there one second and gone the next in a spray of black leviathan goop. Sam had taken at least two weeks to process that Dean was even dead, breaking down one night as it all finally crashed over him. This time, it seemed, things would be different, and well it should be. All the evidence pointed to Dean dying in Sam’s arms, the younger brother unable to save the older.
Tony was broken from his reverie as Sam sat back, Dean’s face clean, and Clint started collecting the dirty washcloths as Thor and Natasha finished clearing blood from the hunter’s arms. “Sam?” Tony asked hesitantly. “Why don’t you go clean up?”

Sam didn’t say anything, still, but one of his hands flew to his cheek where Dean had fallen against him, smearing a streak of familial blood across his skin. He nodded and stood, leaving the room silently. Tony heard him cross towards the common room and tensed (was he going to run?) but relaxed when he realized Sam probably just wanted a change of clothing. This train of thought was justified as the trunk of the Impala creaked open loudly and then slammed closed before the door to the compound opened and closed again.

Footsteps came down the hall and entered the next room, the soundproofing keeping Tony from continuing his audible watch on Sam. He imagined it in his mind’s eye-- Sam, dropping the bag on the bed and collapsing next to it for a split second before pulling himself together and heading for the bathroom to shower.

Footsteps were coming down the hallway again and Friday spoke up quietly, using the room speakers. “Mrs Potts-Stark has arrived, Boss.”

Tony stood, hurrying to the door and stepping into the hall before Pepper could come in and see Dean. She was almost there when he closed the door behind him, blocking the knob with his body.

“What happened?” she asked, but something in her voice told Tony she already knew, or at least suspected.

“Dean,” Tony said. “He’s dead, Pepper.” He hadn’t meant to say it so bluntly, but it had just slipped out, the way words often did for him. “I don’t know what happened, I found them in this warehouse and Sam was holding him but he was dead.”

“Oh, Tony.” Pepper was crying, tears spilling down her beautiful cheeks and clinging to her eyelashes. He reached out and pulled her into a hug, feeling every line of her body pressed against him, the warmth of her skin helping dispel the chill that had settled into his bones when he had felt Dean’s body cooling in his hands as he and Sam moved him to the Impala.

After a long moment, Tony released Pepper and they started back towards the common area, hand in hand. “Sam’s showering,” Tony told her quietly. “He’s barely said a word since I found them.”

Pepper nodded. They reached the end of the hall and she nudged Tony towards the couch, heading herself towards the large kitchen that pushed up against it. Thor was already there, rummaging through the cabinets and pulling out boxes of crackers and sorting through cans of soup. He gave her a sad and sympathetic smile before selecting a can and opening the pull tab, pouring the contents into a saucepan. She stepped around him and found a tray, sorting through everything he had pulled out until she found the coffee grounds and starting a pot.

Ten minutes later, Sam emerged from his room, hair damp and wearing a non-bloodstained set of clothing. Natasha and Clint were waiting in the guise of “happening to be passing by” and steered him past the door to the room where Dean lay, down to the living room and to the couch Tony was still occupying.

Nobody said a word, lending a haunted silence to the room as Sam sat hunched on the couch, elbows on his knees and avoiding eye contact with everyone. Pepper and Thor finished in the kitchen and came around the long island counter into the room proper, Thor carrying a tall table/tray with a bowl of chicken soup on it and Pepper with the other tray, laden with half a dozen mugs of coffee-- decaf-- and small containers of cream and sugar.
Thor set his tray in front of Sam and pressed the spoon gently into the young man’s hand. Sam began to eat, mechanically, one spoonful after another. Pepper passed out mugs and they all continued to sit in silence, everyone bursting with questions and grief but no one knowing how to express either of those particulars.

“Sam?” Pepper finally asked quietly once Sam had pushed the bowl away, almost empty. “What happened?”

For a moment, Tony thought Sam wouldn’t-- couldn’t?-- answer. But his cousin closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and spoke.

“Metatron, he’s been gaining followers, establishing himself as ruler of heaven,” Sam began softly. “Castiel and Gadreel were going to infiltrate heaven and break Metatron’s connection to the tablet so he would be weak enough for D--” Sam broke off. “For him to be killed.”

“Gadreel?” Clint broke in. “I never quite got all the details, but isn’t that the angel that was possessing you?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “And before you ask, Clint, I was pissed for a long time, but I forgave him in the end. He’s my brother.” Sam closed his eyes. “Was.”

A heavy silence descended and for a second Tony wondered if the mood will ever improve from the despair that was coating everything, but Sam kept going after a few seconds.

“Anyway, Cas and Gadreel must have been held up because Metatron was plenty strong. Dean had knocked me out and left me. He knew it was going to be rough.” Sam glanced over at Tony. “I called Tony, he found Dean, I went after him. I went into the warehouse and found them--” Sam’s voice wobbled dangerously-- “and Metatron stabbed him.” Almost unconsciously, Sam’s free left hand, the one not holding a coffee mug, mirrored the movement, moving an invisible blade forward. “Then Metatron vanished and he hasn’t been back to kill me or gloat or anything so I guess that probably means Cas and Gadreel were successful.” Sam shrugged like he couldn’t bring himself to quite care about that at the moment. “I got to Dean and started getting him out-- he told me to stop, that he had to tell me something, and… and…” Sam stopped talking altogether and stared into the depths of the coffee cup like it held the secrets of the universe.

Pepper stood and set her own cup down, crossing to the couch and sitting next to Sam, pulling the mug from his hands and placing it on the table before wrapping her slim arms around Sam and pulling him into her shoulder. After a moment of hesitation, Sam wrapped his own arms around her in return and his shoulders sagged. Tony wondered if he’s finally crying again, letting it out, but when Sam released Pepper his face was dry.

Sam took a deep breath and they could practically see his resolve forming. “I’m taking him back to the bunker in the morning.” It wasn’t not a question.

“Okay,” Tony agreed; he could tell it was pointless to argue. “We can fly you and the Impala in one of the jets, like we did when we were breaking you out of the hospital.”

“Fine,” Sam said. He stood, projecting waves of its-fine-I’m-fine-everything-is-fine that fooled nobody. “I’m going to go to bed.” He smiled weakly at Pepper and Thor. “Thank you for the food.”

Thor stood as well, summoning his hammer from where it rested on the counter across the room. “You are most welcome, but it is but a small repayment for your defense of this world.”

Sam blinked once and looked like he wants to reject this statement-- Tony knew all too well that Sam
was more insecure than he himself was-- but Thor doesn’t give Sam a chance to talk, just carries on. “I will keep vigil over your brother this night.” Sam’s eyebrows drew together but he nodded and started for the hall, Thor following to reach the room where Dean rested.

Tony watched them go before reaching over to pull Pepper into a hug, Clint and Natasha starting to clear away dishes. “What is he going to do now?” the genius wanted to ask, but he knew Pepper didn’t have any more of an answer than he did.

The next morning, Sam drove the Impala up the ramp into the back of a quinjet. Natasha was at the controls, Tony was in the copilot seat, and Dean was lying in state in the back of the car he loved so much. Sam had dark bags under his eyes and his shoulders were lined with tension as the plane rose into the air, Pepper, Thor, and Clint watching from the ground as they took off.

A short two hour flight later, they were landing in a clearing near the bunker, Natasha lowering the ramp and letting Sam back the car out. She opens the door to the bunker as Sam and Tony carry Dean in, through the bunker, and to his bedroom. The cavernous headquarters seem more echoing and mysterious than ever without the noise of Dean clattering around and Tony is almost happy to be back outside by the jet.

“Do you want me to stay here?” Tony asked Sam quietly.

Sam hesitated before shaking his head. “No, you should go back to your job. Saving the world waits for no man.”

“Are you sure?” he repeats.

“Go, Tony.” There’s no anger or frustration in Sam’s voice, only exhaustion and resignation.


Sam smiles a little bit at that. “Fine. I can do that. I’ll let you know when I hear from Cas about how the coup went in heaven.”

“Thanks.” Tony reaches out and pulls Sam into a hug. “Be careful, okay?”

“I will,” Sam said. “I’ll call if there are problems.”

Tony nodded and climbed into the front of the big jet, Sam moving back as the engines started up. The genius watched as Sam headed back to the Impala, no doubt moving it to the garage. He made a mental note to come back and check in if he didn’t hear from Sam for more than two weeks. And, he amended, to come find Sam in person at some point whether Sam called or not. Who knew what trouble Sam could get up to in his current state?

Little did he know, he didn’t have to go out to the bunker to see Sam again.

Tony was in yet another meeting about armor upgrades with Natasha and Steve when his phone buzzed. He picked it up and smiled: Sam. Tony waved his arm in Steve’s direction, interrupting the soldier and making him frown. “It’s Sam. Winchester, that is. I’m going to put it on speaker.”
He answered. “Hey, Sam. You’re on speaker; it’s me, Natasha, and Steve.”

Sam’s voice filtered through the phone into the room, bouncing off the walls. He strained and was breathing quickly. “Hi. No time for small talk, sorry. Can you come get me?” There were a series of grunts and a clunking sound followed by a burst of white noise. It sounded like he had dropped the phone and had to pick it up. “My car may have blown up and I’m stranded.” Two gunshots and a muffled cry of pain.

“I’ll be out with a jet. Where are you?”

“Just outside Mars, Pennsylvania. You’re gonna have to track my phone if you want something more specific.” He let out a brief strangled yell and there was the distinctive sound of someone getting stabbed.

“We’re on the way,” Tony said, making eye contact with Steve, who was already standing and Natasha, who was on the phone and clearing their use of the Avenger’s smaller quinjet.


Chapter End Notes

Hey, ya’ll! The next part is already partly written, so expect it hopefully within the next week or two!

A few fast notes:
I’ve made a decision about Charlie Bradbury, but I’m not going to tell you what it is. You’ll find out in a few chapters anyway.
I think I’m starting to work out how Civil War is going to happen (very AU) but would still welcome ideas!
WHAT ABOUT THAT SEASON 12 PREMIERE! Was that amazing or what?!
The Deanmon

Chapter Notes

So now there’s going to be two demons that attack Dean and get caught on tape. The first will be a random guy, Sam finds out that Dean is alive and possessed. The second is when he finds the phone and calls Crowley, finding out that Dean is not possessed, but his own soul has been twisted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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They landed in a clearing next to a dilapidated house in the middle of the woods to find the hunter’s phone with a bullet hole through it lying on the ground. Nearby, the shell of a pickup truck was on fire, flames flickering into the night. Steve sighed and pulled a modified fire extinguisher from a compartment in the jet, spraying the twisted mess down with foam and leaving them only in moonlight and the rectangle of yellow from the quinjet ramp door. Tony frowned at the two bodies strewn across the porch, awkwardly positioned in death. One had a bullet hole neatly through the center of his forehead, the other with a dark wound in her chest. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but he was pretty sure there was a dark sigil scrawled across the front porch.

He looked across the yard, seeing a fourth body and crossing to kneel by it. The man had two bullets in him, one center mass and one directly over his heart. The genius was getting more anxious by the second, fingerling the broken phone in his hand.

“Sam?” Tony called into the night. “SAM?”

“Over here,” Natasha said, gesturing from where she stood at the far end of the clearing, still in front of the house. Steve and Tony joined her and started walking into the trees until they saw what she had; twenty yards into the tree line, in a small clearing holding a stump with a rusted axe and a few piles of cut wood, Sam Winchester was circling a tree.

Steve winced; Sam’s right arm looked… messy, the shoulder and elbow both visibly swollen. Sam’s face was a mask, though; no sign of pain could be found, although it had to be hurting him. He was more surprised when he came around the tree; a man was tied to it, shorter than Natasha. Dark hair, dark eyes, and dark clothing that contrasted with very pale skin. In several places the fabric of the shirt and pants were cut, the moonlight almost making the white skin beneath seem to glow around the long cuts and dried and flowing blood. A sigil was carved into the tree above the man’s head.

Sam ignored the arrival of his ride. He circled the tree once more before coming to a stop in front of the man, spinning a blade in his uninjured left hand. The twirling knife created a hypnotizing, deadly fan, reflecting the moonlight ominously. “I’m going to ask you one more time.” His voice was deadly calm and Natasha shifted next to Tony, but he didn’t look at the spy. For the first time in his life, Tony felt almost afraid of one of the Winchesters. He had seen them at work, he had seen what they did, but it always seemed a little distant, belayed by the caring that was evident when they talked about saving people. Not now, though; Sam was one hundred percent focused and there was no holding back.

Sam took a step forwards, angling the knife slightly and lightly tapping the man on the sternum a few times. “Where are Dean and Crowley?”

“You’ll never find them, Sammy,” the man said, voice higher than Steve had expected.
“He’s your boss. You know where he is.” It wasn’t a question.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s one of us, now.”

“Wrong answer,” Sam replied, leaning forwards without hesitation and using some of his impressive body weight to drive the knife into the man’s chest. The victim glowed in a way that Tony remembered from the attack on the tower years ago, flashing a red color once, twice, with his head thrown back before it fell forwards onto his chest. Sam yanked the knife out and swiped it across his pant leg before tucking it back in his waistband. Natasha was watching his face and saw the brief flash of pain suddenly appear as he twisted his torso slightly.

“Hey,” Sam turned to them and flashed a forced smile, as if they hadn’t just found him torturing a demon for information.

It took Tony a second to find his voice. “Sam, what the hell?” Sam raised an eyebrow and didn’t answer, heading out of the copse of trees and leaving the body behind as he walked towards the truck. A few items were picked up as he went: a smaller knife, a little bottle of something or the other, a wooden box. He circled the truck once, face brightening a little when he found a small duffle bag that had almost cleared the flames and was just singed on one end.

Sam started to sling the bag over his uninjured shoulder, but Natasha stopped him, taking the strap herself. The hunter didn’t argue. “The bodies?” Steve asked.

“Demons take care of their own,” Sam responded. Steve nodded and followed Natasha up the ramp into the cockpit of the plane while Sam sat down, Tony next to him. The genius couldn’t wait any longer. “What the hell, Sam,” he repeated. “Why are you torturing demons in the woods in the middle of nowhere? Where’s Dean? What’s going on?” He sounded incredibly confused and almost appalled; he had thought torture wasn’t a Winchester thing. Apparently he was wrong.

Sam took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting his head roll back against the bulkhead, closing his eyes as the plane vibrated and the engines quietly started. “Thanks for coming to get me. It was sort of touch and go there for a while and it would have been a long walk back to civilization,” he replied, a sort of non-answer to Tony’s question.

“Sam.” That was the family tone; Sam half expected to open his eyes to see John Winchester standing there.
“Look, I’ll tell you everything when we get where we’re going.” He paused. “Where are we going?”

Tony pressed his lips together. “You don’t give answers, I don’t give answers.” The billionaire half expected a patented Sam Winchester glare, but Sam just nodded.

“Fair enough.” They sat in silence the rest of the ride, the hunter wincing every once in awhile when his weight shifted. The quinjet landed at Avenger Tower, per Tony’s request, just fifteen minutes later.

All four passengers disembarked and entered the Tower proper to find Pepper Potts-Stark sitting on the sofa, legs curled under her and a glass of wine in her hand, which she almost dropped when she looked up. “Sam!” she called, setting the glass down more carefully and rushing over to carefully give him a hug, mindful of his arm. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“Neither did I,” Sam answered truthfully. Natasha laughed lowly and prodded him in the middle of the back.

“Forward march to medical for you, Sam.” The hunter nodded and looked around to confirm that Steve was now carrying his duffel bag before letting Natasha guide him to a small clean, mini-hospital room. Tony, who had followed, found a pair of scissors and started cutting off Sam’s shirt, since the right sleeve was ripped beyond repair anyway.

There was a general wince as Sam’s arm came into full view in full light. At least one finger was clearly broken, there was dried blood coating his upper arm from a cut on his bicep, and his elbow was heavily swollen. His shoulder was the worst; it was obviously dislocated, the bone distorting the shape of the muscle on top of it.

“Shoulder first,” Sam instructed. “Don’t worry about anesthetic, just pop it back in.”

“You sure?” Steve asked.

Sam rolled his eyes. “If I hadn’t needed a ride, I would be doing this in a motel room with a bottle of whiskey and a mishmash first aid kit. Just do it.” He kept an eye on Natasha and sent her a questioning look as she approached with an IV line.
“Fluids,” she replied and he eyed the bag for a moment before he held out his uninjured arm for her to neatly slide the line in. She backed up and Sam slid his legs around to that side of the bed, letting Steve get a better angle on his shoulder. The supersoldier pressed his hands on both sides of Sam’s arm and counted.

“One, two--” he pushed the bone back into the socket of Sam’s arm, the click audible. Sam closed his eyes and took a deep breath against the pain before carefully rotating his shoulder.

“Nice,” he said to Steve. A prick make him open his eyes; Natasha had come around and injected an anesthetic next to the cut, opening a suture kit with her other hand. Sam felt a little ridiculous; he was sitting there while Black Widow stitched up his arm and Captain America carefully splinted his broken finger. When they both finished, ten minutes later and the IV bag had almost run its course, Steve gently extended Sam’s arm, testing the range of motion and keeping a hand on his elbow.

“Just a sprain,” he diagnosed. “We’ll wrap it, but you should probably use a sling. It’ll be good for your shoulder, too.” He looked doubtful that Sam would listen, but to everyone’s surprise, the hunter nodded. Natasha pulled the IV line and wrapped it against back bleed just in time for Tony to reenter the room.

“Shower,” he demanded. “Pepper’s washing the rest of the stuff from your duffle bag.”

“The bandaging is waterproof,” Natasha said, “Don’t worry about getting it wet.” Sam nodded and hopped off the table.

“Thanks,” he said, nodding at the two pseudo-doctors.

Steve shrugged and smiled. “Don’t mention it.”

Sam followed Tony out and down to the rooms, avoiding looking at the room where Dean usually stayed. “Come eat when you’re done,” Tony said before leaving.

Jarvis had already turned on the shower for Sam and the bathroom door opened in a burst of steam, Sam stripping, stepping into the water, and letting the heat burn away his thoughts. He emerged fifteen minutes later to find that his torn jeans and dirty boots had been taken away and a fresh set of clothing (plaid shirt and all) had been left in their place. Sam padded out into the kitchen, wearing the new clothing and feeling cleaner than he had in weeks. Pepper was straining pasta and poured it back into the pot, adding butter and salt. Steve was sliding two plates onto the table, pointing Sam to
one of them. The hunter raised an eyebrow at Steve and the second plate, glancing at the clock. “I eat
a lot, remember?” Steve defended. “Fast metabolism, four times the average human?”

“Less talk, more eating,” Pepper directed, piling noodles onto both plates and dishing out sauce as
Natasha reappeared with Tony and picked up a bowl of mixed veggies to bring over to the table. Soon
they were all sitting, Natasha and Pepper with wine, Tony with a tumbler of brandy, Steve and
Sam with water. Steve was once again amazed with how much food Sam could put away in
comparison to him and said so; it was like the guy hadn’t eaten in days.

When he said it, Sam sort of shrugged and avoided Tony and Pepper’s eyes. “Been busy,” he
mumbled. “No time.” Pepper didn’t respond, just pushed the bowl of bread a little closer.

They finished eating a few minutes later and Tony whisked the plates away. Sam ran a hand through
his drying hair and looked at Tony. “Coffee?” he asked. He could really use whiskey (a lot of
whiskey) but it was probably out of the question because Natasha had given him some pain meds.
Not that mixing meds and alcohol had ever stopped the Winchesters before, but it would probably be
frowned upon by the present company.

Tony set the mug down in front of him a little harder than he strictly needed to and looked Sam full
on for the first time since they had picked him up.

“What you said to the demon in the woods… Where’s Dean, Sam?” It wasn’t a question, it was a
demand for information.

“He’s gone,” Sam replied bluntly, taking a sip of coffee. His hand shook as he set the cup down and
reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. It was small, torn from a notebook,
and had a few words scribbled on it in neat and familiar handwriting: “Sammy, let me go.”

“I went back to the room a few hours after you left. He was gone, but he left this. I figured he-- his
body--” Sam swallowed. “Must be possessed by a demon. I started looking for demonic activity and
there’s video,” Sam told them. “From a convenience store in Wisconsin. Dean’s there, he kills this
guy who apparently just walked up to him. Dean still has the Blade and you can see his eyes…” Sam
doesn’t have to spell it out. “So I’m trying to find Crowley-- you know about Crowley, right? King
of Hell, complete asshole?-- because I think he’s with Dean.”

“I’ll come with you,” Tony immediately said. “You’ll need backup and we can run face traces until
we find either Crowley or Dean.”
“No,” Sam replied. “No way. We don’t want Crowley knowing about you. Chances are Dean hasn’t told him about you-- why would he? And the last thing we need is the King of Hell taking you for ransom or killing you or coming after Pepper or whatever. We may work with him on occasion, but he is not a nice guy.”

Tony had looked like he was going to argue but stopped when Sam invoked Pepper’s name. They all knew he wouldn’t risk anything happening to her. “Fine. Fine, I won’t come with you. But you have to call me the moment you find out anything.”

Sam sighed. “Okay,” he picked up the mug and took a sip. “I will.”

Steve half raised his hand. “What about Castiel? The angel?” he clarified as if there were any other Castiels Sam might know.

“He’s… struggling. He’s helping catch rogue angels, the last few from Metatron’s regime. But he doesn’t have his grace anymore, just some stolen from another angel. When it runs out, he dies. So he’s trying to fix that without killing any more angels. Cas can’t help.”

Sam drained the rest of his coffee and stood. “I need to go.”

Pepper stood and rounded the table, facing off from him. Despite her height, she was still a full half foot shorter than Sam but stood her ground. “You’re not going anywhere until you get some sleep. And another meal.”

“Pepper, I don’t have time--”

“You can make time. At least a few hours of sleep.”

Sam’s phone chimed on the table and he swept it up, face darkening as he read it. “He’s killed someone else. Police report, same guy as last time. Dean.”

Tony sighed. “I’ll fly you out.”

Pepper looked unhappy but stepped forward to give Sam a hug. “Be careful. Please.”
“I will. And I’ll bring Dean home.”

A scant day after Tony (unhappily) dropped Sam off in the Pacific Northwest, his phone rang. “Got a trace on Crowley. The demon Dean killed left his phone and I called Crowley. He said…” Sam let out a shuddering breath, just audible of the rumble of an engine and Tony could picture him over the phone line, one hand on the wheel the other holding the phone to his ear, Looking out into the night through the windshield. “Dean’s not possessed. It’s his own soul, just twisted by the Mark of Cain.”

“What?” Tony gasped. “He’s not possessed? But…” he flew through ideas. “That means you can cure him, right? You told me the last Trial from the “Closing the Gates of Hell” business was curing a demon. So we can do the same for Dean.”

“God, I hope so.” There was a loud rattling noise in the background and Sam let out a string of swears.

“Sam?”

“Fucking car is breaking down. Great, just what I need.” A few banging noises made Tony suspect that Sam was banging on the console. “Look, can I call you back?”

“Yeah. I pulled the trace data from your phone; I’ll keep an eye on Crowley.”

“Great. Let me know if he goes anywhere.”

Tony spent the next day on pins and needles until Sam finally called again.

“Hey, it’s me. Long story, but I’ve got Dean here with me and I’m gonna need some backup at the bunker. Can you meet me there with a few friends in a couple hours?”
Tony dropped his soldering iron and headed for the door of the lab. “No problemo, Sam. Steve’s out on a search for Barnes, but I think the rest of the crew is still around, so I’ll have to come up with an excuse to stop training. I’d bring Wanda, but she hasn’t met either of you and this might not be the best way to start.” Tony mentally ran a checklist of who was where and doing what. “I think it’ll be me, Rhodey, and maybe Wilson?”

“Fantastic,” a voice drawled. It was faint, as if the speaker was sitting next to the person holding the phone. A chill ran down Tony’s spine-- it was Dean’s voice, but not quite, like something had been taken away from him and all the edges were sharp and harsh and exposed. “Sounds great, Tony.”

“Shut up, Dean,” Sam bluntly told his brother. “See you it a bit, Tony.”

Sam Wilson and James Rhodes looked at the door in front of them with a combination of awe and trepidation. It was set into a half circle of concrete, weathered with age but still plenty intimidating. There was a mark carved into the door, a pattern of intersecting triangles. Tony reached out and knocked.

Sam opened the door a moment later and Tony winced. “Jesus, Sam, what happened to you?” He looked like he had been in a fight, and an unfair one at that-- one eye was black, his face and hands were littered with small cuts, he was once again wearing the sling that Steve had put on his dislocated shoulder. He also just looked tired and a little bit defeated.

Sam winced as he half smiled and his split lip pulled. “Got in a bit of a fight with an ex-marine who’s dad was sort of possessed by a monster. Dean killed the dad years ago and the son spent years thinking Dean murdered his dad and looking for revenge. Took me as leverage.”

“And?” Tony prompted.

“Not too bad,” Sam shrugged. “Hit me on the head pretty good, took my shoulder out again, punched me a few times.”

Tony looked like he wanted to throw up his hands in resignation because he was sick of Sam and Dean saying things like “It’s fine” or “It’s not bad” followed by lists of injuries. However, Sam was already stepping back from the door, offering them entry to the bunker.
“How are things, Sam?” Rhodey asked as they entered.

“Well, my brother’s not dead, but he’s also a demon so…” Sam gave a ‘what can you do’ shrug and nodded down the hall. “I’ve got him tied up in one of the dungeons.”

“What do you need us to do?” Sam Wilson followed up.

Sam shrugged his good shoulder again. “Mostly just be back up. I’ve been giving him shots of blessed blood-- got some on the way back-- and I’ve got holy water on standby. I really just need you all if it doesn’t work or if something nasty shows up to try and stop us.” He hesitated for a moment and then continued to talk as he headed down the stairs into the bunker. “Cas is on his way, too. Just a few hours out. And… don’t go talk to Dean unless you’ve got your head on straight. He sure knows where to hit.”

A heavy silence descended on the group as they considered everything Dean could say to them.

Rhodey broke it with a low whistle, breaking the melancholy. “I gotta say, Sam, this is a pretty sweet setup. Hidden bunker in the middle of America? Nice.”

Tony clapped one hand to his chest in mock offense. “And here I thought you liked my tower and the Malibu house!”

“Well…” Rhodey held his hands out like scales. “You do have more going for you in terms of sunlight, but if a nuclear missile hits, I’ll be here.”

“Point,” Tony conceded.

The trio followed Sam down a winding series of halls until they arrived in a badly lit entryway. Sam took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and opened the door.

Dean was in the center of the room, tied to a chair. Although the room, like the hall outside, was not lit well, a devil’s trap was clear on the floor. Dean’s hair was immaculate, his shirt perfect, and his eyes cold. “Sammy! You’re back! Worked through what I said yet? Decided if I’m right? Was it your fault? You know, everything? Mom? Dad? Kevin?” He leered at Sam through the dim light.
“Oh, look! You’ve brought friends!”

Tony winced and looked at Sam, only to find that the younger hunter’s face was like stone and he had pulled a syringe from somewhere and was approaching his captive demon brother.

“Now, now, Sam.” Demon Dean’s smile became even more sharklike. “Be careful. Don’t want to kill me, remember? Boiling alive from the inside out?”

A single tremor ran through Sam’s hands but he jabbed the syringe into Dean’s arm, emptying the pure blood into his brother with a smooth motion. “Be back later, you asshole.”

And then he turned and left, trailing three awed and concerned avengers behind him.

A moment later they were in a kitchen not far from the door they had entered through. Sam offered them all coffee with a gesture at the coffee pot and they accepted, Sam spiking his own liberally.

“Sam…” Tony finally began a moment later.

Sam cut him off. “Don’t even say it, Tony, because he might not be all right, but he sure as hell isn’t all wrong either.”

Tony looked like he wanted to argue but didn’t, reserving the conversation for a later date when Sam wasn’t so high strung.

“What’s with the blood?” Rhodes finally asked. “You said it was blessed?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. It’s how you can cure a demon. Well-- okay, look. There’s a few types of demons. Usually, what we deal with are the sort of demons who possess someone else’s body. The body then has two souls in it, but the demon soul is in charge. Sometimes we can save the person, but a lot of time they end up dead because the demon runs them too hard-- they don’t need sleep or anything.”

He rubbed the heel of one hand along the edge of the table. “I… got possessed once, years ago. She smoked two whole packs of cigarettes in a day.” The rubbing stopped for a moment, Sam’s hand
flying to touch his throat and remembering how rough it had been afterwards, how defiled he had felt for days, as if the gunk that had coated his throat and lungs had been directly connected to the demon. “Anyway, we can get rid of those demons by using an exorcism, or by killing them with a small range of weapons if the vessel is dead. Or,” something-- shame? Disgust?-- “if we don’t have a choice, they’re alive.”

Nobody spoke. Sam took a swig of his spiked coffee. “When we were doing the Trials, we learned that a demon can be cured. But it’s hard and slow. If you inject a demon with blood of a person who has confessed their sins-- or if you get it blessed-- you can cure them. That’s what I’m trying to do with Dean. Only, Dean is different. He’s not being possessed. The only soul in his body is his own, but the Mark of Cain is twisting it, driving him to murder, to anger and hatred.”


Sam let out a humorless laugh. “Yep.” He looked at the old clock on the wall. “Half an hour. Let’s go.” He stood and the others followed, trailing back down the hall, the Avengers feeling fairly helpless.

Only, when they arrived, the door was open and Dean was gone.

“Fuck.” Sam turned and sprinted silently down the hallway, the others following again, cautiously rounding corners.

They reached a small storage-looking room, where Sam rummaged around for a moment before emerging with a set of keys and beckoning them through more labyrinthine corridors to a maintenance room. Sam unlocked it, keys swinging in a wild pendulum, and entered.

“Get ready,” he ordered. “I’m going to put us in lockdown so he can’t leave, but as soon as I do he’ll know where we are. Split up. Try to find him. Don’t get killed.”

Everyone nodded and Sam reached out, gripped an impressive looking breaker, and pulled.

They were plunged into darkness for a long second before red emergency lights spluttered into action, bathing them all in a haunting red glow. A siren started, loud and long. “Go!” Sam said and they went.
In the hallway, the Avengers and Sam crept around corners, listening, moving, trying to find an enemy who was… apparently not trying to hide. Dean’s voice echoed down the halls: “Smart, Sam! Locking the place down. Doors won’t open. I get it. But here’s the thing: I don’t want to leave! Not ’til I find you!”

Rhodey swore; Dean’s voice was getting louder to his position. “Sammy! You’re just making this worse for yourself, man! Oh, by the way, you can, uh… blame yourself for me getting loose. All that blood you pumped into me to make me human… Well. The less demon I was, the less the cuffs worked. And that Devil’s Trap? Well, I just walked right across it. It smarted, but still.”

Rhodey heard the clatter of a drawer opening and closing and realized; he had somehow circled around back to the storage room where Sam had fetched the keys. Which meant Dean would probably go to the maintenance room next, to see if Sam was still there. The airman crept away on quiet feet, back towards the room. He rounded the corner and… yes, the door was open. Dean would enter. And they could close him in.

He silently passed the door, whipping around it… and had to smother a rather unmanly scream as he ran solidly into Sam on the other side. The hunter’s hand covered his mouth and he nodded at the open door, apparently having had the same idea Rhodes had.

A moment later, loud footsteps echoed down the hall: Dean, not bothering to hide. The demon entered the control room, and after a minute of shuffling, the power suddenly came back on, leaving Rhodey and Sam blinking in the light. “Yeah, that’s more like it,” Dean said just as Sam lept forwards and closed the door, locking it and trapping his brother inside before dropping the keys.

Dean’s voice was muffled, but audible: “That’s your big move?”

Sam took a deep breath, gesturing with a medium length but very impressive knife he had pulled from somewhere. “Listen to me, Dean! We’re getting close, okay? I know you’re still in there somewhere. Just let me finish the treatments.” There was no pleading in Sam’s voice, no matter the words.

But Dean didn’t answer.

Sam and Rhodey both stepped towards the door, listening, then jumped back as one when the door began to splinter. A few fast blows later, and Dean was leering at them-- and Tony and Wilson, who had come skidding around the corner, most likely to see why the power was on.
“You act like I want to be cured!” Dean growled, continuing to smash at the door with a hammer and unnatural strength. He looked through the hole at Sam. “Personally, I like the disease.”

“Dean, stop!” Tony chimed in. “We don’t want to hurt you.”

“That sucks for you all, doesn’t it? ‘Cause you really mean that.”

“Look, if you come out of that room, we won’t have a choice,” Sam said, gesturing at the others with his knife. Wilson and Rhodey had pulled guns out of waistbands and Tony had one of the repulsors he used in “capture and hostage” type missions that looked impressive but would only knock a victim out.

“Sure you will! And I know which one you’ll make. Isn’t that right, Sammy? But see … Here’s the thing: I’m lucky. Oh, hell, I’m blessed! ‘Cause there’s just enough demon left in me that killing you? Ain’t no choice at all.”

Dean practically roared and suddenly the door was down. “Scatter!” Sam commanded and the broke up, Sam and Tony going one way as Rhodey and Wilson took the other side. Dean stepped into the hall, running a casual hand through his hair before looking around and walking after Sam.

“Sammy?” He swung the hammer once, experimentally. Rhodey ran at him from behind and had to dodge having his skull crushed in; he ducked and suddenly Dean’s fist was in his face, a starburst of pain spreading from his nose and knocking him back into Wilson, taking them both to the ground.

“Come on, Sammy! Let’s have a beer, talk about it. You and me and Tony, a little family reunion. I’m tired of playing, let’s finish this game!”

Sam and Tony shuffled down an adjoining hall. Tony peeked around the corner. “Clear,” he whispered but it was too late, Sam let out a yell as he ducked, Dean’s hammer swinging over his head with such force it broke into the wall and holding out the knife in his good hand. Tony let off a shot but it seemed to have no effect on Dean who just smiled at him even as Sam pushed his knife to Dean’s throat. “Well,” Dean drawled. “Look at you. Do it, it’s all you. Watch this, Tony.”

Sam’s eyes closed for a brief second and then he was dropping his hand and taking a step back. Tony’s heart dropped, sure this was when he was going to die as Dean’s eyes flicked black.
Suddenly, a pair of arms in a tan trenchcoat were wrapped around Dean, holding him firmly in place. “It’s over.”

Castiel was there, his eyes glowing blue as Dean struggled against him, his own eyes flicking black. “AUUUUUGGGHGHGHGH,” the demon let out a primal roar and Sam Wilson and Rhodey sprinted around the corner, blood pouring from Rhodey’s nose.

“It’s over, Dean,” Castiel repeated while they looked on in awe.

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Twelve hours later, they were running on coffee and whiskey. An impromptu waiting area had been set up outside the door leading into the room where Dean was tied up. Tony, Sam, and Cas stood in front of Dean, Sam injecting Dean yet again with blessed blood. Tony winced as he got a good look at Dean’s arms; the last twelve hours and the five or six before that had left needle marks all up and down the skin, surrounding the Mark of Cain.

Dean slumped over as Sam pulled out the needle, his head hanging low.

“What the hell are we doing to him, Cas?” Sam asked quietly. “I mean, even after I gave him all that blood, he still said he didn’t want to be cured, that he didn’t want to be human.”

Castiel shrugged. Tony carefully draped an arm over Sam’s shoulders, mindful of the one in the sling, as Cas answered, sounding as if he was choosing his words with care. “Well. I see his point. You know, only humans can feel real joy, but…” he looked towards the floor for a moment, as if remembering. “Also such profound pain. This is easier.”

Dean groaned and there was a scramble in the hallway as the trio of (now healed-- Castiel used a little of his angelic superpowers to fix Rhodey’s nose) avengers stood and came in, blocking off the doorway. Dean’s head rolled back, eyes opening, and several sharp intakes of breath came from the group-- his eyes were black. A moment later, it slowly dissipated and Sam stepped forwards, a flask in his hand that Tony assumed was full of holy water. Dean looked around, taking in Castiel and Sam in front of him with Tony only a step behind and two more avengers behind him.

“You all look worried, fellas.” His voice was rough, probably from all the yelling, but it was unmistakably Dean and Tony felt a wave of relief wash over him, so strong he had to lock his knees to remain standing.
Sam splashed a quick wave of the holy water across Dean’s face. Nothing happened and Sam smiled. “Welcome back, Dean.”

Voicemail of Tony Stark
“... plus it’s been a few days and he’s still fine. Hungry-- even after we ate with you guys, I had to go shopping and restock because he’s having, like, five meals a day. And it’s not like he didn’t eat while he was with Crowley. Anyway, Dean’s been sleeping and eating mostly, except when he wakes up and feels super guilty. Cas stayed around another day, which is great because it meant I could get drunk after you left and not worry.

But, yeah. The Mark is still there, but Dean’s back. Thank Rhodey and Sam again for me and tell Rhodes sorry about his nose, even if Castiel did fix it.

We’ll stop by sometime soon, I’m sure; Dean’s apologizing about everything under the sun right now so I’m sure he’ll want to talk to you.

Talk to you later, Tony.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, ya’ll! Thanks for hanging in there-- I promised a week or two and then life came and took me out at the knees with a baseball bat.

I churned this out really quick, so tell me what you think!

Hopefully will have a shorter thanksgiving-esque chapter up for the holiday and while I’m thinking about it, thanks to all you who read and review-- you make me happy and inspired.
It was barely light on a Sunday morning in early June at the upstate New York New Avengers training facility. The large, shiny, mostly new building was mostly empty-- Sunday was the day off for most SHIELD agents. Only a dozen guards remained, patrolling the perimeter and keeping an eye on the building, tac vests covering the edges of holsters and hidden weapons tucked into boots and up sleeves. They would finish their rounds then go home-- all SHIELD agents had the entire week of Thanksgiving off on paid leave.

A dozen guards… and the Black Widow and Captain America. It was a routine morning for the pair- a four-thirty run, a sweep of the grounds and training facility before sparring with each other. The rest of the team usually had the day off on Sunday but were coming in anyway; they had fought a grueling fight on Thursday and Steve had given them off Friday and Saturday in exchange for a practice session Sunday morning. They would be there at six. Natasha grinned as she set up another set of obstacles; it was a paintball day, so it would be both beneficial and fun.

However, the whole schedule for the day was thrown off when, at five forty-three, Steve was almost taken out by a flailing leg as Castiel, Dean, and Sam appeared out of nowhere and fell to the floor.

Trained as they were, it still took a few moments for Steve and Natasha to size up the circumstances. Castiel was thrashing, seemingly in agonizing pain, forehead furrowed and chin coated in blood; it looked as if he had bitten clear through his bottom lip in an effort to keep from crying out. Sam was desperately trying to hold his head still and Dean was almost sitting on the angel’s legs, running his hands over Castiel’s torso as if frantically trying to find the injuries.

Steve dropped the paintball gun he was holding and followed Natasha quickly over; fighting the angel’s superhuman strength to drag Castiel’s arm down to the floor and looking at Dean for instruction, only Dean wasn’t looking at him. He was focused on Castiel’s face and Sam.

“Come on, Cas!” Sam all but yelled. “You can do it, please, we can’t fix it unless you can bring them into this plane, I know it hurts but we need you--”

He was cut off as Castiel screamed, a deep human scream overlaid with a piercing angel’s cry. Steve had to fight to keep from letting go of Castiel’s arm to cover his sensitive ears as several smaller panes of glass cracked and shattered; fortunately the wall of the room was a durable bulletproof glass and didn’t break and rain down on them. Castiel’s scream stopped as abruptly as it began and Natasha had to stop herself from gasping; next to her leg, suddenly stretching between her and Sam and between Steve and Sam on Castiel’s other side were a pair of massive wings, reaching out at
least ten feet tip to shoulder on each side with the feathers long enough to cover her feet where she crouched. The feathering was beautiful; a dark brown, almost black, on the tops and ends, the colors faded into a lighter golden tan on the underside, the side facing up and the side, on one wing, which was coated with blood.

It was immediately clear what the problem was; the wing on Steve’s side was shredded. A multitude of deep gashes ran the width of the muscle in many places and Natasha could see at least two spots where the cuts went clear to the bone. The bird-like musculature seemed to be fine farther out, but the thicker meaty part closer to Castiel’s shoulder was coated with so much blood it seemed a wonder the angel was still conscious. Even in the few seconds that the wings had been lying there, a pool was starting to form of the slightly-shimmering red liquid. Castiel seemed to have given up the fight; as the wings appeared he went totally limp and tears had begun running from the corners of his eyes down into his hair.

Dean and Sam were both babbling. “We’ll take care of it, Cas, it’ll be okay, it’ll be fine. Don’t move, don’t move.” Castiel let out a strangled hiss as Sam released his head and moved over to the wing, clearly in awe but focused on the medical problem at hand, starting to carefully probe the edges of the cuts.

“What in the name of--”

Steve whirled around to find Wilson standing in the doorway, armed for practice but with huge eyes taking in the five people, one of whom had wings, in the puddle of blood on the floor. “Med kit, Wilson, NOW! Tell any guards who ask that we’re fine here.”

The ex-military man hurried off to snatch a kit from the nearest room and Steve’s attention was drawn back to Castiel as the angel groaned lowly. Natasha and Dean had pulled Castiel into a half reclining position a few inches off the floor as carefully as possible but couldn’t help bumping his wing. Dean was holding one shoulder from the front and trying to support the angel’s chest with his other hand, Natasha lifting the shoulder… attached… to the injured wing with the other and carefully using a knife to start cutting off the angel’s shirt, since the wings seemed to have magically created holes in it.

“Injury report?” Steve asked the group as a whole.

Dean answered tersely. “Cas has a hell of a lot of bruising, the lip, and the wing. Had a run in with one of the last rogue angels. Sam has--” he eyed him for a moment “a couple cracked or very bruised ribs and some standard cuts and bruises.”
“Dean has at least one broken bone in his hand, but he’s not bad ‘cause Castiel pulled a second knife and--” Sam cut off the long story. “Cas got the worst of it.”

“Can’t you heal it, Castiel?” Natasha wanted to know, neatly slicing through the end of the trenchcoat and slowly settling Castiel’s shoulder back on the floor before putting the knife back into her belt and stripping the fabric from his arm. Steve helped take the brunt of the angel’s body weight from Dean, trying to stay away from the broken ribs, as she repeated the process on the other side.

“No,” Castiel rasped quietly in response to Natasha, voice deeper but more harsh than usual from the yelling. “I’m too tired to heal the injuries of the vessel. And I’m still looking for my own grace. The wings…” he trailed off.

“The wings, Cas?” Dean asked. He had left Steve to help Natasha get Cas’ torso free of clothing and was with Sam looking at the wing, stripping off his own outer shirt and pushing it against the biggest of the cuts, slowing down the flowing blood.. “What about the wings?”

“Angels with badly injured wings--” he took a gasping breath “-- usually cannot fly.” The angel’s hand clenched tightly into Steve’s sweatpants on the leg that was just near his hand, bunching up the fabric and he closed his eyes. “We have never healed a wing before... They usually cannot fly,” he repeated.

“That ain’t happening, Cas.” Dean pried Castiel’s fingers off of Steve’s pants and let Castiel grip his hand, the angel not opening his eyes. “Sammy?”

“Right,” Sam took over just as the Falcon hurried back into the room, now trailing Rhodes and Maximoff. “First aid kit, now!”

Wilson dropped to his knees next to Sam and Dean, popping the lid of the kit and switching into “battlefield medic mode.” He and the brothers started putting more pressure on the cuts, Sam using only one hand while he rummaged with the other in the kit. The younger hunter ripped open a pack of sterile gauze and a bottle of antiseptic and looked over at Cas, who had tilted his head in their direction, reopening his eyes to watch their actions even though sweat was beading on his face and mixing with tears. “This is going to hurt like Hell, Cas,” he warned.

“Do it,” the angel got out through gritted teeth.

“Good thing you zapped us here instead of back to the motel room, otherwise we’d be doing this
with a bottle of whiskey,” Dean said, in an unsuccessful attempt to lighten the situation.

“I can take away some of the pain,” Wanda began.

“NO!” Sam and Dean shouted, Dean letting go of the bloodstained gauze and reaching out but before anyone could stop her, she laid a hand on Cas’ forehead. Both beings yelled and Wanda staggered backwards, her eyes glowing red for an instant before she fell to her knees, one hand on her temple.

Sam Winchester stood and took several long strides towards her, dropping to his knees despite the cracked ribs. “Are you okay, can you still see?” He shook her shoulders slightly. “Are you okay?”

“It is fading-- but he is not a human!” Her eyes widened in panic. “The things I sense from all of you--”

“Yeah… you probably shouldn’t try to do any mind-voodoo with any of us.” Wanda looked at the man. He could only be a few years older than her, but his face was lined around the eyes and there were faint scars on… everywhere, really. His neck, over the jugular, his chin, near his hairline, on his hands and lower arms. There were fading bruises a few days old around one eye socket and trailing back towards his temple, as if he had been hit with something heavy and lengthy. The man was gripping her shoulders tightly and she squirmed away lightly until he released her with a nod in Steve’s direction and went back to his injured friend, the not human one with wings.

Wanda reached out lightly and touched the mind of Vision, who was with Mr Stark, spending a little time looking through the old wreckage of SHIELD files at some odd data. “There are three people here at the training centre. The Captain seems to trust them, but one is not human and the others seem-- rough. One warned me against touching their minds.”

“I will see if Mr Stark can pull up a feed.” The android responded immediately.

Wanda nodded, although Vision would not know what she was doing and went to stand near Rhodey. He looked concerned, but not as concerned as she felt so she asked. “Do you know them?”

He nodded, tucking one hand in the pocket of his workout clothing; War Machine had peeled off of him and deactivated, standing silent a few feet behind. “I’ve met them before. They may seem crazy, but trust me, they know what they’re doing. They’ve probably saved the world more times than we have.”
She raised her eyebrows. “How did you meet?”

“I met the younger one-- the one with the long hair-- first. He was grieving after an accident and came around to see Tony. Let’s see… I met Dean-- the one with the short, brown hair-- at the tower. They were hanging out and I was around. They’re brothers. Tony’s cousins. We’ve been at Tony’s house at the same time more than once.”

“They are relations of Stark?” Wanda didn’t know if that should reassure her or not. She had made a tentative peace with the inventor that was rapidly solidifying into a general friendship. However, he was impulsive, ingenious, and she wasn’t sure what any family of his would be like.

As if to confirm, Vision spoke again, his words resonating through her head. “Mr Stark and I turned on the cam footage and he immediately became most agitated. We are on our way over now.”

“Captain,” Wanda called. Steve looked up from where he was holding down the end of the long wing. The man-- not man? The one Rhodes had not mentioned -- had mercifully passed out, but the wing tried to jerk involuntarily every time as the same man who had come over to her quickly and neatly tried to stitch up the gashes. It was clearly taking him much longer than he wanted; the inhuman was a much paler shade of white-grey than was healthy. The second brother-- Dean, Rhodes had called him-- was helping hold down the wing with one hand and was carefully cradling the neck and head of the injured inhuman with a hand that she could see trembling from across the room, the tendons in his neck tight. A broken bone in his hand, the other had said. The medic was trying to work around the feathers and she noticed that both were being very careful, muscled and scarred hands gently stitching, cleaning, and wrapping with the occasional help of Sam Wilson or Natasha. “Stark and Vision are on the way.”

The brother who had come over to make sure she could see and who told her to stay away from their minds-- the one she was calling the medic, for now-- looked up at that, a little smile on his face. His brother’s eyes didn’t even move from the medic the other was pulling tight but he spoke up, voice lower than Wanda was expecting. “Tony’s coming?”

“Yes,” she said. “Along with our final teammate.”

He nodded and went back to his work, pushing feathers aside so the other could slide the needle in again. The medic-- she really needed to learn his name-- glanced up from where he was carefully stitching and supervising Steve’s cleaning of the feathers and the gashes that had already been stitched closed and found Natasha with his eyes. “Is there a place we can stay for a few hours until we can get the car and get out of your hair?”
“Of course, Sam,” Natasha said, waving her phone in his direction. “We’ve got the entire residential facility for this entire week, so there won’t be anyone coming in to bother you.”

Sam nodded his thanks, turning back to start stitching the last gash closed.

Dean grunted. “We might need every day of that week-- even with angelic healing and all that crap, who knows how fast it’ll take Cas to heal?” His tone brooked no argument. It was clear, in his mind, that Castiel would heal, despite what the angel said about injured wings.

“You’ve got it,” Natasha confirmed. “Our headquarters are at your command.” She winked at Dean, who grinned tiredly back.

“Thanks, Tasha.” Wanda’s eyebrows shot up a the familiarity but didn’t comment. There was clearly more to these men than met the eye.

Sam Winchester and Sam Wilson both sat back, their hands covered in blood but the wounds in Castiel’s wing finally closed and covered. “We should let him sleep. I don’t know if painkillers will work for him, but I doubt it,” Wilson said. “From what you’ve told me, anyway.”

“He can take the third spare room,” Steve added decisively. “The one next to Dean’s.” He took a few steps forward, drawing level with Castiel’s knees and looking down at the angel and the huge wings spread on either side. “I can carry him, but is there a way to--” Steve made a sort of folding gesture with his hand.

Dean shrugged from his position at Cas’ head. “Dunno, man. We have exactly as much experience with wings as you do.” The hunter reached over to the uninjured wing, prodding it gently. To everyone’s great surprise, it shifted away from his hand slightly. Dean leaned as far as he could and nudged the wing near what looked like a large joint halfway or so down the wing. The wing curled, and most of the group stole a glance at Castiel’s face-- but the angel was still unconscious. A moment of Dean prodding later, the whole of the very large, feathered, appendage was now neatly folded, hugging Castiel’s bare shoulder, side, and back, all the way just past his knees and extending slightly over his shoulder.

“We probably shouldn’t fold this one,” Sam Winchester thought out loud, looking at the large bandages on the second wing.
“If I carry him with the folded wing tucked against me, could you and Rhodes and Wilson support the wing?” Steve asked. “We’re not going far. You remember, Sam.”

Sam remembered. It hadn’t been all that long ago that he had watched Thor carry Dean, lifeless, through these very halls.

“That could work,” he agreed. “Dean, if you try to use that hand, I swear to god I will end you here and now.”

“You’re one to talk, Mr Bruised Ribs,” Dean muttered but subsided, opting instead to grab the strap of the abandoned first aid kit and sling it over his shoulder.

“I’ll take care of this,” Natasha said, gesturing at the chaos of blood and scattered equipment that would be left in their wake.

“Ready?” Steve knelt and in one smooth motion, pulled Castiel into his arms. He paused a moment to make sure Rhodey, Wilson, and Steve all had full support of the wing-- Sam and Sam up near the shoulder, supporting the wounded section, Rhodey holding the joint and lifting the dark trailing feathers. Slowly, with Steve leading, they lifted the limp angel and carried him from the room, navigating corners and doorways until they arrived at the trio of guest rooms and carefully laid him on the bed.

Sam ran a hand through his hair and turned, everyone taking his cue and filing out of the room silently, heading for the living room.

Sam and Dean dropped onto the sofa and a squishy armchair, respectively, and Sam ran a hand through his hair. “Hey, guys,” he smiled tiredly at the Avengers. “How’s it been?”

Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson shook their heads in unison. “You two are crazy,” Wilson said, half admiringly, half seriously. “Let me go get a clean medical kit and I’ll look at Dean’s hand and Sam’s ribs.”

“There’s really no need--” Sam started before Wilson cut him off with a glare and he subsided as Falcon went to find a medical kit.

Sam and Dean both looked around, their shoulders relaxing slightly, taking in who all was present.
“Hey, Rhodes,” Dean said, waving at the military man. “How’s the nose?”

Rhodey grinned. “You know Cas fixed it before we left, so it’s just fine.” He leaned forward, elbows braced on the back of the couch Sam was lounging on. “Do you guys need food or anything? We all usually eat light breakfasts, a snack, and then a big lunch, but we could cook something up for you.”

“We’re good,” Sam said, exchanging a quick look with Dean. “Tired, but we’ll wait for you all to eat. Don’t go to any extra trouble for us.”

Rhodes snorted. “Please. After all the shit you guys have taken for the world? Us feeding you is pretty low on paying back what’s due to you.”

Sam looked a little uncomfortable and changed the subject. “I don’t think we’ve met,” he said, eyes landing on Wanda. She had slipped around and was in the soft chair near Dean’s, across from Sam. “You’re Wanda, right?” Wanda nodded and raised an eyebrow. “Tony’s told us about you,” he added in explanation. “Seems to think you’re about the coolest kid on the block, what with the--”

Sam made a waving gesture with his hand that Wanda was sure he meant to signify her magic. The hunter seemed to realize that he looked a little crazy, so he hastily dropped his hand. “I’m Sam Winchester--” he gestured towards the chair-- “my big brother Dean. We’re Tony’s cousins.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Winchester.” Wanda smiled and tipped her head towards him. “What do you and your brother--”

“Alllll right!” Wilson came back in, triumphantly waving a first aid kit. “Sam, shirt off.”

Sam rolled his eyes in exasperation at Wanda and Rhodes, who came around the couch and plopped down on the floor, leaning against the arm of Wanda’s chair. He slowly started peeling off layers of clothing, the outer jacket being joined on the floor by a plaid shirt and a tan t-shirt.

Everyone except Sam frowned when the hunter’s bare skin came into view; it was mottled with heavy bruises all across his right side and a long scrape crossed his lower oblique muscles, just above the top of his pants. “So another angel, huh?” Wilson asked as he pulled a sanitary wipe from a pack and started cleaning dirt and dried blood from the scrape.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “Two of them. The last few rebels from heaven, who don’t agree with how it’s being ruled.” His lips twitched into a wry grin. “And they don’t like us much.”
“What… exactly,” Wanda asked, more than a little confused. “Do you do?”

Sam’s smile faded. “We’re called hunters.” He shifted slightly so he could face Wanda more completely. “There’s a couple dozen of us across the States. Dean and I have been doing this our whole lives.”

“And what do you hunt?”

“Monsters,” Sam said, and Wanda’s eyebrows shot up. “They’re real; vampires, werewolves, wendigo, things that go bump in the night. We actually met Tony for the first time after a ghost hunt got mixed up with a demon and Dean got hurt pretty bad.”

“Demons?” Wanda asked.

“Demons. And angels,” Sam replied. “In balance. Castiel—” he pointed down the hall—”Is an angel, although he’s a lot more free spirited than some of those dicks.”

“Wow,” Wanda finally said. “That’s different.”

“Yeah, it is.” Wilson cut in. “Sam, I can’t do too much about your ribs except give you a painkiller. Anything else?”

Sam shook his head in negation. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Dean…” Wilson trailed off as he turned to look at Dean, who had been uncharacteristically silent through the whole conversation between Sam and Wanda.

Dean was asleep in the chair, one foot firmly planted on the floor, one splayed out to the side. His arms were crossed over his chest with the broken hand on top and his head had lolled sideways, breathing deep and slow as he got some much-needed rest.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Don’t wake him up,” he stopped Rhodey as the soldier started reaching towards his snoozing brother.
“He’ll be sore when he wakes up,” Rhodey cautioned. “I slept in that chair once. And we need to take care of his hand.”

“The hand will keep for a few hours,” Sam said. “And…” he hesitated. “He- we- get little enough sleep as it is. Dean could use a few hours.”

To his mild surprise, Sam Wilson didn’t argue with him about Dean’s broken hand but nodded towards the bedrooms. “You probably should get some sleep, too.”

Sam took a quick internal scan and decided Sam was right-- as long as Cas was still out and Dean was asleep he might as well get a few hours. “Tony warded this whole building, right?”

“Right,” Rhodes affirmed. “Max security against everything we know about.”

“Wake me up if anything exciting happens,” Sam said and then carefully pushed himself to his feet.

“Will do,” Wilson said. “Sleep well, Sam.”

When Sam Winchester woke up, it was with the disconcerting feeling that he had been asleep for a long time. There wasn’t a clock in the room and when he fumbled for his phone it flashed “Dead Battery” at him briefly. But there was cool late-November sunlight streaming around the edges of the blinds and birdsong filtering through the window.

Sam pushed back the blankets, taking in the room. Tony had clearly decorated it with him and Dean in mind, although they had never really planned on ending up at the Avengers training facility, especially now that Tony was more of a consultant and manager rather than an active duty member. The room was tasteful; light colors accented with cool blues. There was a neat stack of clothing on a chair near the attached bathroom door and it only took Sam a moment to realize they were his own. He recognized the green plaid as a shirt he had left at the Tower once, along with a few others, in case they ever showed up short supplied. Tony must have arrived while Sam slept.

A few minutes later, Sam emerged from his room, fully showered, shaved, and clothed and feeling
more relaxed than he had since Dean had taken the Mark of Cain. He stopped at the room they had
 deposited Castiel in and knocked lightly; when nobody answered he pushed the door open to find
the room empty.

Cas was in the kitchen, looking bizarre in comparison to the (relatively) normal humans around him.
He was wearing what looked like one of Steve’s plaid button ups and a zip up jacket over it, the
sleeves of both rolled up. The clothing was a little large on him but didn’t fit horribly; Sam thought
perhaps what was so strange was just that Castiel wasn’t wearing his usual suit and coat ensemble.

And of course there were the wings; someone had cut two long slits through the back of both shirts
and Castiel’s wings had been threaded through them. The bandages on the right wing, Sam could
tell, had been changed since he had been asleep and were a bright white against the darker brown
and tawny feathers. The other wing was tucked against Castiel’s back although it flared slightly
when the angel shifted forwards to pick up a cup from the table.

Sam fully entered the kitchen just as Sam Wilson started passing around plates. Falcon grinned at
him. “Sam! Good timing.” He gestured to a spot a few places down from Cas and slid a sandwich
his way.

Sam picked up the sandwich gratefully. “What time is it?” he asked. “Oh, and does anyone have a
charger I can borrow?” He turned to check on Dean, only to find that Dean was no longer occupying
the chair across the room. “Where’s Dean?”

“It’s twelve… fifty two,” Wanda said, settling next to Sam and picking up a sandwich of her own
after checking the oven clock. “There’s a charge port in the middle of the table and your brother
woke up two hours ago, showered, ate, and left with Tony and Natasha to get your car.”

“What about... “ Sam tried to remember the last Avenger’s name as he reached out to hook up his
phone. “Vision? He’s here too, right?” he asked before taking a bite of the sandwich.

“Indeed I am,” a voice familiar behind him answered and Sam turned to see Steve and someone else
entering the room. Sam took a moment to size him up. He was… tall, purple and blue, and had a
gemstone in his forehead. Sam mentally shrugged-- not the weirdest thing he had ever seen. Castiel
was currently wearing a sweatshirt and had visible wings so, yeah. Weird day all around. “Nice to
meet you, Sam,” Vision said, crossing the room and holding out his hand.

It was the voice, Sam realized as he shook Vision’s (oddly warm) hand. He had forgotten that Vision
had grown out of JARVIS, the AI Sam had first met at Tony’s Malibu house. “Nice to meet you,
Vision.”
“How’s the wing, Castiel,” Steve asked, looking curiously at the large appendages.

“How’s the wing, Castiel,” Steve asked, looking curiously at the large appendages.

“How’s the wing, Castiel,” Steve asked, looking curiously at the large appendages. “Much better, thank you,” Cas said distractedly, poking at the sandwich. “I have managed to heal the wounds of the vessel—” he gestured at his cut free face— “and the wing feels much better.” He abandoned the sandwich and frowned, his shoulders dropping. “There are very few instances where angels have had wounded wings, so I’m afraid there isn’t much reference to go on. But…”

“It’ll heal, Cas,” Sam reassured him.

Cas nodded but looked doubtful, pushing his plate towards Sam.

“You should eat that, Castiel,” Wilson said, frowning at the plate.

Sam grinned, knowing what Cas would say.

“I don’t need to eat, Sam,” the angel replied predictably. “I can’t taste it. It’s just molecules.”

Falcon looked taken aback and took a moment to process that before just shaking his head and shoving the plate closer to Sam, who took it gladly and started eating his second sandwich. “So, you all have training at six on a Sunday morning?”

Wanda smiled and took a sip from a glass of orange juice near her. “Not usually, no. We had a mission on Thursday and Steve and Natasha gave us off Friday training provided we came in today.”

“We did train a little after you went to sleep but probably won’t do too much this afternoon. It’ll be a slow week, training wise,” Steve said. “It’s a holiday week, you guys are here, we might as well take a bit of a break, for once.”

“It’s a holiday week?” Sam asked, running through a mental list of what time of year it was and what could be happening. His eyes widened as he realized-- almost the end of November meant Thanksgiving. “I forgot.”
“What, no big Thanksgiving plans?” Rhodey said, entering the room with his phone in hand. His tone was half teasing half serious.

Sam snorted. “We’re usually just thankful that we’re both alive. Although, the last few years…” Sam thought back, the smile dropping from his face. There had been Dean, newly struggling with the Mark of Cain. Before that, Sam and the Trials. The Leviathans. Bobby had died not long before Thanksgiving. Sam wasn’t even entirely sure if they had celebrated the holiday while he was soulless. And the year before that, well, he had been… gone.

Wanda must have sensed his dramatic change in mood or else it must have simply been highly visible on his face because she shrugged. “I have not yet had one of your American Thanksgivings either. It will be a first for us both, it seems.”

Sam looked a little taken aback-- while he agreed that they would stay at the compound for the week while Castiel healed, he didn’t expect to be suddenly joining a Thanksgiving celebration. Not that he had any problems with the holiday, per se, it was just… unexpected. He and Dean didn’t exactly do a lot of family gatherings or parties these days. “Um, yeah. It’ll be interesting.”

Castiel’s wings flared a little as he turned from Sam Wilson, with whom he had been having a conversation about something angelic, if the look on Sam’s face was anything to go by. “I remember the first Thanksgiving,” he said casually. “Of course, it’s not what you all refer to as “The First Thanksgiving,” which is highly idealized. It was more of a small town dinner to celebrate the arrival at Plymouth Rock. There were no Native Americans to be seen and half the town contracted tuberculosis the day after.”

Sam, who was more or less used to Castiel dropping such bombshells on a daily basis, didn’t even blink, just took a sip of his juice and a handful of grapes from the bowl in the middle of the table. However, Wanda dropped her fork, Wilson, who had just taken a drink, had to fight to keep from spitting it out, and Rhodey nearly dropped his plate. Steve just raised an eyebrow and Vision didn’t react at all.

The awkward silence that followed Castiel’s pronouncement was followed by the sound of Wilson choking on his drink, Steve clapping him on the back, and Sam’s phone ringing.

Wanda reached out and pushed it towards him and he scooped it up and answered it without bothering to look at the ID. “Dean?” He sat up straighter a moment later. “Garth?” Several Avengers looked at him with curiosity. “We haven’t heard from you since… well, you know. How’s Bess? And everyone else?” The hunter lounged back. “No way! Congrats, man.”
The hunter on the other end of the line must have changed the conversation because Sam’s smile evened out and his brow furrowed. “Well, um. We’re a little busy at the moment, but if we’re the only team in the area…” Sam leaned across the table, picking up a pad of paper and pen that were sitting near Steve. “Okay. Run it by me.” He uncapped the pen and started scribbling a minute later, repeating some of the information out loud and talking half to himself and half to the hunter-- Garth - - on the other end of the line.

“Okay. Beaver Cove, Maine. When? Tuesday? When did the reports come in?” He kept scribbling away, handwriting becoming messier. “Wait a second… Beaver Cove…” Sam shook his head. “How many vics?” A pause. “All of them?” Sam’s voice seemed to have dropped, becoming harder. “Garth. What’s the breakdown.” It wasn’t a question. He waited a moment, shoulders tense, then exhaled but instead of relaxing, he had turned on a laser focus Steve remembered from the year Sam had lived and trained with the Avengers while Dean was in Purgatory. “We’re on it. Send me the files.”

Sam ended the call and immediately dialed someone else, putting the phone on speaker and setting it in the middle of the table.

“Dean, how far out are you?” he asked the second his brother picked up.

“Three hours, maybe. Figured we’d take it easy, since we’ve got time and Cas has to rest up before we go, anyway.”

“Can you make it in two? Garth called, we’ve got a job.”

“Sam, can we just take it easy for once? While Cas heals? Natasha said we could be there for a week before moving, it’s Thanksgiving on Thursday, a few hours isn’t going to kill us and if Garth called then he’s probably got a handle--”

“Dean, it’s just outside the portal from Purgatory, that can’t be a coincidence.” Sam’s hand clenched reflexively. “Garth doesn’t have any leads on what it is, and it’s killed a kid.” Wanda gasped, everyone else tensed, and if the Avengers thought Sam’s face had been icy before, it was stone now. “Every other day since Tuesday. Two so far have gone missing, one dead and tomorrow night’s our deadline.”

“Does he have any idea what it is?” Dean asked, the roar of the Impala getting louder in the background as Dean presumably stepped on the gas.

Sam grimaced. “Sounds a little like a tulpa. Something that gets in the houses. But if only kids are
seeing it and it only works at night…” he shrugged. “I’ll borrow a laptop--” he looked up at Steve, who gave him an affirmative thumbs up-- “and do some research before you get here. We should check Dad’s old journal, too.”

“Right. We’ll be there as soon as possible,” Dean said. “Call if you find anything.”

Dean ended the call and Sam picked up the phone, sliding it into his pocket, before turning his attention to Steve. “Laptop?”

Steve nodded and stood, crossing the room and reaching under the coffee table to pull out a sleek computer. “Here. Our resources are at your disposal.”

Sam grinned. “Never heard that one before.”

Two hours later, Dean arrived with Tony, Natasha, and the Impala. He walked in the compound, his and Sam’s bags slung over his shoulder, to find Sam sitting at the kitchen table with Wanda, the pair sorting through printouts and with a pair of computers in front of them.

“Right, what’ve we got?” Dean asked. “And where’s Cas?”

“His wings and ribs were hurting him, so Wilson gave him the strongest painkiller they had.” Sam smirked a little. “Cas didn’t think it would do anything, but he was out cold fifteen minutes later. He’s back in his room.”

“And the case?”

Sam’s face turned businesslike, sliding some papers across the table to Natasha, Tony, and Dean as they all took seats.

“The first kid went missing on Tuesday night,” he began. “Just disappeared out of her bed. Danielle Alogrin, age eight. Her parents reported her missing the next morning when she wasn’t in the house. Thursday night, it was Jason Miller, age twelve. His parents also reported him missing the next
morning when he wasn’t in his room and the school said he didn’t show up. Last night, it was a thirteen year old. She—” Sam flipped through some pages until he came up with an autopsy report—“Stephanie Zonov, age thirteen. Her parents sent her to bed, stayed up to watch a movie, and then when they checked on her at about one thirty in the morning, found her dead. Autopsy report said she had been strangled, but the positioning was weird—she had been lying on her back but the fingerprints were on the front of her neck. Like she had been lying on the bed and something had reached from under her and choked her.”

Dean raised his eyebrows and sat back. “So where are our missing kids? What did it? And how do we kill it?”

Suddenly, Natasha spoke up. “What’s the community like?”

“Um…” Sam clicked through the file Garth had sent. “Seems pretty close knit. Mostly Eastern European descent but there’s been a lot of in and out recently.”

“Mostly Russian descent.”

“Yeah,” Dean focused completely on Natasha. “You got something?”

“Well,” she said. “I don’t know if it’s real, but there is a monster…”

Sam and Dean Winchester sat in the back corner of a seedy bar in Beaver Creek, Maine, waiting for their associate. Tony and Wanda had been put out that they weren’t allowed to come until Sam and Dean reminded them that Tony wasn’t exactly subtle and they didn’t need any extra attention and that they had never worked with Wanda before and a case of this magnitude wasn’t the best place to start, no matter how good the young woman was at her Avenging job. Castiel, thankfully, had still been unconscious and they hadn’t had to argue with him about the visibility of his wings and his resulting inability to be inconspicuous.

A few minutes later, Natasha slid into the seat next to Dean. “Coroner’s report doesn’t have anything new,” she began without preamble. “But the handprints left on Zonov’s throat mean that it was definitely supernatural. The fingers are too long, the marks are too strong for a human to have caused them, and there’s a kind of burn marking around the edges. Not human.”
“The parents all had about the same setup,” Sam filled Natasha in. “They all tucked in their kids, reminded them that they need to go to bed, no staying up late, and then went to bed. The Alogrin and Miller parents didn’t check on their kids, just found them missing. The Zonovs usually check on Stephanie before they go to bed. It’s a normal habit and they didn’t hear any signs of a struggle coming from her room.”

“So in other words, you’re looking more right by the moment,” Dean said, grinning at Natasha.

She didn’t smile back. “Of course. I grew up on stories of Tili Tili Bom,” Natasha said. “The monster, the Russian Boogeyman, who would come into the rooms of children who were supposed to be sleeping and would punish them.”

“ Weird, but not the weirdest shit we’ve ever heard,” Dean muttered.

“And,” Natasha continued as if Dean hadn’t spoken. “Nobody seemed very certain about what he looked like, so it’s not impossible for him to be superhumanly strong.”

“We’re just outside the exit from Purgatory, remember?” Sam added, “So it’s not impossible for a weird old monster to have left purgatory and then been drawn here, to a town of mostly Russian descendants. Also,” he spun his open laptop so Natasha and Dean could see the screen. “There’s plenty of precedent about for the same type of monster-- for some reason, there’s a bunch of lullabies about them. Um, in Haiti, it’s “Dodo Titit,” in Italy, it’s “Ninna Nanna,” in Turkey there’s “Incili Bebek Ninnisi,” and so on.”

“Okay, okay,” Dean said. “So we’re unfortunately right, there’s something still out there, we think it’s Tils or whatever, we don’t know where it is, how to kill it, or where it’s going to strike next,” he summarized. “Great. Time to ring some doorbells.”

It took them eight houses to strike gold.

By the time they approached the shabby but neat home at the end of the street, Dean was tugging uncomfortably at the hem of his “university dweeb” sweater, as he called it. Sam looked at ease but Dean could see him running his hands through his hair more than usual, and both of them had been forced by Natasha to take meds for their respective injuries an hour before.
The spy, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at home with her neat navy blazer and skirt, which she had procured somewhere from the bag she had brought along. In every house they had visited, she had taken the lead as they questioned person after person about any old legends, taking notes and occasionally showing pictures Natasha had found on the internet. One old guy, after hearing that they were apparently researchers in the field of old Russian myths and legends and learning that Natasha was fluent, chattered away at them only in Russian for nearly forty five minutes while pulling books off shelves and pouring them glasses of the worst vodka Sam and Dean had ever tasted but that Natasha drank like it was water.

But finally, finally, they were getting somewhere. The woman who answered the bright red door was tall, taller than Natasha and only a few inches shorter than Dean. Her face was thin and her hair was in a tight bun but she had full lips and a kind smile. “Hello?” she asked, a little hesitantly-- after all, two children had gone missing and one of them was dead.

“Hi,” Sam began. “We’re a university research team and we’re doing a study on the prevalence of classic Russian stories and lullabies in modern societies. Could we talk to you for a few minutes?”

The woman looked at her watch and there was a shift of fabric behind Sam as Dean checked his phone: 6:12. The sun had set nearly an hour before and all three were starting to get antsy; their window to find information was starting to get very small.

“Of course,” the woman answered and gestured them in the house. “Peter? There are a few university people here who were asking what we knew about any Russian stories or lullabies.”

A man, presumably the woman’s husband, emerged from the living room with a girl in tow. He was portly but still rather tall, only an inch or so shorter than his wife. He had the young girl on his back, her arms wrapped loosely around his neck and her gangly child’s legs dangling behind them. “Go finish your homework, sweetheart,” he told her, setting the girl down.

She gave Natasha a friendly wave, which the spy returned, before bouncing towards the front door and up the set of stairs leading to the second floor. “Peter Petrov,” he introduced himself. “My lovely wife, Diana.” The woman emerged from a small kitchen connected to the living room with a tray of mugs.

“Please, sit,” she said, passing around cups. The girl came rushing back down the stairs, a few sheets of paper in hand.

“Papa, can you help me with my geography?” she asked.
“And of course, our daughter, Angelina,” Peter said. “Sweetheart, we’re a little busy right now…”

“I can help,” Dean volunteered. “If it’s okay with your parents, of course. And then my friends here can talk to them.”

“You don’t have to—” Diana began to object.

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Dean soothed. “Let’s just go sit at the kitchen table, okay?”

Angelina gave him a wide grin and grabbed his hand, leading him off to sit at the table with his coffee and her homework.

“Dean-- Professor Smith-- loves kids. He’s like a child whisperer,” Sam said truthfully. “I keep telling him his talents are wasted at the University, that he needs to go off and teach middle school somewhere but he says he’d rather walk over hot coals than teach middle school kids,” Sam added, significantly less truthfully.

Natasha rolled her eyes, as if she had heard that argument between “Professor Smith” and “Professor Colt” a thousand times. “Not again,” she groaned. “Anyway, like Dean said, it’s no trouble. We’ll chat about the old stories a little, Dean will help Angelina with her geography, and then we’ll be out of your way.”

“The old stories?” Diana asked. “Anything in particular? We know a handful, both our parents came the United States from…”

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Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Dean was talking about geography.

“No, no,” he said, pointing out the map of all fifty states she was filling out. “Just remember, all the little states are really easy because they all look different, plus you live here. These ones out west are hard because they’re all square and look the same,” he wisely advised.
“I don’t like geography,” Angelina grumbled, scribbling “Vermont” across New Hampshire. “What are your friends talking to Papa and Mom about?” she asked.

“Russian stories and monsters and all sorts of things. That’s our job, is to look at what sorts of stories people remember and if those stories come from the same countries.”

Angelina didn’t look up from her paper. “Monsters like Tili Tili Bom?” she asked.

Natasha nodded sympathetically. “It’s enough to make anyone nervous,” she said. “Angelina seems in good spirits, though.”

Diana sighed and glanced at the door, a deadbolt drawn across. “She’s only ten and didn’t know any of the children. Danielle was younger than her and Jason and poor Stephanie were older so they didn’t share any classes, thank goodness. She’s at the age where she just bounces back, can’t understand why we won’t let her stay out after dark.”

“Kids,” Sam said, shaking his head. “Crazy how resilient they are.”

“It came in the house, once,” Angelina said. “Papa didn’t believe me. But it was in my room, by the closet, but Papa came in and said because we were both awake he would make me hot cocoa.”

“And it didn’t come back?” Dean asked quietly.

“I think… I think it was outside yesterday,” Angelina said. “And all around. All the kids at school say if you’re awake after you go to bed, it comes and stands outside your house and sometimes it comes inside. It might kill you or it might eat you,” she said with the serious solemnity of a child who half believed her own words but at the same time was tainted by the reasoning of her parents. “Or it might just take you to its house and eat you later.”

“Where does a monster live?” Dean smiled, teasing. “In the dark woods?”
Angelina nodded. “I know where.”

A brief strategy meeting was all they had time for, their entire arsenal laid out on the dingy motel bedspreads. “Right,” Dean said. “So it lives in the woods by the school, just around the corner from the Petrov’s house. There’s apparently an old hunting shed, about fifty feet inside the treeline. That’s the place. I say we get out there now and gank it. Take everything we’ve got.”

“What about Angelina?” Natasha argued. “We need to split up. It sounds like she’s the next victim, or at least a likely one. Dean, you should stay near their house and keep an eye on her. Sam and I will kill Tili Tili Bom.”

“No,” Dean shook his head. “I’ll go with Natasha and we’ll take down the shed and check for the kids and Tils there. Sam, you go to the Petrov’s house.”

“You’re better with kids than I am, Dean,” Sam argued.

“Look…” Dean pursed his lips. “I’ll be honest. I’ve got the mark. If it does come to the house, we don’t want me to, you know… go crazy while Angelina is there.”

“I thought you said it was under control!” Sam said, voice rising.

“It is!” Dean started packing weapons onto his person and into a duffle bag. “I just want to be careful, okay?”

“Fine,” Natasha said smoothly. “Dean and I take out the monster, Sam watches the house.”

“Besides,” Dean said. “The parents like you and if Tils comes you’re going to have to break down the front door to get in the house. Better you than me explaining why you just broke in.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”
It was nearly nine and Sam was starting to get jumpy. The room he assumed was Angelina’s had lit up for a bit, possibly as the Petrovs had put their daughter to bed, and now all was dark. There hadn’t been any sign of trouble, but then again, Dean and Natasha hadn’t contacted him either, which meant they were either coming up blank as he was or they were fighting a monster.

And then, it all happened at once.

A high scream bled out of the house, faint through the walls and windows and distance, but Sam had heard a lot of screams in his life and recognized what it was. He was up and moving towards the house in a flash, heading for the front door. Sam’s shoulder collided with it, sending a flash of pain through his bruised ribs and stopping him in his tracks.

He let out a grunt of frustration and took a half step back, looking over the door critically before shifting his weight and kicking the lock dead on. The door half broke, his foot going right through the flimsy wood and plastic. Yanking his leg out, Sam ripped a chunk out of the door,shouldering through the newly created gap just in time to collide with Peter and Diane Petrov, who had rounded the corner and were headed for the stairs to their daughter’s bedroom.

“I heard a scream,” Sam shouted, racing up the stairs behind them. Fortunately, the Petrovs were much too occupied with the danger their daughter was in to question Sam’s shaky excuse for breaking down their front door.

Peter charged into Stephanie’s room, Diane right behind him. But before Sam could follow, both came flying past him into the hallway, propelled by an unnatural amount of force and slammed into walls. Sam’s heart dropped and he burst into the room to find...

Nothing.

Well, mostly. The lights were on and the instant Sam had stepped fully inside, the door slammed behind him. He turned, pulling on the handle, but there was no give despite the lack of a lock on the door-- it was being held supernaturally. He could hear a frantic pounding on the other side; at least one of the Petrovs was back on their feet and trying to get in. Just as Sam turned back to locate Angelina, something went through him.
He gasped— it was as if, for a brief moment, his whole body had been dropped in a tank of ice water. Spinning back to the door, he was just in time to see the back of something dark float through the heavy wood door as if it wasn’t there. A scream of terror broke off the sound of fists on the door and he could hear the panic in the hallway through the supernatural deadening of the sound.

Sam did a quick spin and jumped in his skin when he found Angelina only a few feet away from, dark eyes filled with fear and the hem of her pink pajama shirt clutched tightly in one fist.

“It was here,” she whispered. “Tili Tili Bom.” Sam knelt in front of her but was startled to his feet instantly when he found that there was suddenly several inches of water covering the floor, soaking the front of his shins and the bottom of Angelina’s pajama pants. “It was here, in my room,” Angelina repeated as Sam assessed the situation. Now that he was watching it, the water seemed to be rising more and more rapidly, several inches in only the last handful of seconds. There were several windows in the room but he didn’t have any hopes about the water draining out of them— if the crack under and surrounding the door wasn’t letting any of the water out, chances were the windows weren’t going to be any help either.

“On the bed, Angie,” Sam said, scooping up Angelina and setting her on the bedspread. He suddenly realized the frantic pounding and screams of fear from the hallway had stopped and he pressed his lips together— that couldn’t be good. Sam climbed on the bed next to the little girl.

“I don’t swim very well,” Angelina said, inching just a little closer to him.

“I’ll keep you safe okay?” the hunter reassured as confidently as he could, watching the water begin to lap at the bottom of the comforter hanging off the bed. “Angelina, remember how me and Dean and Natasha came to your house earlier and we said our job was to learn about stories? About monsters in stories?” Angie nodded and a little life came back into her eyes as water began to soak the bedspread. “That’s our real job,” Sam told her. “We’re like... police for monsters and we go around and make sure they never hurt people again. I’ll look after you, okay, and Dean and Natasha are stopping Tili Tili Bom and making sure your parents are fine,” he added, although it wasn’t entirely true.

While he spoke, Sam looked around and found himself increasingly desperate. There didn’t seem to be anything particularly buoyant in Angelina’s room— no wood furniture, no inflated beanbag chairs, no convenient trash bag he could inflate and tie off for her to hang on to.

“Okay, Angelina, here’s what we’re going to do.” Sam started to stand on the bed, kicking his shoes off while he had the opportunity and since they were already waterlogged anyway. “I bet your parents have told you not to do this, but we’re just going to stand on your bed.” Angelina’s eyes widened, but she pushed herself to her feet anyway. Despite the severity of the situation, Sam couldn’t help but smile as she gave a few test bounces on the squishy surface.
“And then, when the water gets too high for you, I’m just going to hold you up,” Sam continued calmly. “Don’t tell my brother,” he whispered conspiratorially, “But I’m really tall, taller than he is, so I’ll just hold you above the water.”

“What about when you can’t stand on the bed anymore?” Angelina asked.

Sam didn’t say anything. He didn’t have a answer to give her.

A stick snapped under Dean’s foot loudly as he and Natasha took their final approach towards the ramshackle hut Angelina had directed them to.

It was, as she had said, only a few dozen yards inside the woods just off the school grounds and just around the corner from the Petrov’s house. The hut was dark wood, stained with age and starting to fall apart in one corner of the roof.

“Well, I guess Tils isn’t a big fan of home maintenance,” Dean quipped as the duo surveyed the dilapidated building. Natasha didn’t respond but he could practically hear her rolling her eyes at him.

“You go left,” she said instead of quipping back and began her own trek around the building to the right, peering into shadows with her pistol raised in silent readiness. They met at the rear of the building, both shaking heads-- there had been nothing, at least on the outside, to indicate anything unusual happening with the shed.

“So,” Natasha said as they retraced Dean’s steps back to the front. “You still have the Mark of Cain?” she asked bluntly.

It was Dean’s turn to roll his eyes. “Is this the time?”

“Didn’t want to ask with Sam around,” she said. “It almost seems like it bothers him more than it bothers you.”

“It bothers us both plenty,” Dean said, his fingers twitching on the grip of his pistol as he thought of the red skin on his forearm. “But we’re dealing with it. I think Sam’s still researching how to get rid
of it, but I don’t know where he thinks he’s going to find that information.”

They moved forwards in tandem and without hesitating, Dean reached out and swung the door of the hut open, almost ripping it off hinges that were sagging from disuse. “Nobody’s used that door for awhile,” Natasha observed.

“Yeah, but someone’s been here,” Dean said, looking past her. The floor showed unmistakable signs of someone having walked it repeatedly. “Small footsteps-- at least one of the kids must be alive.”

“Yes, but was,” Natasha agreed grimly.

They took a few steps forward and Natasha clicked on her flashlight with the hand not holding her pistol to reveal a small huddle of dirty blankets in the corner.

They shifted as the light hit them and Dean’s safety clicked on as they were pushed to the side altogether, uncovering the dirty pajamas and bare feet of two small children. The older-- Jason, Dean remembered-- had his arms wrapped around the much younger girl, warding off the November chill that crisped the Northeastern air. “Hi,” Dean said, moving forwards slowly and kneeling in front of the pair, who looked at him with frightened, gaunt faces. Natasha stood and took a few steps back to the door. Dean ignored her-- whatever she was doing, he was sure it had a purpose. “You must be Jason and Danielle,” Dean said.

Both children nodded at him but neither spoke. “I’m D-- Dan,” Dean continued softly, deciding at the last minute that having lots of people putting them together with the trio of “professors” was probably not a great plan. “We’re going to get you out of here, okay?”

“The monster,” Jason’s voice was rough and his tongue flicked out to run over his dry lips. Dean winced sympathetically; those kids were going to need some serious treatment for dehydration. “It left earlier.”

Dean tensed and in his peripheral vision he could see Natasha do the same. That meant Tili Tili Bom was probably on its way to the Petrov house-- and Angelina and Sam.

Natasha took a step forwards. “Look, guys, we’ve called the police to come get you. They’ll probably have your parents with them too, okay? But we need to get out of here.”
Jason nodded and started sitting up with Danielle curled tightly to his chest. To both Jason and Dean’s surprise, though, Natasha reached out, scooping up Danielle and pulling her against her shoulder, the girl’s slight weight on her hip.

“I’ll carry you piggyback,” Dean offered the boy. He could see the pride swell in Jason’s eyes despite his obvious hunger and dehydration. “You know, because you aren’t wearing shoes,” Dean added. “Just don’t want you to step on anything even though you can walk just fine.’’

Jason seemed to consider that before nodding and letting Dean turn so Jason could wrap his arms around Dean’s neck.

The four moved in quick synchrony to the edge of the woods where already red and blue police lights were flashing and voices could be heard shouting. The moment they stepped from the trees, they were mobbed by police and EMTs, the parents of both children crying and hovering around them as they were reunited with their children.

A single police officer lingered. “We’ll need your statement,” he said, but it was clear his attention was on the rescued kids.

“Of course, Officer,” Natasha said smoothly. “We’ll just wait right here, go help with the kids, please.” The man didn’t even look back as he went over to his colleagues and started guiding parents and cordoning off the edge of the woods.

And so he didn’t see the two hunters slip into the night.

Dean and Natasha were running flat out a moment later, moving as fast as their legs could take them for the Petrov house. The instant the rounded the last corner, Dean knew something was wrong. Most clearly, the door now had a large, Sam-sized hole in it. A little less clearly, the Impala’s door was open. Sam must have been moving fast to have left the car open to theft.

Dean swung it shut as they passed by and in his moment of distraction, almost missed getting his pistol up in time.

It was if he had blinked and it was there; Tili Tili Bom, in front of them at last.

Chapter End Notes
OH NO! Dean and Natasha are ready to face off against Tili Tili Bom, Sam and Angelina are in high water, the circumstances of the Petrovs is unknown, Cas’ wing is still injured, and the Winchesters have never had a proper Thanksgiving! What a cliffhanger!

Hopefully the next chapter will be up on next Friday!

And thank you all, like always, for the comments. They mean a lot.
Thanksgiving, Part 2

Chapter Notes

To answer some timeline questions-- I’m placing this as a sort of interlude to “Book of the Damned.” Castiel has just regained his own grace and per my own headcannon his wings are mostly uninjured (despite what we see in the episode) because he had his grace taken from him just before he was cast out of heaven by Metatron. For the sake of ease, I’m breaking up “Book of the Damned” into the “angel parts” and the “Mark bits.” The “angel parts” which lead up to Castiel getting his grace back happen before the “Mark bits” (where Charlie calls, Dean meets up and kills a Styne, and we are introduced to the Book of the Damned).

Sorry this took so long; more notes at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was not in a good mood.

He had been denied hunting with Sam and Dean and then to add insult to injury had to spend the majority of a day and a half clearing up most of Stark Industries R&D because some idiot freshly out of the company had thought it was a good idea to work with experimental tech by himself, without safety precautions. So by the time he made it back to the Avenger’s compound, it was late Monday evening and he was in a funk made only worse by the sudden realization of what day it was and that it was about the right time for Dean, Sam, and Natasha to hopefully be killing a monster.

He huffed and decided it would be a good time to get some questions answered.

It took him about ten minutes to find Castiel; the AI that was installed in the compound was really more of a virtual assistant than anything on Jarvis or Friday’s level and once it told him that the angel had left the building, it was of no more help.

Finally, Tony emerged from the roof hatch, a cup of coffee in his hands. He had considered bringing one for the angel, but since the being hadn’t eaten anything all day and had reiterated his “molecules” excuse when Rhody, Sam, and Steve had in turn tried to get him to eat, Tony was pretty sure it was a lost cause.

“Hey,” Tony said. “How’s the wing?”

Castiel didn’t even turn to look at Tony but just dipped his head. “Better, thank you.” The angel rotated both his shoulder and the wing and turned to look at Tony, gesturing for the genius to sit next to him on the roof. He was wearing another one of Steve’s shirts with long cuts to accommodate the wings down the back despite the chilly November air.

“And the rest of you?” Tony prodded, looking Castiel over without sitting next to him. He certainly seemed more healthy than he had when Tony had last seen him-- between Castiel’s rounds of sleeping (or just passing out to save energy while healing; Tony wasn’t sure if there was a difference for the angel) and Tony’s trip back to New York, he hadn’t really seen the angel since lunch two days prior, when Castiel was still nursing a multitude of cuts and bruises along with a few broken ribs. His skin was now clear, and Tony couldn’t see any bandages under his shirt.
“Also better,” Castiel said. He must have caught the look on Tony’s face because he elaborated slightly. “I am sufficiently rested and my grace has… ‘recharged,’ you might say. I got it back very recently and it took a significant amount of effort to bring Sam, Dean, and myself here from our fight. Since then, I have been able to heal the rest of my injuries.”

“But not the wing,” Tony checked, shivering against a sudden breeze that ran through his t-shirt and taking a sip of coffee.

“No, but to my surprise, it heals at its own pace.” Castiel’s uninjured wing twitched out and the wing tip twisted in front of them. “Angels usually do not treat injuries with such… human methods. Perhaps, if we had done so, an injured wing would not be such a cause for alarm.” Almost absently, Castiel ran his fingers through the feathers, plucking out a bent and broken secondary feather from near the edge and holding it up. The grey twilight winter sunlight filtered through it, turning the streaks of tan into a sharp gold. He released the feather and it floated off into the breeze, the angel watching it soar away. “How is Ms Potts-Stark?” Castiel suddenly asked.

Tony smiled softly. “She’s busy, like always.” Castiel smiled and nodded. “You’ll see her later this week, she’s coming out to join us later tomorrow and she’s staying here through Thanksgiving, until we both go back to the Tower.”

“I look forward to it,” Castiel said. “She is a woman of both intelligence and great compassion.” The angel finished arranging the tip of the wing and his hands curled together neatly in his lap. “Something is bothering you, Tony,” he added without looking at Tony.

Tony blinked twice before his surprise passed and he considered his options. He could, of course, deny everything like usual. Nothing was wrong. Nothing was bothering him. And he had no questions. He was fine. (It was a lie). Or… Tony wouldn’t go so far to say Castiel was a friend. When the angel had been newly human and kicked out of the Bunker by an unthinking Dean, Castiel had stayed with Tony and Pepper for several weeks while they got paperwork in order, taught him some basics of being a human, and made sure he wouldn’t starve to death on the streets. They were somewhere between acquaintances and friends, an odd relationship made more strange by Tony’s increasing awareness of Castiel’s age and general… angelicness, mostly because there were a big pair of wings physically attached to Castiel’s body and reminding him all the time.

Tony must have been thinking for an unusual amount of time without speaking because Castiel apparently decided Tony’s silence was reason enough to bring the topic around on his own.

“You are still upset about the incidents with Ultron,” Castiel said, swiveling again and piercing Tony with his bright eyes.

Tony closed his own to avoid meeting the angel’s gaze. “What?”

Castiel stood to face Tony, uncomfortably close. He shook his head and gave a half smile. “You are related to Sam and Dean Winchester. You share the family need to gather the guilt that is not all yours and hold it close to your chest.” Castiel reached out and touched Tony’s sternum, where the arc reactor had once sat. “Here, inside you.”

“It was my fault,” Tony confessed. “The guilt is all mine because it was my fault.”

“No,” Castiel said, voice growing. “If I have learned anything from humanity, it is that nothing is ever just the fault of one person. I…” the angel hesitated for the first time. “You are not alone in holding the guilt that is not your own. I… I was responsible for the angels being cast out from heaven and even now am responsible for those who the rogue angels are killing in the name of our Father. I am responsible for many of the things that have happened to Sam and Dean. I am
responsible for Claire, the reason she no longer has either a father or a mother of her own.”

“But you’ve done good stuff, too!” Tony argued. “You saved Dean from Hell! You stopped Metatron’s take over of heaven!”

Castiel’s chin lifted. “Precisely. And you mean to tell me you have done nothing worthy of praise in your lifetime?”

Tony’s own face dropped. “Well… I created a killer robot that took out a whole city, got Wanda’s brother killed, oh, took out a bunch of innocent civilians with years of weapons manufacturing, caused tons of property damage,” he said, the words spilling out before he could stop them. “Oh, I almost got Pepper killed a bunch of times, I’m the reason Clint retired, gave SHIELD the technology to make those Hydra helicarriers, my father always hated me…” he knew he was starting to sound hysterical, but at this point he didn’t think he could stop that.


Tony blinked, having been caught in the middle of his verbal unburdening, and did as he was told, setting his coffee mug down next to him. The angel took a quick step towards him. “Lower your head.”

Tony again did as he was told, smoothing the hem of his t-shirt and Castiel’s shoes filling his vision. A moment later, the weight of the angel’s hands settled on Tony’s head, long fingers flattening the genius’ hair. “Anthony Stark, I am not God, my Father. But I ask you,” and Tony could hear the sincerity in Castiel’s graver-than-usual voice. “Do you regret what you have done and the mistakes you have made?”

The wind whistled across the roof. “Yes,” Tony said, “I do regret them. Every hour of every day.”

“Do you understand that the blame for what you have done, but only for what you have done, rests on your shoulders?”

Tony’s head dropped further as he tucked his chin to his chest, but Castiel’s hands stayed on him. “Yes.”

“Anthony, do you understand that you made those mistakes doing what you thought was right, and that the results were not always what you wanted them to be, you are not a bad person for trying and failing to make a better world?”

Tony heard the roof door bang open and out of the corner of his eye could see shoes that he thought belonged to Steve, but apparently the soldier realized whatever was happening was of great importance and a moment later, the shoes retreated.

Tony opened his mouth but couldn’t get the words out. It had been his fault, it all was his fault and he wasn’t a good person. He wasn’t.

Castiel’s hands grew heavier. “Anthony. Tony. Just because you have failings in life does not make you a bad person. Just because you have made mistakes does not mean you are not redeemable. I know this. I have learned this…” the angel’s voice shook for a fraction of a second. “I have learned this with great difficulty over many years. But I need you to understand. You are not a bad person. And what you have done does not make you evil or lesser. Do you understand?”

Tony’s answer was a speck of dust in the wind, a whisper borne away by the breeze. “I understand. I don’t know if I totally believe it, but I understand what you’re saying.”
“Believe it,” Castiel responded. “Because it is true.” His voice rose, echoing across the land in the
cold November sky. “I am not God and I am the least worthy of his children. But today Anthony, I
absolve you as best I am able of the actions of your past. Move beyond them, Tony. You are more
than what guilt is letting you become.”

Castiel removed his hands from Tony’s head and the billionaire took a long, shuddering breath. He
took a moment before lifting his head to rub at his cheeks-- they were suddenly damp, and while he
was sure Castiel would understand, some part of him wanted to hold on to at least a shred of dignity.

Tony stood and a moment later the door to the roof opened again to reveal Steve, just as Tony had
suspected.

“Tony?” Steve said, voice all business. “Sorry to bother you, but I just got a text from Natasha. You
probably did, too. She says that they found the two kids and now they’re going after Tili Tili Bom.”

Tony gave Castiel a light nudge towards the door and followed the angel as they headed for the
hatch, Tony pulling out his phone to confirm what Steve had said. “Won’t be long, now,” Tony said.

“I wouldn’t think so,” Castiel said, wincing as he pulled in his bad wing to accommodate the
doorway and the stairwell.

“You should probably take more meds,” Tony said. “If you keep healing at the rate you did when
you were out earlier, that wing will be fine in no time.”

Castiel nodded, which told Tony it was causing him more pain than he let on. When they reached the
ground floor, Steve headed off to tell everyone else about Natasha and the Winchesters while Tony
rummaged around to find Castiel the proper medicine.

He handed it over and let his hand shift forward to grip Castiel’s forearm for a brief moment. “Thank
you, Cas,” Tony said.

Cas dipped his head, birdlike, and accepted both the pills and the thanks. “Thank you, Anthony. You
have been an anchor for both the Winchesters and myself for many years, now. I have been in your
debt.”

And with that, he wandered off towards his bedroom, leaving Tony to ponder the last fifteen
minutes.

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Dean and Natasha were running flat out a moment later, moving as fast as their legs could take them
for the Petrov house. The instant the rounded the last corner, Dean knew something was wrong.
Most clearly, the door now had a large, Sam-sized hole in it. A little less clearly, the Impala’s door
was open. Sam must have been moving fast to have left the car open to theft.

Dean swung it shut as they passed by and in his moment of distraction, almost missed getting his
pistol up in time.

It was if he had blinked and it was there; Tili Tili Bom, in front of them at last.

Dean had the pistol up and steadied with his bad hand before he even took in Tili Tili Bom’s full
appearance, firing off two quick shots.

The monster didn’t even pause at the impact but stopped moving towards the woods down the street
and instead headed for Dean.
“Down!” Natasha yelled and Dean ducked, Natasha having abandoned her own gun in favor of a throwing knife. The small blade whistled over Dean’s head and sunk into Tili Tili Bom’s chest and the beast roared, rearing back, allowing Dean to finally get a good look at what they were fighting.

It was as if a shadow had come to life, a partially translucent being. The edges of its shoulders wavered in the nearby streetlamp and Dean would swear he could see the mailbox behind it through the edges of the beast. One long hand reached up to pull the blade out of the wavering sternum, the inky darkness of the rest of the body fading gradually into a bleached, bone white flesh that reminded Dean of dead fish and rotten bodies, the fingers long and knobbly and capped with sharp, broken shards of nails.

The blade clattered to the pavement and Dean and Natasha both took an involuntary step back as it turned to glare back its attacker. Despite the insubstantial neck, there was nothing transparent about the monster’s face. Pale skin was stretched over a narrow, skeletal skull and the yellow eyes that pierced both of them were too large for any human, with the black pupils spreading, catlike, from top to bottom. There was no nose to speak of, not a half nose, a human nose cut off, but nothing beside a flat area of thin skin where there would be a nose. The mouth was a narrow slash of red, a dagger wound bleeding out.

Only a few seconds had passed but it seemed like a brief eternity before Dean managed to yank a flask of holy water from his jacket and splash it across Tili Tili Bom. The monster didn’t even react beyond a snarl and swiped out at Dean, sharp claws scything inches from his chest and narrowly missing Natasha’s arm as she followed up with a handful of salt and an iron poker.

Dean shivered at the wave of cold that seemed to radiate from the creature rushed over him and dodged another slash. However, the cold sparked an idea.

“Hold him for a second!” he shouted and sprinted the few feet to the Impala’s trunk. It only took him a second of digging before coming up with what he had been looking for. “Got it!” he called out triumphantly.

“Hurry up!” Natasha responded, ducking another counter attack and dancing back to solidly smack Tili Tili Bom across the face with her iron poker with a force that would have knocked a grown man out.

“Come on, come on,” Dean yanked on the trigger, bad left hand twinging and the homemade flamethrower roared to life, glowing in the cold night. “Natasha!”

The shriek of Tili Tili Bom echoed off the buildings and left Dean hoping most of the neighbors were either at the school or too worried to come out of their houses and investigate. Tili Tili Bom lit up in a burst of blue flame, the shadowy edges catching first and licking tongues of fire trailing up the smoky form. Dean and Natasha both edged back as the scream faded and with it, Tili Tili Bom, leaving behind only a small pile of ash and dirt.

“Did it come from the house?” Dean asked but he wasn’t waiting for the answer; he had seen that hold in the door, he knew where it had been coming from. The moment he started shouldering through the door Sam had left in the front door, it was clear something was wrong.

For one thing, there was water pouring down the stairs.

Sam woke up to the sound of breaking wood and Dean yelling his name.
It was muffled, though, and it took a second for Sam to place it before he realized that Dean must be breaking down what was left of the front door downstairs in his haste to get himself and Natasha inside. Sam tried to take a deep breath and coughed, his throat burning as he spit out bloody water from his lungs.

A moment later, his brain finished rebooting and his heart dropped: Angelina. Tili Tili Bom.

He gritted his teeth and shoved himself up, his vision greying out for an instant as he strained the cracked and bruised ribs-- drowning in a supernaturally sealed room sure hadn’t done them any favors.

Sam did a fast look around and the room was empty; everything was soaked but there was no longer any standing water. His shoes had followed the flow of water and were now sitting, wet through, by the door. Tili Tili Bom wasn’t there. And Angelina was lying only a foot or so away from him.

He immediately moved closer, flipping her gently from her side to her back. She was white as a sheet and when he moved her she didn’t respond. “Angie,” Sam choked out, his voice rough from the coughing. Sam found her wrist, feeling for a pulse; she had been unconscious before him, -- the water had reached the ceiling and he had pushed her upwards, both of them taking a frantic gulp of air before the water covered them both and they couldn’t breathe anymore. She had struggled against him and Sam had to clamp his lips shut to keep from screaming her name as she went limp in his arms and stopped moving. He flailed away, pushing at the door as firmly as he could underwater but the door wouldn’t move and his lungs couldn’t hold out anymore and the hunter swam back to the girl, pulling her to him and closing his eyes and opening his mouth, the last bubbles of air escaping--

Sam couldn’t find a pulse and tilted her head back, ignoring the pain in his own chest as he started performing chest compressions as carefully as possible on the small girl.

As he switched to a rescue breath, he could hear, in the part of his mind that was fully aware of his surroundings, a lot of swearing in the hallway, very close by.

Dean burst into the room, taking in the scene in a flash and coming over to kneel next to Angelina’s still form. The moment Sam stopped the rescue breaths, his brother began compressions despite his bad hand, letting Sam take a moment to catch his own breath. “Come on, Come on,” Dean muttered in time with the compressions. Natasha was just behind, settling on Angelina’s other side and picking up her pale wrist and finding the pulse point. Sam didn’t stop to ask if they killed Tili Tili Bom-- if they hadn’t, they were at least there to keep an eye on the area.

Sam performed another rescue breath, his heart sinking as Dean began a third set of compressions in silence. “Did you get it,” Sam asked roughly, using his voice making his whole chest ache even more.

“Yes,” Natasha answered tersely. “Jason and Danielle were alive. We sent them home with the cops.”

“The Pavlovs?”

“Dead,” she replied.

“Sam,” Dean said as Sam leaned over Angelina once again. “Sam,” and Sam looked up at his big brother to find a pair of tired eyes that he knew matched his own. “That’s five minutes from when we got here.”

“We were both out before you got here,” Sam said reluctantly and he watched as Dean glanced him
over again quickly, lingering for a second longer on his chest. “Don’t stop,” he added when Dean
started to sit back on his heels.

“Sam--” Natasha said, but Dean began another set of compressions, his face a stoic mask.

“Please,” Sam said. “Please.” He wasn’t talking to Dean, but to Angelina. “Come on, Angelina,
please.”

Dean finished the set of compressions and sat back

“Sam.”

Sam closed his eyes.

“Sam, she’s--”

Sam listed sideways into his brother’s shoulders.

“I told her I’d save her,” he said. “I told her we’d save her. I promised we would take care of her.”

Natasha reached out and laid a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Dean swallowed and pulled Sam to him
despite his brother’s waterlogged clothing, so tightly it hurt Sam’s ribs, but the younger hunter didn’t
protest.

“You know we can’t save everyone.”

When they had been driving long enough for Sam’s clothing to be considered “damp” but not
“soaked,” Natasha broke the heavy silence.

“This is good enough for me, Dean, if you’ll just pull over here.”

Dean took his eyes off the road to raise his eyebrows in the rearview mirror. “You’re joking. We’re
in the middle of nowhere; you know that, right? We’re still, like, a full hour and a half from the
Compound.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Clint will be nearby in about ten minutes to pick me up. I’m spending a day
with him and his sister and her kids before we all come up to the Compound for Thanksgiving.”

“Want us to wait?” Dean asked.

“No,” she said. “He’ll be here.”

Dean shrugged and pulled the Impala over to the side of the road, leaving the headlights on to
illuminate the pre-sunrise dark and getting out and opening the trunk to retrieve Natasha’s bag. Sam
unfolded himself from the passenger seat and came back to join them.

“Thanks for the help on the hunt,” he said. “Nice to have someone who fits right in with the locals.”

“Anytime you need a Russian speaking, knife wielding, butt kicking spy to help you out, just let me
know,” Natasha said with a soft smile. She didn’t hug Sam, mindful of his ribs, but reached out and
touched his damp shoulder. Neither of them mentioned their failures. They didn’t need to.

“See you later this week,” Dean said.

“See you then,” she returned and shouldered her bag before waving and trotting off into the
shadowed woods, where Clint would meet her at a predetermined spot, just out of sight of the road.

The clock ticked loudly as the hour hand touched seven in the morning and Tony was out of his compound workshop (smaller than the one in the tower and more for repairs than full scale design) and running to the doors the moment he could hear the rumble of the Impala.

Dean pulled up near the garage doors and turned off the engine; Tony’s heart dropped and he stopped dead when he caught sight of Sam and Dean’s faces.

“Tony,” Castiel nudged him and Tony realized that he was blocking the whole doorway. He stepped forwards towards the car, watching as Dean opened the door and carefully pulled himself out of the car, avoiding using his bad hand at all and with several new scrapes on his face and blood on his sleeve. Sam opened the passenger door as well but didn’t move for a long moment, almost long enough for Tony to get to the car before he swung his long legs out.

Something had gone wrong. “Where’s Natasha,” Steve asked and Tony came back to himself suddenly, realizing all present members of the Avengers Initiative-- himself, Steve, Wanda, Vision, Sam, and Rhodey-- as well as Castiel were beginning to crowd around the car and the two hunters.

“With Clint,” Dean grunted as he popped the trunk of the car and started pulling out an assortment of duffel bags and weapons. Everyone relaxed. “She had us drop her off--”

“On the side of the road, right? She does that sometime,” Tony finished. “Sam, what happened?”

Sam still hadn’t gotten out of the car and was staring at his hands as if he had never quite seen them before.

“Sam?” Tony repeated and the general hubbub of people carrying bags and holding doors subsided. He reached out to touch Sam’s shoulder and suddenly realized that his shirt wasn’t exactly dry.

“Sam.” Dean’s voice was more sharp than Tony’s had been. “Get out of the car. Go change.” His tone brooked no room for disagreement.

Sam didn’t respond. It was as if Dean hadn’t spoken. A long second later, he spoke. “Tony, do you have any holy water?” His voice was rough, as if he had been screaming or coughing.

Tony blinked, nonplussed. “Yeah, we’ve got a gallon under the sink, just in case. I had to do it though, and--”

Sam interrupted him by coughing twice, wet, painful coughs from deep in his chest.

“And I don’t know if it’s correctly done; I never got a chance to ask you how to check,” Tony finished. “Sam, what--”

“I can bless it, if you didn’t succeed,” Castiel said. “I’ll bring it out.” He turned and hurried back into the house, following the stream of Avengers with bags.

Sam nodded and silently pulled himself out of the car, Dean watching with arms folded as Sam clutched his side with his arm, his ribs clearly paining him.

“Sam, what are…” Dean trailed off, clearly bewildered as Sam started pulling off his jacket,
followed by his plaid shirt and the undershirt after. It took him a long moment but a second later, he was bare to the waist in the cool November morning air. Everyone winced as they caught sight of Sam’s ribs they had gone from the red and slightly purple of Sam’s previously bruised ribs to a much deeper purple, almost black in places.

“Damn,” Dean muttered. “Definitely broken now.”

A half circle of the Avengers who hadn’t gone in remained standing near the car, nobody speaking as Castiel reappeared and handed Sam an opened gallon bottle of water, frowning at the hunter’s sides.

Sam took it and before anyone could object that it was too cold, poured most of the bottle directly over his head.

He didn’t react to the chill aside from his lips clamping tightly together. Sam didn’t move for a second before spilling the rest of the container over his arms and hands and scrubbing at the skin as if he was trying to get rid of a stain.

A moment later, he handed the bottle back to Castiel, still refusing to look at anyone, shoulders slumping. “I’m going to take a shower,” he told them as a whole. “I’ll be back out later.”

“Sam,” Castiel stopped him and lifted his hand towards Sam’s forehead. “Let me,” he said, and before Sam could protest, he extended his fingers and touched the hunter’s brow gently. There was a soft glow and Sam suddenly looked much healthier than he had a moment before; the bruising on his ribs was gone, the scrapes and fading bruises on his face had cleared, and the faint rattling in his lungs from the inhaled water had vanished.

“Thanks, Cas,” Sam mumbled, and made his escape into the house.

Dean nodded and watched silently as his brother entered the house, his face a mask. He missed Cas moving until the angel was reaching out to touch Dean’s forehead as well, mending his hand and Dean’s own set of bruises. “Thanks,” Dean said before slamming closed the Impala with more force than was necessary. He looked around and forced his lips into a quick smile that was more of a grimace. “Thanks for taking our crap inside. If you need me, I’m going to go shoot something.”

Wanda wandered into the range half an hour later to find Dean still emptying cartridges into the targets at the end of the field. He shot smoothly, face resting in a small frown as he switched weapons, loaded, and bangbangbangbangbangbang fired all six shots smoothly into the head and chest of the figure fifty meters away.

“Can I ask you a question?” Wanda said when she was close enough for him to see her.

He set down the weapon and held up a finger, popping out a foam earplug. “What?”

“I just wanted to ask...” Wanda perched herself on the edge of the table with all the guns. “How long have you and Sam been doing this?”

Dean sighed and turned away, starting to unload and wipe down the weapons, pausing for a moment to rub at a spot on his forearm, hidden by his sleeve. “A long time,” he said, running a cloth down the barrel of one of the pistols. He finished the gun and set it down to the side, glancing up as if to see if Wanda was still there. “Since I was four,” he elaborated.

Wanda nearly gasped out loud. “Since you were four?” she asked, in a voice less steady than she wanted it to be. “There are that many monsters out there?”
Of all the secondary questions she could have asked, that took Dean by surprise. “That many?” He barked out a laugh. “Sister, I’m not sure Sam and I have even put a dent in it. And we’re not the only hunters, which you know from Sam’s talk with Garth a few days back.” He slapped a new clip into his weapon and passed it from hand to hand quickly before checking the safety and leaning against the table next to her. “It’s a rough life. So if you’re taking this as an opportunity to get some information about getting into hunting, I’d give you some advice: don’t.”

“No,” Wanda reassured him. “I was just wondering about you and Sam.”

Dean raised his eyebrows and let out a long breath before taking the clip out of his gun without firing it and starting to wipe it down. Wanda watched him in silence for a moment before speaking up again. “You and Sam, you remind me of…” she faltered for a moment before continuing. “Of me and Pietro.”

Dean set down his supplies. “Pietro?” he asked.

The slight young woman nodded sharply. “My brother.”

Dean glanced up at her but she was looking off into the distance. “We were much like you and Sam, I think. A pair of siblings, although Pietro and I were twins.”

The hunter started loading guns back into a bag. “Where is he?”

“He’s dead,” Wanda said bluntly.

“I’m sorry,” Dean reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder for a second before reclaiming it and finishing loading the bag. “I know how that feels.”

“Do you?” Wanda asked.

“Yes,” Dean said without hesitation. “Several times over. Don’t ask how because I don’t want to talk about it, but yes. Sam and I both know.”

She watched as Dean, subconsciously, she thought, ran his hand across his chest.

“What happened?” Dean asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Wanda took a slow breath. “I am unique, you know this.”

Dean snorted. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“And so was my brother. Pietro and I volunteered because we thought we would help our country, a country that had nothing and was being overrun by militaries and poverty. I have my own ability and Pietro... Pietro was very quick.” Wanda snapped her fingers. “He could run like the winds, you would blink and he would be gone and back again.”

She smiled. “He would occasionally use it to play tricks—run in and move something very quickly and the then leave before being seen. There was an annoying General who was sure his house was haunted.”

Dean smiled, a small but real smile. “You should hear about some of the pranks Sam and I have played.”

Wanda dipped her head and continued. “Many things happened, not all of them good, and we joined the Avengers for the final attack on Ultron.” She hesitated. “You know about Ultron, yes?”
“Yeah,” Dean nodded. “The Avengers came and crashed at our… house, in the middle of the whole fiasco. We got the whole story.”

“We fought with them to stop Ultron, but in the end, Ultron was trying to shoot Clint and the small boy Clint had gone back to save. The rounds were from a plane, very large, and very fast. Pietro…” Wanda’s fingers clenched on the edge of the table, knuckles turning white. “He pushed Clint and the boy out of the way, but was hit by many bullets.” She looked away from Dean. “I could feel it, in my bones, and I used my pain to kill Ultron.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Dean asked, his voice uncertain. “I mean, thanks for trusting me, we don’t always get a lot of that. But you don’t even know us. All you know is that we’re related to Tony and while he told us a lot about you, I don’t know if it went the other way around.”

“I am telling you as a thank you, I suppose,” Wanda said, shrugging. “I know how it is, to fight day after day after day and feel as if you are making no difference for anyone. To lose someone, your brother, and the world does nothing for you in return.”

“And I suppose you get a lot of thanks in the Avenging business?” Dean asked pointedly.

“No,” Wanda laughed. “We get politicians, angry about how we saved people and wishing we could do better.”

“That’s how it feels,” Dean agreed. “We’ve been off and on the FBI most wanted list for years. Thank god for Tony and Jarvis. And Friday, now.”

“I never met Jarvis,” Wanda commented thoughtfully. “By the time Pietro and I arrived, he had become Vision.”

“What’s with you and him anyway?” Dean asked, voice teasing, standing and slinging the bag over his shoulder. “I saw some of those passing looks before we left to pick up the Impala.”

“It is a nice car,” Wanda deflected, smiling brightly.

“Oh no,” Dean said, starting to chase after Wanda as she danced away and towards the door. “Don’t change the subject!”

Their voices faded until all that remained was a lone target riddled with bullet holes.

Sam, meanwhile, had emerged from his shower and had planted himself at the kitchen island where, a mere two days before, he had taken the call from Garth which had sent them off on the hunt.

The laptop that he used to journal was in front of him, his second glass of whiskey at his elbow, and the bottle in easy reach.

Tony came into the kitchen just as Sam was finishing typing up a general report for Garth’s files. “Hey,” he said simply, grabbing another glass and pouring from the bottle.

“Hey,” Sam said. “Where’s Dean?”

Tony sighed mentally-- of course that’s what he wanted to know. “He’s shooting. I think I saw Wanda headed that way, so he’s probably not going to be alone for long, though.”

“He’s probably trying to blow off some of the steam from the M--” Sam seemed to process the rest of
Tony’s statement and his head lifted, eyes sharpening. “Wanda?”

“Don’t worry, she probably understands you better than anyone else but me. And maybe Clint,” Tony added. “She won’t push him.”

They sat in silence for a minute as Sam sent off the info. Garth was always looking to expand their files, the same way Bobby had. In fact, if they weren’t so intent on keeping the Bunker as much a secret as possible, it would probably be a good idea to get Garth into the Bunker. There were still rooms of information, file after file that Sam hadn’t had time to get into yet. Garth would probably enjoy it, too. And tell everyone and their brother where it was. But, still, the amount of information--

“Sam?” Tony asked quietly. “What happened?”

Sam sighed and picked up his glass, closing his computer and taking a drink. “We didn’t save everyone,” Sam said.

“I’m sorry,” Tony sighed. “Know how that feels.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “Fucking awful.” He drained his glass and looked at it like he wanted to throw it across the room. Tony reached out and silently refilled the glass. “I promised the girl-- Angelina--that I would keep her safe but then Tili Tili Bom tried to drown both of us and Dean and Natasha killed Tili Tili Bom but he had already killed her parents. Then the spell or whatever broke but it was too late.” Sam rubbed his fingers across his forehead. “Dean and I couldn’t wake her up.”

“What was with the holy water?” Tony asked, curiosity finally getting the better of him.

“I felt… unclean, I guess,” Sam said, scrubbing at his arms idly. “From Tili Tili Bom’s magic. In the water. Didn’t know what to do about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony repeated and let the conversation lapse.

Sam sat for a moment before standing. “I’m gonna go take a nap. Can you make sure I’m awake for lunch?”

Tony did, in fact wake Sam for lunch.

By that point, the whole gang was there. All the current Avengers: Steve, Rhodey, Sam, Vision, Wanda, and Natasha, who had arrived with Clint. Along with Clint had come his sister Laura and her three kids. Tony was standing by Pepper, who had arrived sometime before Sam woke up from his nap and immediately engulfed him in a huge hug, which he gladly returned. And then there were the hunters; Sam, Dean, and Castiel.

All in all, quite a party. Dean volunteered to keep an eye on the older two Barton children while Sam helped out Laura, Pepper, Sam Wilson, and Wanda in the kitchen, preparing for the next day’s meal. Feeding sixteen people, thirteen of whom were adults and eleven of whom trained to save the world and generally had fantastically high metabolisms would be no small task.

Sam wasn’t even sure if Castiel would eat but figured it would be good to have extra food around anyway, just in case-- Dean would be more than willing to eat it.

After Natasha had finally dragged Dean out of the kitchen by an ear-- “Hanging out with the
women, I see how it is, working on the female arts.” He grinned at Wanda, Pepper, and Laura, all of whom were glaring at him with the same unimpressed look, to let them know he was kidding. Neither of the two Sams was amused. The younger Sam spoke up. “Dean, you literally cook half the time in the Bunker. And you iron. And clean sometimes.”— Sam found that he actually was enjoying spending time with the small group of people. They were smart, all four of them, and while they had vastly different life experiences there was an easy camaraderie that they shared, something that brought them together while they peeled potatoes and chopped up fruit for pies.

Sam had actually been relegated to a lot of the chopping, since his skill with knives was formidable, even if it was a different type of knife than he usually used. He watched as the others wound their ways around the kitchen, Wanda adding different spices to the other two’s mixes, Wilson digging through cabinets to find pots and pans, Pepper checking dish preparation off the list as Laura gathered different ingredients.

“So, can I ask,” Sam said finally.

All four of them looked at him and he swallowed, suddenly feeling more intimidated than he had two days ago, facing the prospect of drowning at the hands of a monster. “How exactly are you related to Clint?” Sam asked.

Laura grinned mischievously. “You want to know where my husband is and if Clint and I are married and if he’s leading Natasha on,” she said.

Sam winced. “I don’t know about all that, but… sure?”

Pepper laughed. “Don’t spend too much time with Tony, or you’ll be confused from the endless speculation and odd conspiracy theories.”

“Despite that,” Laura said, taking pity on Sam, “I actually am Clint’s sister. A year younger. We have-- had--” she faltered. “An older brother. I’m married to Captain Peter Smithon, US Marines.”

Sam nodded. “Clint’s mentioned his brother before. Don’t worry, we know it’s sensitive.”

“Anyway,” she continued as she rolled out a neat circle of pie crust. “He’s overseas right now, leaving me with the three kids. I kept my last name for professional purposes-- I’m a nurse.” she added. “Also, I’m rather fond of it.”

“Huh,” Sam said. “Sorry for prying, I was just wondering.”

“What about you, Sam?” she asked playfully. “Don’t let me hog all the questions. Dean’s your brother, right?”

Sam grinned. “The one and only. We’ve been through a lot. Although,” his grin faded. “I apologize in advance if he seems a little… off. We’re working through some, y’know. Stuff.”

Laura nodded sympathetically. “That’s too bad. It’s just the two of you?”

“Yeah.” Sam shrugged in a sort of “what can you do?” gesture and returned to the potatoes, shoulders relaxing as Laura didn’t push and the conversation stayed firmly away from the Mark of Cain. He stopped paying attention, just basking in the feeling of family that always seemed to accompany cooking with other people.

His little moment of bliss was dragged back into the present when the conversation turned to Thanksgivings past. “Sam, did you say you had a Thanksgiving with someone in high school?” Sam Wilson asked as he slid the stack of Laura’s finished pie crusts onto sheets of waxed paper in
preparation for the fridge.

He nodded, setting down the last potato and wiping his hands on a towel. “A girlfriend offered and I was dumb enough to say yes. Spent the holiday and the day after with them.”

“Dumb enough?”

“Dad was on a hunt with Dean. I didn’t ask if I could go and they came back a little earlier than expected to find me gone. I showed up an hour later to find Dean frantic and Dad pissed off. Told them I’d just been getting some food. I don’t think Dad ever believed me.”

“That’s it?” Wilson asked. “One? I mean, you gotta understand, Thanksgiving is a HUGE deal in my family.”

“Yeah, one,” Sam said, then tilted his head in consideration. “Well. I did a little thing in college, my senior year. With Jessica, you know. Before she went home for break. I was planning on going home with her the next year, when she was in nursing school and I was at law school. But then. You know, she died, I went back to hunting.”

Sam didn’t elaborate. It was clear that talking about Jessica didn’t hurt Sam like it used to, but nobody in their right minds, even someone who had seen and experienced so much since then, would like to relive the traumatic death of their girlfriend.

Wilson tried to lighten the mood. “Man, how do you know she wouldn’t have dumped your ass by then? I’ve seen a picture of you two and she was seriously pretty, way too pretty for you.” He grinned and dodged Sam’s smiling punch to the arm.

“Because I was going to ask her to marry me that summer and if she tried to dump me after that I would have had worse problems than where to go for Thanksgiving.”

Nobody responded to that and Sam didn’t mean for the mood to continue falling so he frantically tried to explain. “--I guess you can stop worrying about talking about Jess because it’s been a long time, it doesn’t, I don’t know, hurt anymore. It’s been, like… almost ten years earth time? But I spent a year or so with the alternate Mystery Spot world or whatever, and then there’s… you know. The Cage.” Sam fell silent. As willing as he may be now to speak about Jessica and his Thanksgivings past, there were still some lines he wasn’t ready to cross, particularly with several people he didn’t know. The atmosphere did not improve. Much to Sam’s relief, Castiel chose that moment to open the door from the outside and enter the living/dining area. “Hey, Cas. What’re the others up to?”

“They’re playing a… game. Paintball, Dean called it.” Castiel crossed towards the kitchen area and sat, cowboy style in the tallest chair, wings tucked tight to his back. “Natasha and a rather reluctant Tony are looking after Nathaniel and Lila,” the angel informed Laura. “Lila was most fascinated by my wings.”

“What are you up to, Cas?” Pepper asked, eyeing the wings within a few feet of the food being prepared and clearly wondering if she needed to comment on them.

“I am not “up to” anything,” Castiel frowned. “But if you are asking why I am in here, rather than outside, I thought I might ask Sam and Sam if they are available to undo the back of the bandages. I believe the wings can go back to the etheric plane.”

“Really, Cas?” Sam grinned. “That’s great!” He followed Sam Wilson over to the sink to wash their hands.

“Hmmm, yes.” Castiel rolled his shoulders. “It’s nice to stretch them in this plane and have them
visible to preen.” Everyone except Sam, who had seen stranger things, blinked at that and as if to demonstrate, Cas extended the previously-injured wing and ran his fingertips through the ends of a few feathers, smoothing them out. “But a vessel is not meant to hold wings and it has been a tedious draw on my grace, keeping them in this plane to heal.”

Wilson rummaged around until he found the medical scissors and began to carefully cut through the bandages, peeling off layers until only clean feathers and already almost-faded scars remained. Sam ran his fingers over them. “Looks good, Cas.”

“Excellent.” Castiel pulled the wing tight to his shoulders again and stood, taking several large steps back until he was in the center of the open plan living area, where there was nothing tall for him to hit nearby. He stretched out the wings, making Sam grin and Laura gasp— it was the first time she had seen them fully extended as the others had the day Castiel and the brothers appeared, covered in blood.

The angel closed his eyes for a brief second and the lights flickered but didn’t go out. There was a sudden breeze through the room and then without any further fanfare, the wings were gone.

After several days of Castiel walking around with large wings attached to his shoulder, Sam Wilson thought he suddenly looked very strange. Much more… human. There was no denying that he wasn’t entirely human; something in his eyes burned more brightly than any normal person.

“Wow,” Laura said and Sam laughed at the understatement.

With the addition of Castiel who, like Sam, proved himself more than proficient with kitchen knives and also arranged some unusual but not unattractive arrays of spices, the prep team finished their work in a little more than half an hour. Flowing in small groups from the huge main building, they threw on more layers of protection against the sharp, frigid, air and the heavy clouds threatening to drop their burden of rain at any moment. Sam borrowed a jacket— his hunting layers would help but not totally block the freezing breeze and he seemed to have lost a glove at some point during their weekend hunt— and followed Pepper and Castiel outdoors, grinning at the sight of the angel. He had found the rest of his clothing, cleaned by the discreet staff who did some of the work around the compound, and now looked back to normal, the dark suit jacket mostly covered by that familiar tan overcoat.

They trooped across the open field behind the building, waving at Natasha and Tony, who had similarly bundled up little Lila and Nathaniel and who were coming around the edge of the building towards them.

“Et tu, kitchen crew?” Tony asked when they were close enough to talk without shouting, his breath puffing around him in frozen clouds.

“Thought we’d go see what all the racket was about,” Sam responded, reaching out to little Lila when she reached for him and swinging her up to her shoulders. He ignored the little ache in his heart that reminded him of the last little girl whose hands he had held and loped off across the field at a slow, smooth trot, Lila shrieking “Faster!” and gripping his hair with one hand.

They looped back around and rejoined the others just as the whole group slowly arrived at the edges of the bordering woods. By now, the laughs and shouts of the training/playing fighters could be heard, echoed by the pops of paintballs hitting and missing their targets.

Sam lifted Lila off his shoulders and handing her to Laura, who had just arrived along with everyone else who had been approaching at a more sedate pace. Something just inside the woods moved and he shifted instinctively, yelping as a paintball smacked his shoulder and burst. “OW!”
Castiel reached out curiously as Sam twisted to get a good look at his shoulder, poking the blue paint. The angel’s nose wrinkled at the smell and he frowned as he realized he didn’t have a way to clean it off, short of wiping it on his precious trenchcoat. Sam sighed. “Sorry about the coat, Pepper.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “They all ruin clothing on a weekly basis.”

Sam smiled at that, looking out through the woods, his sharp eyes finding people “hidden” with their paintball guns. And there was Dean, not even trying to hide, three dozen yards away, laughing at him.

“Tony,” Sam asked, his smile stretching and becoming more feral. The expression was apparently visible to Dean, even at a distance because he grinned too before taking off deeper into the stand of trees.

“Yeah, Sam?” Tony answered.

“I’m gonna need some gear.”

Tony’s smile grew to match Sam’s own. “You got it, Boss.”

Ten minutes later, Tony, Sam, Wanda and Sam had suited up, Castiel opting to stay on the sidelines and talk with Laura, Pepper, Nathaniel, and Lila. Three teams had divided for capture the flag, Sam, Dean, and Wanda facing off against Steve, Sam, Vision, and Clint as well as Tony, Rhodey, and Natasha.

Sam and Dean worked well together and assimilated Wanda into their team without pause, the three sneaking noiselessly through the woods until a twig had broken loudly under Vision’s foot and Wanda had shot at him with a loud pop. From that instant, every team abandoned their silent tactics, a free for all opening as they scrambled to find flags without getting shot.

Everything was going fine until Dean snapped.

Clint had jumped him, leaping from where he had lurked from in a tree and landing squarely on Dean’s shoulders. The experienced hunter immediately went into fight-or-flight mode; however, Dean was never much for flight and the Mark of Cain sure didn’t help. Wanda screamed as Dean flipped both himself and the archer, taking Clint roughly to the ground and jamming a knee in the spy’s solar plexus. Clint rolled with Dean, the experienced spy saving himself from broken ribs. An instant later, Sam, Sam, and Tony arrived, having heard Wanda’s scream.

It was a tableau from a renaissance painting; Clint on the ground, a tag of red paint coloring his jacket. Dean on top of him, fist holding Clint’s collar in place. The First Blade in Dean’s hand, having appeared from virtually nowhere, raised high above Clint’s neck and flashing in the cold November light.

“DEAN!” Sam roared. “Stand down!”

Dean’s arm trembled and his eyes closed.

Nobody moved.

“Dean,” Sam repeated. “Drop the Blade. Stand down.”

The tendons in Dean’s neck tightened, his hand trembling, and a moment later, the bone blade fell to the ground. Castiel-- Sam had missed him arriving entirely-- scooped it up a second later, performing his usual vanishing act and letting the blade disappear somewhere into his clothing.
Dean blinked once, slowly, and ran his shaking hands through his hair as he rolled off of the immobilized Clint. “Sorry,” he rasped. “Sorry. You startled me and I just…”

“Yeah man,” Clint said. “I know. I shouldn’t have, I mean.” He seemed pretty calm for a person who had almost just died, but Dean figured the spy was used to that. But still. He had almost killed Clint.

Suddenly, he was too hot, the Mark pumping pure heat and adrenaline through his veins. He started pulling at his jacket, unzipping the fabric and taking off both it and the flannel shirt below in one movement, leaving only his undershirt. The hunter took a deep breath, hoping the cold air would cool more than his skin before he realized everyone was still looking at him.

Or they were looking at the burnt red symbol on his forearm, glowing hot with rage and visible for the first time for many of them.

“Dean?” He suddenly realized someone was saying his name-- Sam. His brother. A wave of guilt washed over him and to his shame, he felt much better, as if the guilt canceled the anger. A hand touched his shoulder and he looked up to see it was Sam, of course.

“Hey, Sammy.”

“You with me?” Sam looked both concerned and wary and Dean added that to the ever-growing pile of guilt-- it was his job to make sure Sam was okay.

“I’m with you.” The Mark of Cain had slowly faded over the last few seconds, leaving Dean hungry but also exhausted despite the fact it was only late afternoon. He shivered and started slowly pulling his jacket back on.

“We should probably go get you some food, right?” Sam asked and Dean nodded. “Get up, come on.”

Pepper called from the edge of the woods, breaking up the awkwardness that was starting to fall over the group. “Rain’s starting to come across, everyone back to the building!”

Dean smiled a little. “Every man for himself!”

Tony took the cue, whooping loudly as he started for the equipment shed at a trot, everyone following behind him.

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Dean was asleep a mere hour later, having inhaled several sandwiches, taken a shower and collapsed onto his bed.

Sam had joined everyone else for a (long and perilous) game of Monopoly and successfully bumped Tony’s elbow while he was rolling the dice, causing the businessman to land on Steve’s Boardwalk with a hotel and go bankrupt.

The rain continued to pour down as everyone slowly headed for an early bedtime, becoming a full blown storm.

Sam Wilson was woken suddenly by a clap of thunder and fumbled for his alarm clock, groaning when he managed to decipher the numbers: 4:12 am.

“Damn,” he said, rolling out of bed and pulling on a sweatshirt. He padded out of his room and
down the hall towards the common area, silently passing rooms of sleeping Avengers and guests.

Sam hesitated at the doorway, having immediately scanned the room from force of habit and seeing the blanket-draped figure at the large floor to ceiling window. Should he leave? The tall younger man—although, he couldn’t be more than a few years younger, Dean had to be around Wilson’s own age—hadn’t given any indication that he had heard Sam enter.

He paused for a moment longer before crossing to the kitchen and beginning the process of making some hot chocolate, more than enough for two people. Sam still hadn’t moved, but when Wilson came to sit on the floor near him, he just nodded in his direction.

The young hunter, however, did seem surprised at the cup being offered to him and it took him a long second before accepting it. “Thanks,” Sam said, taking a sip.

“What’re you doing up?” Sam Wilson asked, as if he too wasn’t up and about in the middle of the night.

Sam shrugged. “Woke up an hour ago. Thunder.” He gestured out the window. “I used to love storms when we were little. Dad would drive right through ‘em and Dean and I would watch from the backseat of the ‘pala.” Sam smiled a little and took a sip of his drink, the VA councillor hanging discretely on his words. “And I still like the rain. It…”

He paused and looked Sam up and down, as if judging something in his mind. He nodded slightly, as if deeming Sam Wilson to be worthy. “It never rained in the Cage.”

Wilson blinked once, slightly overwhelmed at Sam’s trust. He had been around when Sam was struggling from his initial hallucinations and then again later, when Dean had vanished into Purgatory and Sam was struggling. Steve had told the then newly-minted Avenger that he had suggested Sam go talk to Wilson about his problems; Wilson had almost been relieved when Sam didn’t come talk to him. How did you deal with a guy who had been in the deepest levels of Hell for years?

But apparently, Sam wanted to talk about it now. A little, at least.

In the span of the few seconds it had taken Wilson to realize this, he just nodded at the hunter, which Sam seemed to take as permission to keep going.

“It was cold. Really cold, almost all the time. The bars would frost…” a shudder worked through Sam’s body and he took a sip of his drink, pulling the blanket a little tighter around him. “It hurt. And it would storm, too. Lots of lightning, thunder.”

“Like this?” Sam Wilson asked quietly, gesturing at the half rain/ sleet that was sliding down the windows, occasionally illuminated by bursts of lightning.

“No,” Sam said. “Or, not quite. It was less… I don’t know. Human?” He shook his head. “Hard to describe. But it didn’t feel the same. And it never rained,” he repeated his earlier sentence.

He shook the hand not holding his mug free from the blanket and reached out, placing it on the window, where, for a half second, it was backlit by rain and lightning before he let it drop again. “They’re always there, you know.” He glanced over at Sam Wilson.

“The memories,” the pilot guessed. “Lurking in the corners, waiting for you to look at somebody and see the outline of their profile, the way a group of people move…” he trailed off, thinking of all the little, day to day things that had ever set him off.
“Yeah. Except instead of a handful of years, it’s a few hundred of them, rattling around at the edges.” Sam nodded. “Always there.”

“Have you talked to Dean about this?” Wilson felt compelled to ask, although he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

Sam shrugged. “Not really. We talked a little after… after he did his time. But for me it was different. I was, you know. Soulless. For a long time. And then he had to deal with the wall, so I couldn’t remember anyway and the last thing we wanted to do was talk about it. And then the wall was down and I wasn’t coping at all, the hallucinations and everything, and we were dealing with the Leviathan and then Dean was gone, and now the Mark…” He shrugged again. “Never seemed to get a good time.”

“A good time for what?” Dean himself stumbled into the room, looking disheveled.

“Nothing,” his younger brother said, casually, shooting Sam a look that ordered him not to argue. “What are you doing up?”

“It’s storming, in case you didn’t notice,” Dean said, the implication that he was awake for the same reasons as Sam lost on nobody in the room.

“Well, I’m going back to bed,” Sam Wilson said, giving Sam a look of his own, one that clearly said “talk to him.” “There’s hot chocolate on the stove if you want any, Dean.”

“Thanks,” Dean said, wandering towards the kitchen and digging for a mug, a spoon, and a bottle. He poured the remains of the hot chocolate into the mug, topping it off with a liberal splash of the whiskey and stirring before plunking himself down onto a sofa near Sam. is brother’s eyes followed Wilson from the room.

“Hey,” Dean said.

“Hey,” Sam replied.

“Want to get some cleaning done?”

Sam eyeballed his brother. “You’re not planning on leaving tomorrow, are you?”

“Nah,” Dean shook his head. “Just thought it would be a good time, since everyone’s asleep.”

“Drink your hot chocolate, first,” Sam bargained.

“Fine,” Dean agreed, and took a sip.

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When Steve stumbled into the living area, having slept longer than usual and feeling groggy, the brothers were arguing and Castiel was perched nearby, looking bemused. He started the coffee pot, watching as Sam knocked away one of Dean’s hands that had started to reach out and snatch a rag from it’s position across Sam’s knee.

They were surrounded by a vast array of weaponry. Steve only recognized about a third of it; there were the usual knives and swords (the jagged demon blade that Sam used, two angel blades, three machetes, a hatchet, as well as a collection of smaller throwing knives, among others) a half dozen pistols (Dean’s Colt with the ivory grips among them), a series of sawed off shotguns of various length, a set of cases holding ammunition that Steve would bet a million bucks wasn’t standard
ammo, and a few other odd things that couldn’t be found in most weapon stashes, the flamethrower and what looked like a crossbow right next to a set of lockpicks, a box of various talismans and charms, a wooden stake, and what might have been a grenade launcher.

“Wow,” Steve said, crossing the room with a cup of coffee and interrupting the brothers as Dean made a second attempt to steal the rag Sam was using to wipe down the barrel of a shotgun. “That’s a lot of weapons.”

“Well, we’d been on a hunt before dealing with the angels, so we’d been packing.” Dean shrugged and pointed at the flamethrower. “And it came in handy up in Maine, so…”

“Point taken,” Steve said, picking up the hatchet to look at the engraving on the head of the axe. “Never hurts to be prepared.”

“What time is it?” Sam changed the subject. “I mean, I don’t know what time the kids’ll get up, since it’s a holiday. We should get all this packed away before they’re out here.”

Dean nodded. “And the weather’s stopped for a moment, anyway. Might as well finish up here and take out everything while it’s not snowing too much.”

Steve glanced out the window and found Dean wasn’t exaggerating; somewhere during the last hour, the sleet had finally turned to snow, white flakes drifting down and starting to gently coat the icy ground.

“I’ll take a few trips for you,” Steve volunteered. He followed Sam’s directions and wrapped the machetes, the hatchet, and a long knife that was almost a short sword in a cloth before following Castiel, who had three of the shotguns, out to the Impala, shivering as the cold air ran fingers down all of their spines.

A half hour later, the last of the weapons were clean, they were taking their last trips to the car, and more people were starting to wander into the kitchen.

Pepper and Steve started breakfast, popping cinnamon rolls in the oven and cracking eggs into a bowl. Dean joined them after a few moments, Sam coming to sit at the island and letting his big brother slide him a glass of juice. They chatted as Tony, Sam, Wanda, and Vision joined them, Clint coming a few minutes later and forcing Sam and Dean to vacate their seats to provide space at the island for the newcomers to sit. A miasma of sound rose, (almost) everyone having slept long and well, ready for the large meal to come and the companionship that would come with it.

Sam’s voice broke above the others. “Fine! Fine! But I swear to god, Dean, if you…” Half the room had turned to look at him with this outburst and found he looked rather unhappy, while Dean’s grin was bordering on gleeful. “In here? Hardwood floor, you can sweep up fast after.”

“Why do I have to sweep up? It’ll be your hair!” Dean argued and smiles and raised eyebrows swept the room as everyone realized what Sam had just agreed to.

Ten minutes later, a dozen Avengers, support team, and a trio of young children were standing in a half circle around Sam Winchester, who was sitting on a low stool with a towel around his shoulders, hair damp and shaggy, looking unhappy as his brother dug through a bag. “I swear, Dean,” Sam reiterated. “If you cut it all off, you won’t sleep for months. I’ll get a dog and she’ll live exclusively in the Impala.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Dean looked scandalized but apparently Sam’s point had made it across because when he straightened up from the kit, he wasn’t holding clippers but only a pair of scissors.
Despite his earlier threats, Dean was neat and precise, the hunter’s unlikely task belied with the ease with which he trimmed the ends of his brother’s hair. Something in the action was strangely childlike, the surety of his hands a testament to how many times Dean must have done this over the years.

It only took him a handful of minutes. Regardless of the fuss Sam had put up and the potential for having his whole head buzzed by Dean, his hair was still plenty long but also considerably neater when Dean had finished. The young man ran a hand through the rapidly-drying hair, pushing back the now slightly shorter locks from his face.

“Thanks,” he said. “You want yours done?”

“Nah,” Dean said. “Not too bad, maybe in a week or two.”

Sam nodded and carefully lifted the towel off his shoulders, trapping the cut hair inside to be shaken off outdoors.

Both brothers looked up to find Pepper watching them, hands over her mouth and eyes shining, looking as if she had just seen the cutest thing in the world.

“You good, Pepper?” Dean asked.

She laughed and reached out to pull him into a quick hug. “I’m great.”

And suddenly, there they were; gathered around a series of tables in the living room, which had been cleared of all it’s other furniture. Tony, owning the building, funding the Avengers, and also having the most seniority (something which he and Cap had argued about for some time), sat at the head of the table, with Pepper and Rhodey to one side and Sam, Dean, and Castiel on the other.

They-- his little family, Natasha and Clint, Laura and the kids, Steve, Sam, Vision, and Wanda--watched with anticipation as he picked up the large carving knife. The genius smiled as he looked across the group.

“Let’s eat!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again this took SO LONG. I expect everything will take longer this spring; I have a crazy workload. But I have quite a few ideas about where this should go next, even if it’s not written out yet. Still to come: the fate of Charlie Bradbury, and AU Civil War, and a MAJOR death!

Drop a comment to let me know what you thought and what you're looking forward to!
Civil War, Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tensions were very high.

They were very high in the Avenger Compound. They were very high in Stark Tower. They were disastrously high in both a secret defunct organization’s Kansas bunker and in an abandoned Pennsylvania warehouse with very high supernatural security. Tensions were high across the country and around the world, rising to extremes in Vienna, Austria.

Vienna, Austria was where a new set of international legislation was slowly being written into the world. It was slow going, because only a single day ago, someone had leaked what was going on and now the public was hanging on every word. Every civilian of every country and their next door neighbor needed to offer their opinion on what were now known as “The Sokovia Accords”: should superheroes-- and not just those primarily known as “The Avengers,” but all of them-- be monitored and overseen by a group of United Nations officials?

The public backlash within the single day had been extreme-- and polarizing. Half the world wanted nothing more than superheroes to remain private individuals, with their own rights and the ability to help in any situation where they saw fit. Half the world-- Lagos recently among them-- were sure the Avengers were one more accident away from destroying the world and needed to be placed under regulations and government jurisdiction.

Civilians weren’t the only ones divided; nations were up in arms, countries finding they had vastly different opinions regarding their own superheroes and those of other nations. Realizing that alliances between them might not hold under this separation of personal rights and oversight of potentially dangerous persons.

And then there were the superheroes themselves-- some of them believing the Accords were necessary, a way to prevent collateral and infrastructure destruction, a way to keep tabs on supervillians, a system of balances to keep those in check who might go too far. Some, on the other hand, were convinced the Accords would be slow and unwieldy, an obstruction that would prevent superheroes from saving lives and helping people, a bit of government machinery which would soon be tied up in red tape, stopping superheroes from ever being deployed.

And on the third hand, there were those who were simply afraid. Younger superheroes, loners who just lent a hand to the occasional neighbor who was being beaten by a drunk husband, people who had spent their whole life without more than a handful of people knowing about their powers and now had to face the possibility of being outed to the world.

Stark Tower was full of tense employees, worried someone would strike publicly and violently at them, Mr Stark, or Mrs Potts-Stark. Tony Stark-- and Pepper, by her own extension-- openly supported the Accords immediately, although not without caution. Both of them knew how much red tape could be created by letting the government take control of everything. But they believed the current state of superhero affairs could be-- and more, should be-- improved.

The Avenger Compound was full of tense employees, ex-SHIELD agents who now ran missions and did intelligence and took missions under the mostly-hidden eyes of Nick Fury. It didn’t help that part of the building was being repaired; a supervillain of sorts had taken out half the training facility only a week before. And it really didn’t help that the agents were now spending most of their time in
the same building where a group of suddenly-divided superheroes lived.

Because divided they were-- in the day since the concept of the Accords had become public, Steve Rogers had sided against them, taking half the team with him, and leaving the rest to agree with Tony Stark or hover, anxiously, in between.

Tensions were also very high-- albeit, for a different reason-- between Wanda Maximoff and Vision. The young woman had slowly acclimated herself to many things over the last few years: her new family group, her new home in a new country, a life without her brother, the ability to use her powers publicly and to help others.

But suddenly, people were looking at her on the streets with fear in their eyes and a tight grip on their children’s hands.

Wanda had told herself it didn’t matter; that the only opinion that truly mattered was her own (although, if she would admit it, Clint Barton’s opinion mattered more than most others).

So when Wanda found, not even twenty four hours after the leaks regarding the Sokovia Accords, that Vision was deliberately finding ways to keep her from leaving the Compound, she was, to put it mildly, not happy.

And then there were the hunters.

Sam and Dean Winchester were not worrying too much about the Accords at the moment, besides realizing how it would impact some of their few friends. They had bigger problems to deal with. For Dean, that problem was the Stynes; an insane, murderous family, whose magical spellbook Charlie Bradbury had recently stolen. For Sam Winchester, Charlie Bradbury, Castiel, and occasionally the witch Rowena, that problem was the Mark of Cain and the havoc it was increasingly asserting over the man who still bore it.

“Look,” Charlie said. She pointed at her screen, where clear scans showed copies of the Book of the Damned and of the Codex. Sam leaned in, Castiel right next to him. “It’s all in this weird code and in, like, four languages. I’m good with computers and and all that, but I’ve never done real Indiana Jones-style tomb curse breaking or anything. Codex that’s coded? This is gonna take time. Maybe a lot of time, I don’t know.”

Sam let out a sigh as he turned his head and found Castiel looked just as bewildered as Charlie did. “Okay. If you get on it, I’ll find Rowena, wherever she is, and ask if she’s made any progress, although she probably hasn’t.”

“Hey,” Charlie snapped her fingers. “What about Tony?”

“Tony?” Sam said blankly.

“Uh, yeah,” Charlie said, as if it should be obvious. “Tony Stark, your cousin. The genius-slash-billionaire. Probably great at this coding/decoding business. Probably would help if you asked.”

“Yeah, but…” Sam hesitated. “Dean will get mad if he finds out we’ve dragged Tony into this. Plus, there’s the Accords. I don’t know much about them, but… they sound bad.”

“Okay, first, the Accords are going to be happening over a matter of weeks, if not months. It takes a long time for something that big to go through. Second, I know Dean’s going to be mad, but he’s already going to be mad that Castiel and I are involved. I was reluctant at first, I admit, but come on, you know you’re right. We’ve got to cure Dean.”
“Charlie is right,” Castiel chimed in. “It seems Tony would be a great help.”

Sam’s phone rang and he looked down, eyebrows shooting up. “Speaking of…” he answered it. “Hey, Tony, what’s up?”

Charlie raised her own eyebrows and started gathering up papers, looking pointedly at Sam and at the pages scattered around them.

“Yeah, we’ll come. The last thing any of us need right now is a supernatural anything mixed up with superheroics. When?” Sam ran a hand through his hair. “Okay. We’ll probably be there in a few days. Great.”

He hung up. “Looks like Dean and I are heading out to the Compound. Tony wants us to check all the warding-- apparently some supervillian took out part of the building and they had to rebuild it.”

“I get it.” Charlie said. “Like you told him, you sure don’t need to worry about somebody getting attacked by a vampire or something.”

“Want to come? Cas?” Sam asked.

The angel shook his head. “I’ll track down Rowena, get the three of us in the same room, and see what work she’s done on the Codex. It will be easier to protect the book and the Codex if we are all together.”

Charlie also declined. “I’ll stay with Cas. See if I can crack this. Tell me when you get to the Compound and get what email Tony wants me to use and I’ll send him whatever I’ve got at that point.”

“Great.” Sam hit speed dial. He had a brother to call.

Steve Rogers dropped his head into his hands. He hadn’t felt this stressed since he had come out of the ice, and there had been a lot of stressful situations since then.

But here he was; on the brink of finding his brainwashed best friend, closer than they had been in years, getting texts every few hours about the rapidly declining condition of Peggy Carter, trying to keep a recently-discovered secret from Tony Stark until he could decide how to break the news, and now dealing with the disaster that was the Accords.

The worst part was that he couldn’t really manage any of it. They had picked up traces of Bucky possibly being in Romania, but all they had found upon arriving was an empty apartment. It had all the signs of recent habitation and Sam Wilson had found a small scrap of paper upon which had been scribbled “James Barnes???” and if that wasn’t evidence Bucky had been there, Steve didn’t know what was. Bucky clearly didn’t want to be found yet and if he didn’t want to be found, it seemed Steve would still have a devil of a time looking for him.

And speaking of Bucky… the file had been faded and half covered in ink and blood, but if Steve’s Russian had been as clear as he thought, there was something he needed to tell Tony. Even if-- and Steve knew this was probably wishful thinking-- it hadn’t been the Winter Soldier, Tony deserved to know what had happened in the woods, December 16, 1991.

Then there was Peggy; she had been slipping, lately. It made Steve’s heart ache, deep in his chest, to see her. Her hair was silver and her face was wrinkled, but her eyes were just as bright as they had always been and it hurt, to remember every time what he had missed.
And finally, those Accords.

As if summoned by the thought, a nicely dressed Tony Stark walked into the room. “Hey,” the billionaire said, somewhat hesitantly. They hadn’t snapped, but ever since the previous day, when both had declared their allegiance to opposite views of the accords, they had been walking on eggshells.

“Hey,” Steve said, lifting his head and picking back up the sketchbook he had let fall into his lap. “What’s happening? Is the new construction over?”

“Yeah, finally,” Tony said, coming over to sit on the armchair nearby. “And on that note-- I know it’s not the best time, but Sam and Dean are coming out in a day or two to do all the supernatural proofing for us. And...” he hesitated for a heartbeat. “Ross is coming tomorrow to talk about the accords.”

“Okay, thanks for letting me know.” Sam said neutrally. “I’ll tell anybody you haven’t already caught. And about Sam and Dean, also.” Steve’s smile at this was only half forced. Tony had been happier ever since he married Pepper, but was clearly even more upbeat and less manic when the boys were around. The boys-- Steve mentally shook his head. Tony’s vernacular must be rubbing off on him. The two Winchester brothers were just about his age, although he was closer to Sam in age than Dean.

“Cool,” Tony said awkwardly, regaining Steve’s attention. “Just wanted to let you know.” He stood and brushed a speck of dust off the front of his shirt. A few steps from the door, he half turned to face Steve. “Was there... was there something you wanted to tell me?”

Steve let himself panic for a heartbeat before shrugging and shaking his head. “Nah.”

Tony shrugged back. “Later,” he threw a piece sign and left.

Steve sagged into the couch. Later. That was when he would tell Tony. When the time was right, when Tony was less stressed. But not right then.

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Tony stopped to lean against the wall in the hallway and sighed. There was too much going on. He had just gotten back from MIT, where he had been accused, rightfully, and accurately, by a woman whose son he had practically killed himself. Peggy Carter was going downhill, he was trying to manage the Compound repairs, his views on the accords, and now not only were the Winchesters coming tomorrow, but Thaddeus Ross was as well to give them all the “official” version of the Accords.

It was a shitstorm all around, that was for sure.

Tony stood, straightening his tie and pulling his phone from his pocket to shoot a text off to Pepper: “Leaving the Compound now, be home soon.”

Pocketing the device, Tony headed for the heavily armored room near the back of the Compound where he kept the armor. The ceiling slid open as Tony undid the front buttons of his suit and held out his arms for the Iron Man suit to assemble itself around him, shooting through the roof and off into the early evening twilight.

A text alert popped up on the HUD, distracting him for a moment. It was from Sam, and informed Tony that his cousins would be hopefully arriving at the Compound the next evening.
He was almost back to the tower, streaking across the sky when his visor lit up red, signals flashing from several sides. “Boss! We’ve got a --” Friday didn’t get to finish her sentence before more items flashed red, the targeting system locking on the distant tower. “There’s been an explosion at the Tower, Boss.”

Tony’s heart dropped and he felt like he had been kicked in the chest. “Pepper?” he asked the AI, concentrating on coaxing every last drop of speed out of the suit towards the rapidly approaching skyline.

“She’s fine. He was on the lobby level. He made it through the front doors and tried to get into the elevator. I called security and locked down the doors, but he yelled and detonated… whatever he was carrying. White male, approximately thirty years of age. I have images, but sensors still working in the area indicate he’s dead.”

“What’s the damage? How are the employees?” Tony asked. He was over the city and he could see a thin but still alarming trickle of smoke floating upwards from where the base of the Tower most likely was.

“There are civilians gathering at the base of the tower,” Friday informed him. “It looks like there were no casualties in the building, as the terrorist wasn’t closest to any of the employees. No reports yet on injuries. All employees are now clear of the lobby and are now slowly evacuating from the upper levels. Mrs Potts Stark is headed for the lobby now. Emergency responders are now on the scene.”

“Okay, um. Okay.” Tony flew around the last few buildings. “How’s structural integrity?”

“Uncompromised. The lobby will need redecorating from the blast, and Patricia from HR will be devastated to know that the potted plant from near the elevator is gone.”

“Right. Because that’s the most of our worries.” Tony swooped around the last few buildings and over the heads of a group of police, private security, and EMTs who were holding back the crowd and looking over several employees. He landed in front of the building. “Friday, send a message to all Stark Industries employees who work here in New York. Tell them not to come in for at least three days. Today’s what, Tuesday evening? We’ll reopen the doors Monday morning. They’ll get paid for Wednesday through Friday, but any work is entirely up to them. Send a message to all other SI employees telling them security will be doubled at all locations and to expect a little longer morning commute because everyone’s getting double screened for a while.”

“Got it, Boss. Mrs Potts-Stark will be at your location in approximately three minutes.”

Tony popped the helmet and lost a gauntlet, finding the small compartment that held an earpiece and sliding it onto his ear before letting the gauntlet reassemble and heading for the police officer who looked like she was in charge. “Name?”

“Officer Danburry,” the woman nodded at him. “Mr Stark. So far it looks like there were minimal injuries, although one of the receptionists at the front desk, Mr…” she consulted a list on a clipboard. “Mr Peters has a broken arm sustained when he pushed one of the women down and was then hit by one of the largest pieces of debris. All other injuries are minor lacerations only. Six sets of stitches.”

Tony nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “Just so that you are aware, all employees who are not immediately needed for investigation are being sent home. We’ve got footage from cameras showing the attacker, although from the remaining sensors, I’m reasonably sure he’s dead.”

“With your assistance, then,” she clicked her radio twice, “we’ll go in and get the body and make
sure there are no undetonated explosives. Give me five minutes to gather my team.”

“Mrs Potts-Stark will be down in a moment and I need to confer with her. Can I meet you at the
doors in ten?”

She nodded and Tony turned, heading to talk to Mr Peters. He crossed to the back of the ambulance,
where the man was being settled on a stretcher. “Mr Peters? Thank you for your actions.”

Peters gave him a small, grim smile. “It’s something that you would do, Sir.”

Tony was momentarily speechless. Just hours earlier, a woman had condemned him for being
unheroic, for killing her son. Now this man was telling Tony he had sacrificed himself because Tony
would?

He shook himself out of it. “We’re sending a message out, but we’re going to be closed until
Monday. If you need more time, please, tell us. You’ll be paid for the time off and we’ll cover the
hospital bill. It’s the least we can do for you.”

Peters reached out with his unbroken left arm and Tony took his hand and accepted the handshake.
“Thank you, Mr Stark.”

“Thank you, Peters. Now I better go, Mrs Potts-Stark should be out here by now.”

Friday spoke up in Tony’s ear. “She just arrived. North of the doors, about fifty yards and heading
your way.”

Tony spun to find Pepper walking briskly towards him, heels clipping on the pavement. “Pepper!”

She closed in and Tony wrapped his still-suited arms around her, pulling her close. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, but the small tremor at the end of the short sentence spoke otherwise. She pulled
back enough to look at him. “We’ll need to give the employees time off.”

“Already done.” Tony explained what he and Friday had done. “Look, we’re going to stay at the
Compound for a few nights, if that’s okay with you. It’ll be more secure than Malibu and you’re not
sleeping here, even though there’s no structural damage. Plus,” he added, smiling. “I didn’t get to tell
you yet, but Sam and Dean will be at the Compound tomorrow or the next day.”

Pepper brightened. “Perfect! Always good to see them. Can I go get a few things?”

“Ummm…” Tony looked to the doors to find Officer Danburry and her team assembled, ahead of
schedule. “Let us go in and check first. Not that they would damage the upper floors, of course, but
better safe than sorry. Give us fifteen minutes.”

“Of course.” Pepper rolled up to her tiptoes and kissed him. “Be careful.”

“Always am,” Tony laughed and headed for the doors, pulling the helmet on as he went to join the
boys and girls in blue. “Let’s rock,” he said and they headed through the front doors.

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Wanda was waiting when Tony and Pepper arrived. “Hey,” she said from the doorway to the garage
as Pepper got out of the car and Tony went around to grab their bags. “I made dinner, if you want
some. Chicken and noodle soup and bread.”

Tony almost moaned out of gratitude. “You’re the best, Wanda.”
She grinned at him and dipped her head. “So I’ve heard.” Wanda let Pepper wrap her in a quick hug and then stepped back to lead the pair towards the kitchen. “How is the Tower?” she asked.

Tony shrugged. “It’s still standing. Minor damage and only a few injuries.” He rubbed his temple. “We’re adding security to all SI facilities.”

“It’s unfortunate,” Wanda said, shaking her head. “I may not know where I stand yet on the Accords, but that someone would be willing to die and to take others with them because of this law not yet written…”

They reached the kitchen and she started ladling noodles from a pot into bowls. “So Steve said Sam and Dean are coming tomorrow? And that Ross is going to introduce the Accords properly? Sounds like a busy day.”

“Yeah, it will be.” Tony took a mouthful of soup and gave Wanda a thumbs up. “This is really good.”


“No,” Pepper said and Tony frowned. “Someone needs to oversee repairs. Someone with a good sense of taste and who knows what sort of plant Patricia from HR will want to replace her dearly departed fern.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Tony laughed and ate some more soup.

“I wasn’t aware Hawkeye would be here or I would have brought another copy.” The thinly veiled criticism in Thaddeus Ross’ voice didn’t pass over Clint Barton’s head, but the archer didn’t react except to lean back in his chair and lace his fingers behind his head.

“Nah,” the archer replied, shoving the thick stack of accords past him down the table so Wanda could distastefully pick up the topmost of the heavy, official documents. “I’m retired and it’s just Barton, now. Don’t need a copy.”

“So why, Barton, are you here?” Thaddeus Ross asked. “If not to learn about the Accords?”

“Oh no, I am here to learn about the Accords,” Clint returned, “I just don’t need my own copy. It’s just a little hard to get all the details through the superhero newsletter these days and I figured since I care about my friends, I would come get the story firsthand.”

“Ah,” Ross forced a smile. It looked a little like he was trying to distort his face. “At any rate, these copies can’t leave your persons, so if you take them out of the Compound, please keep them close. They’re the first and most updated copies out of the UN Task Force.”

“Anything else?” Steve asked, voice icy. He-- and everyone else-- hadn’t appreciated any part of Ross’ presentation, complete with slides of the destruction in Lagos, Sokovia, and New York.

“No,” Ross snapped his briefcase closed. “Except. You have exactly two weeks to decide where you stand on these Accords. The Sokovia Accords will be presented to the full United Nations in Vienna at that time. You must all make a choice where you stand.” He nodded once to them all and left the room, leaving them in the terse silence of people who disagree.

Tony’s phone beeped, catching everyone’s attention. He scooped it up and ran a thumb across the screen before smiling, the first smile to cross any of their faces since Thaddeus Ross had arrived.
“Sam and Dean will be here in less than an hour. Dean’s hungry.”

Steve cracked a smile as well and, the tension broken for the moment, smiles ran around the room. “Well, we can’t have that.”

They all headed out of the conference room, most of the Avengers heading to private suites to drop off their copies of the Accords. Clint followed Wanda, closing the door quietly behind them after they entered the room and pulling her into a tight hug after she dropped the stack of paper on her bed.

“Hey, you okay?” he asked. The young hero let out a deep, slow breath and let her head drop against his shoulder for a moment.

“I’m okay,” she replied, voice muffled.

“What about Vision?” Clint pressed. “You said in your texts that he--”

“We’re not talking much, right now,” Wanda admitted. “I’m angry still, I can’t believe he would try to keep me here--” she broke off and took another long breath and sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it. But if we only have two weeks… I guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“I can help, if you want. Laura and the kids are staying with her parents for a while, just in case. We can read through together, talk to Nat, Steve, Tony; all the others.” Clint loosened his arms and leaned back so she could see his smile. “We’ll make it through.”

Wanda returned the smile with a shaky one of her own. “Thank you, Clint.”

She let go of him and turned to pick up the Accords, crossing the room and dropping it into the wall safe before closing the door and tugging on the handle to ensure it was firmly locked. Wanda went back to Clint, taking a few seconds to have one final long breath in and out; Clint could almost see her locking up the thoughts of the Accords in her mind the same way she had just locked away the physical copy. “Come on,” she said, “the Winchesters are coming.”

The pair wandered down the hall, meeting up with Rhodey on the way and running into Pepper, who had just arrived back from Stark Tower. A moment later, they were lounging on various articles of furniture in the kitchen/ open living area and listening to Steve and Tony order an obscenely large amount of Chinese food from a company that was pretty close to the Compound and was probably kept open solely from the orders placed by the Avengers.

Twenty minutes after that, Sam and Rhodey were halfway through one of their usual arguments about the Air Force vs the Army with Steve, Tony, and Clint egging them on when Tony held up a hand suddenly.

“Shhhh… “ he said and listened for a moment. “Hear that?” A slow grin spread over his face as the sound reached everyone’s ears: the low bass thrum of a well tuned, classic engine approaching the Compound. “Someone tip the Chinese food girl when she gets here; I’ll be back,” Tony said, standing. Pepper followed suit and both of them eagerly left the room, following the sound of the engines towards the garage.

Six minutes later, the small family reappeared, Sam and Dean both toting an obscene amount of weapons, books, and materials to ghost, vampire, demon, and everything-else- proof the newly fixed sections of the Compound. The first thoughts of many of the Avengers was how tired both the brothers looked, especially Sam-- much more so than he had only two and a half months ago, when
the Winchesters had come for thanksgiving. There were new lines around his mouth and eyes, stress deepening the crow’s feet that had already started to form, young though he was. Dean, in comparison, looked both wary and weary, as if stress had settled into his very bones but at the same time he was unable to relax, aware of what was lurking in the darkness.

“Hey, guys,” Dean said, setting his bags and boxes near the door to the hall which lead down to the Winchester’s (and Tony and Pepper’s, and Rhody, Steve, and Wanda’s) bedrooms. “How’s it going?” He stretched and surveyed the group, taking his own mental notes-- of the worry in Tony’s shoulders, the tension in Wanda’s hands. The way Steve’s fingers reached out to touch his phone every few seconds. Vision, the paradigm of emotionlessness, watching Wanda with a combination of concern and guilt. Clint, Rhody, Natasha, who relaxed back into the couches but whose eyes were watchful and observed every detail. The massive amount of Chinese food, still untouched but hot, in the center of the table.

“Not bad,” Sam Wilson responded to Dean’s question. “How about you two?”

“We’re fine,” Sam said, and none of the Avengers pressed the question.

Wanda leaned forward and sorting through the boxes on the table and the mood relaxed as everyone began digging into the food, passing around containers so everyone could try the different choices. Laughter and conversation slowly broke out as the Avengers and the Hunters slowly settled in, momentarily setting aside the concerns of their own lives.

Sam took a moment to lean over to Tony, who was sitting next to him. “Hey,” he said. “Can I have a word later? In private,” he stressed, since Dean was nearby.

Tony looked puzzled but nodded. “Sure. After dinner.”

“Thanks,” Sam smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He reached for more rice and turned to Rhody on his other side. “How’s the fancy armor? Any new upgrades?” he asked and Rhodes was more than happy to fill Sam in with all the new details of his armor.

However, the enthusiasm and recently-rare high spirits of the group-- of course-- couldn’t last for long.

Steve’s phone buzzed and almost subconsciously he reached down to thumb the lock and open the message. The chatter stopped as Steve stood abruptly, phone clenched so tightly in his hand it was almost cracking, and set down his food. “I need to go,” he said without preamble and walked from the room.

Tony’s phone vibrated a second after and the genius frowned and looked at it, his heart sinking as it confirmed what he had been dreading; Peggy Carter, who he had known as “Aunt Peggy” for most of his life and who Cap was still in love with, had died.

Tony stood as well, more cautiously, drawing all eyes to him. “Peggy Carter,” he explained simply and a ripple of understanding moved through the group. “The funeral is in two days, on Friday morning. I’ll take anyone who wants to go-- we’re leaving tomorrow morning, probably will be back Friday night or Saturday morning. Natasha--” he turned to the redhead. “Can you tell Cap when we’re going?”

She nodded and left the room to find Steve. “I’m going to pack,” Tony said to Pepper. “Are you going to come?”

Pepper looked over at Rhody and the pair had a quick silent conversation. “No,” Pepper finally
responded. “I’m sorry sweetheart, but Stark Industries is going to need at least one of us around for the next few days. Rhodey’s going, though.” Pepper’s “He’s going for emotional support, because you’re not great at that” was unsaid but not unheard.

“I will remain here and assist Ms Potts-Stark in whatever way she needs,” Vision said and Tony nodded his thanks.

“I’m going for Cap,” Sam Wilson announced. “Natasha is probably coming also.”

Clint raised a hand. “I’ll stay here, help keep an eye on the Compound.”

“I’ll stay with Clint,” Wanda added. “We can help Sam and Dean take care of... whatever they’re doing to the building.”

“Well,” Tony said. “I guess it’s settled.”

Sam frowned as he carefully painted a devil’s trap into the center of the floor-- they were almost done with their job at the Compound and he was more stressed than when they got there. He hadn’t had time to ask Tony about helping with the Mark of Cain two days previous. Tony had been organizing the jet to London and then they had all just been gone, leaving Sam and Dean with Clint and Wanda to supernatural-proof the Compound. Now it was late Friday afternoon, they were almost finished, and he didn’t have an excuse to keep himself and Dean around until Tony got back late that night or early the next morning, much less until Tony could help crack their code. He couldn’t pretend he hadn’t seen Dean sneaking off several times, returning hours later, once with blood on his hands. Sam didn’t confront Dean-- there was a part of him that just didn’t want to know what Dean had been doing, and besides, it kept Dean occupied while Sam tried to find a cure for the Mark. Part of it had to be research on the Stein family, but until he needed to know, Dean could keep his own secrets.

His phone rang, giving him a welcome excuse to set down the paintbrush and stand, pulling it from his pocket.

“Hey, Charlie,” he answered. “Got any news?”

“Just that I’m headed your direction. I can’t spend another day with Rowena. The lady is certifiably bat-shit crazy. So I’m coming up to join you guys.”

“Um, okay,” Sam replied, a little taken aback. “Actually, that’s perfect. Dean won’t be suspicious because you were offered a job by Tony in the past and you can pretend you want him to look at a project you’re working on, or something. And it’ll convince Dean to stay here, thank god. I was running out of excuses.”

“You could just tell him the truth,” Charlie offered bluntly. “Or, y’know. Keep lying.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Sam said sarcastically. “Very helpful. Let me know when you get close and we’ll come pick you up and bring you the rest of the way to the bunker. When do you think you’ll get here?”

“Well...” there was a pause and Sam assumed she was looking at a map. “It looks like a twelve hour drive. And I’m not going to do the whole thing straight through the night. So maybe tomorrow evening?”

“Great. Let us know when you’re close. One more thing...” Sam hesitated but went ahead. “Have
you seen the news?"

“About Peggy Carter?” Charlie asked. “Yeah. I flag Avenger-related stuff with a program I made. Are they all back from the funeral yet?”

“Tomorrow morning, probably. Just… be careful when you’re here. Steve was definitely more than a little in love with Peggy Carter, still. And from what I can figure, she was a pretty powerful adult-slash-parent figure in Tony’s life when he was little. So it’s a touchy subject.”

“You know me,” Charlie said. “Super sensitive. Talk to you later, Sam.”

“See you,” Sam smiled and ended the call. “Hey, Dean!” he hollered across the room and getting the attention of Clint and Wanda as well, who were taking pictures of everything Sam and Dean had done. “Charlie’s coming up!”

“Um, why?” Dean asked. “Does she need help on a hunt?”

“Nah,” Sam said. “She called me the other day, said she wanted Tony’s input on some program she was coding,” the hunter lied, trusting that Dean’s general distrust of computers would keep him from asking questions about the fictional program. “I offered to bring her up with us and she said no, but she’s changed her mind. She’ll be here tomorrow night.”

“Okay,” Dean shrugged and went back to his work, but Sam didn’t miss Dean’s lips, curled into the first real smile he’d seen in days.

Saturday was awkward, to say the least.

It seemed like every conversation since the return of the Avengers was a potential landmine of negative emotion and unfortunate consequences; the missions of the Avengers led to the Accords, the trip to London was out because of the trip’s purpose, the work of the Winchesters was limited because of the Mark of Cain.

Sam still hadn’t gotten to talk to Tony about the Mark. The inventor had been busy all day, working with Pepper to review new protocols to take effect at Stark Tower on Monday morning. He didn’t want to push Tony-- he knew his cousin was under a lot of stress-- but at the same time, not doing anything about the Mark was making Sam antsy.

Charlie had sent him a text mid-afternoon; she had arrived at the seedy Blackbird motel only a half hour away. Sam was supposed to pick her up (or send Dean to pick her up) around eight. It had seemed ridiculous to Sam that he hadn’t just gone to get her then, but she had seemed distracted and he hadn’t pushed.

The Avengers were possibly just as excited and curious to meet Charlie as Charlie was to be there-- only half of them, give or take, had met the vivacious redhead before and it had been at a moment of crisis, so there hadn’t been much time for chitchat. Almost half of them-- Wanda, Vision, Rhodey, Pepper, and Sam-- hadn’t been around then, so it was a first meeting for them.

Sam snorted when his phone vibrated at dinner and he pulled it out. “She’s registered at the motel under the name ‘Carrie Asimov,’” he informed Dean, who laughed.

“Subtle,” Dean agreed.
“We’re lucky that she didn’t give some weird name to Rowena--’’ Sam cut himself off but it was too late.

“Rowena?’’ Dean asked. “When did Charlie meet Rowena? Did this have something to do…’’ Sam could see his brother putting together all the little puzzle pieces; Rowena’s presence, Charlie joining them when the last time they had seen her was with the Book of the Damned… “I don’t fucking believe it, Sam. I asked you to leave it alone. I told you to destroy that book! To get rid of it! And now you’ve dragged Charlie into it? And… wait, we’re here because you want Tony’s help, right? So you get him killed too?’’

Sam sat and took it; the Avengers long since having stopped eating and frozen in place, watching as Dean’s somewhat righteous anger poured out on Sam. Sam’s phone buzzed again.

“Don’t answer it,’’ Dean said, but Sam did anyway, the caller ID flashing Charlie’s name.

“What’s up, Charlie,’’ Sam said, fake cheer through his voice as he put the phone on speaker. “Bad news, D--’’

Charlie’s petrified voice cut him off, harsh breaths echoing down the phone line. “Sam, help me.’’

Sam and Dean both shot to their feet. “Charlie, where are you?’’ Sam demanded.

Charlie’s voice trembled and Sam and Dean set off down the hall towards the garage at a run, Tony right behind them. “Still at the, um, the motel… t-t-the Blackbird, Sam, someone is here. T-they think I have the Book.’’

“If you have the Book, give it to them,’’ Sam ordered, sprinting around the car and getting into the driver’s seat as Tony slid into the back and Dean started the engine, hitting the gas before the doors were all even closed.

“Charlie has the damn Book of the Damned?!’’ Dean asked over the engine echoing in the garage as they peeled out into the night.

“No, I don’t have it,’’ Charlie said. There was the faint sound of moving cloth, just audible over the engine of the Impala. “I just… I, I just… I have my notes.’’

“Then give them your notes, Charlie!’’ Tony called towards the phone in Sam’s hand.

Sam agreed. “Give them the code… give them whatever they want!’’

Dean reached out and wrestled the phone away from Sam with one hand. “Charlie, I don’t know what the hell is going on, but you need to listen to me. Give whoever that is whatever they want. You understand ? Charlie?!’’

There was a long silence, the tension growing with every passing second before Charlie spoke again, her voice strained.

“I can’t do that, Dean.’’

“Charlie!’’ Dean called but the phone beeped quietly at him; Charlie had hung up.

“Damn it!’’ Dean tossed the phone back to Sam and pressed harder on the gas pedal, shoulders straightening and face collapsing into a stony silence.

That silence only lasted about ten minutes.
“So you had the Book the whole time?”

“Dean,” Sam started but his brother was having none of it.

“Lied right to my face?”

“I thought it was our only chance to get you free of the Mark, so I grabbed it.”

“I made it real clear how I felt, you ever consider that?” Dean replied, voice getting louder with every word.

“Dean, listen…” Tony chimed in.

Dean kept going. “And then you pulled Cas into it. And Charlie, and you were working on Tony, too.”

“Charlie loves you, Dean!” Sam almost shouted. “We all love you!”

“Well that’s just great, but now Charlie’s probably facing down one of the Stynes in a motel in the middle of nowhere because of you, Sam!”

Sam opened his mouth but couldn’t find the words to say anything. They skidded sideways a moment later, the car coming to a stop across the center of the Blackbird motel’s parking lot.

There was no need to ask which room Carrie Asimov had been in; the door leading to the room on the end had been kicked open, the doorknob loose and the locking mechanism still attached to the doorframe while the door itself swung freely. Dean turned off the engine and all three men got out, pulling knives and guns from waistbands, Tony activating a repulsor to cover his entire hand and forearm.

Dean lead, stepping cautiously through the door, eyes sweeping the trashed hotel room. The beds were slashed, feathers everywhere from the mutilated pillows, Charlie’s duffle bag tossed across the room and hanging half off a chair, a half askew bathroom door…

They crossed the room and Dean pulled open the door, the older brother taking an involuntary step back and Sam covering his mouth at the overwhelming smell of blood that greeted them. Charlie’s laptop was shattered below the sink, keys to the keyboard scattered everywhere and the screen cobwebbed and missing pieces.

Charlie herself was in the bathtub.

Sam let out a broken half sound and Dean’s whispered Charlie hovered desperately in the room. Their friend-- their younger sister-- was covered in blood, her neck revealing a collar of dark bruises and the fabric of her graphic tee-shirt doing nothing to hide the series of deep stab wounds in her abdomen.

Tony pushed quickly past the brothers to kneel by the tub, blood from the floor soaking into his shoes as he reached out to find the pulse point at her wrist.

An instant later, he was looking at Dean with eyes afire. “Dean, car, NOW!”

Sam and Dean’s eyes lit and Dean sprinted off, the sound of the impala engine turning over an impossibly short time after he left the room. Sam stepped forwards pulling towels off the rack and reaching out past Tony to pull Charlie’s shoulders forwards. Tony lifted her feet and a moment later, Sam had their friend cradled in his arms, Tony pushing stuff out of their way as the genius snatched
Charlie’s ruined computer and duffle bag from the room, pulling his phone out of his pocket with a bloodstained hand as he used his foot to hold the door open for Sam to maneuver through.

Tony dropped the duffel in the footwell up front, holding the back door for Sam to slide in, his chest cradling Charlie’s back and his own back pressing against the other, closed, back door. He straightened Charlie’s legs and closed the door as Sam pulled one of the towels he had grabbed off his shoulder and pressed it, wincing at the amount of blood on his hands, against Charlie’s stomach.

Tony was on the phone as he slid into the car, Dean speeding off into the night. “--full surgery, as soon as we arrive. We’ll be there in--” he checked Dean’s speedometer “--fifteen minutes. Have Doctor Levann ready when we arrive.”

Tony craned around to face Sam, taking another of the towels and joining Sam in his efforts to keep as much of Charlie’s blood in her body as possible. Her face, which had been alarmingly white when they had pulled her from the bathtub, was inching slowly towards grey.

Nobody spoke and they rode in frantic silence until they arrived at the bunker, Dean bypassing the garage to drift the Impala sideways up to the door closest to the medical wing. Sam was out in a minute, shoving his body backwards and taking Charlie with him, lifting her out of the car and sprinting full out towards the waiting stretcher that was being wheeled towards him by two orderlies, Steve, and Sam Wilson. He gently set her down and was joined by Dean, running next to the stretcher and keeping pressure on Charlie’s stomach until they were both pushed back, along with Steve, Sam, and Tony, at the entrance to the sterile operating theatre. The doctor was scrubbed and ready, any confusion at being pulled away from her evening belayed by the adrenaline of seeing the patient in front of her.

The door swung closed and all of them took slow steps back. Dean was the first to move. He shot a glare at Sam, then at the operating room door before drawing himself up, chin high, and walking briskly back towards his car. The engine started and Tony turned to Steve and Sam Wilson.

“Can you go check the garage? Make sure he’s just taken the car back there, instead of heading off.”

“He won’t go anywhere,” Sam mumbled. “Not while Charlie’s here.”

“Sam, come on,” Tony reached out and touched Sam’s shoulder. The hunter flinched. “Sam. You can’t stay here. It’s not going to make this go any faster, and you need to clean up.” Tony took a look at himself, his overwhelming sense of calm cracking as he saw the blood drying in the cracks of his skin.

This time, Sam let Tony’s hand stay on his elbow, guiding him through the halls back to the main living area and kitchen they had sprinted from only an hour and a few minutes before. Most of the Avengers were there, standing in wait in a tense group.

“She’s alive,” Tony said when they entered. “In surgery, now. She, um.” Tony reached up to run his hand over his face but stopped when he saw the blood once again. “Lost a lot of blood. Steve and Sam went to check on Dean— he was taking the Impala back to the garage.”

Pepper stepped forward, reaching out to gently touch her husband’s cheek. “Go shower, Tony. You too, Sam.”

Sam nodded. When he left his room twenty minutes later, his hands were scrubbed raw but they were free of blood, Dean wasn’t present but his shower was running, and Tony was waiting in the
kitchen, Natasha pouring tumblers of whiskey and sliding them to various parties.

If anyone noticed how badly Sam’s hands were trembling as he took the glass, nobody commented.

It would be a long night ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Looks like the Civil War AU will be three chapters long.

A note about timelines: they’re going to be considerably longer than they are in the movie. It’s hard to tell times anyway, just because although it seems events are happening quickly, you have to factor in things like large amounts of international travel, which, unless it’s just Tony, still will take a considerable amount of time.

Please let me know what you thought about this first part!
Civil War, Part 2

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder before we start that this is now a SUPER AU Civil War; it shares many similarities but not all of the plot points stay the same.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey,” Tony leaned back and let himself slide down the wall to sit on the floor next to Dean. He handed over the bottle he had brought with him despite the time and watched as Dean unscrewed the top and took a generous swallow of the beer.

It had been nearly eight hours since Dean, Sam, and Tony had rushed to retrieve Charlie Bradbury from the squalid motel room she had been attacked in, seven hours since Charlie had gone into surgery, and five hours since any of them had gotten a progress report.

Things weren’t looking good; the initial wave of information from the medical team indicated she had been stabbed at least six times in the abdomen, as best as they could figure. If that wasn’t enough, there were lacerations on her arms and hands, bruises coating her neck in a purple circle, and massive amounts of blood loss. The team had been working for hours on her stomach, stopping internal bleeding, finding injured organs, and trying to close the wounds.

Nobody was really sleeping in the Compound, most of the occupants wandering through the dark halls or dozing in chairs in various locations. Dean had been sitting against the wall outside the surgery for nearly six hours; Wanda had managed to convince the hunter to take a shower earlier and had brought him some food around midnight, but otherwise the Avengers had left Dean alone.

“Sam’s right about at least one thing, you know,” Tony told Dean. He watched, heart fluttering as Dean’s hands tightened around the neck of the bottle. Involuntarily, his eyes darted down; Dean’s sleeves were rolled up and just peeking out from the edge of the cloth was the Mark of Cain, scorched and burnt on Dean’s arm, tendrils of angry red twirling out from the ancient symbol.

“Yeah?” Dean’s voice was bitter and he took another drink, eyes not leaving the door to the operating room. “And what’s that? The part where he lied to me? The part where he put Charlie in danger? The part where she’s dying on an operating table because of what he did?”

“No,” Tony’s voice was firm. “The part where we care about you, Dean. Because we do.”

Dean’s fist clenched again but Tony went on. “Sam hasn’t asked me yet about the Mark of Cain. We didn’t make up the repairs to lure you up here to work on the Mark. I don’t think Sam was ever going to ask me, not after he saw the problems we’re having with the Accords.” Tony’s own voice dropped into bitterness but he forced himself back to the topic at hand. “But if he had, I would have said yes. We do love you, Dean. And it’s not like you’ve never put your life on the line to help us before.”

Dean snorted. “Fine. Whatever. The means don’t matter, the end result is that Charlie’s still here, dying, and it is Sam’s fault. Blame’s on him for this one.”

“Do you really mean that, Dean?” Tony asked quietly. They both knew he didn’t, at least not
entirely. “Look, I’ll leave you alone. Just… get some sleep, okay?”

Soft footsteps interrupted them and both Tony and Dean shot to their feet as Dr Levann came down the hall, plastic coverings on her shoes squeaking on the tile floors. “Hey Tony,” she said, nodding in Dean’s direction as well.

“What’s the-- how’s she doing?” Dean asked, stumbling over his question.

“She’ll be okay,” Dr Levann said and Tony let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Dean’s shoulders relaxed a fraction of an inch. “It’ll be a long, slow recovery for her; severe internal bleeding, damaged organs, lacerations, the bruising on her neck…” Levann shook her head. “It’s bad all around. But it should all heal up fine, as long as she takes it slow.”

“Is she awake?” Dean asked.

“No, and she won’t be for quite a bit,” the doctor replied. “And after she does wake, she’ll be pretty out of it for a while-- she’s on heavy painkillers. Additionally, Charlie might not be able to talk for a few days while her throat heals; I recommend you discourage her from talking. Mr Stark, we’ll be here through the night to keep an eye on her and then tomorrow we can discuss how many of the staff you would like to be present for the next few weeks.”

“Great, thanks,” Tony said, reaching out to shake Dr Levann’s hand. “Thanks again for coming on such crazy notice, also.”

“That’s my job,” the doctor shrugged but smiled. “I’m going to get some sleep, and I recommend you do the same.”

“Go to bed, Dean,” Tony said, giving Dean a slight nudge down the hall towards his bedroom. “I’ll send the others behind you. And the med team and Friday will watch Charlie for a few hours.”

It was a testament to how worn out Dean must have been, even with the Mark fueling him, that he didn’t argue, just nodded and headed down the hall. Tony turned on his heel, walking the other way until the corridor looped back around to take him into the living area. “Friday, is this everyone?”

“Yes, Boss,” the Irish voice chimed quietly from the nearest speaker. “The rest have gone to bed, except Agent Romanoff, who Dean is about to meet in the hall.”

Wanda and Rhodey were both on the couch, which was a little too small for them to both lie comfortably, leading to arms flopping everywhere and Rhodes’ leg apparently crammed in the space between the cushions and the back of the couch itself. Clint was there as well, sitting on the floor and leaning up against the arm of the couch. Sam Winchester was in the squishy armchair that Pepper usually favored. The large size of the chair and the sleep heavy on his face managed to make him look much younger than usual, erasing lines of pain and death and far too much loss for someone his age.

Tony stood at the arm of the chair, leaning forward to shake Sam’s shoulder. “Sam. Wake up,” he said gently.

Sam shot awake, one arm flailing out and almost hitting the nearby coffee table as the hunter entered the world of the waking. “Wazzgoinon?” he asked groggily, fumbling for a weapon that he didn’t have on him and simultaneously waking Wanda, Clint, and Rhodes.

“It’s fine, everything’s fine, Sam.” Tony held out his hands in a placating gesture. “I was just going to send you to bed. Charlie’s out of surgery--” he added, forestalling Sam’s next question. “--and she’s going to be okay, we think. She’s on some pretty heavy drugs for a while, so we’ve been sent
off to bed for a few hours. Dean’s already heading to his room.”

“Um. Okay,” Sam stumbled to his feet, still out of it, and rubbed his eyes, reminding Tony strongly of Pepper’s (and now his) little niece waking up from a nap.

Tony gave in to his compulsion and reached out to tousle Sam’s hair. “Go to bed, Sam. We’ll wake you when Charlie’s up.”

When Sam entered Charlie’s room in medical five hours later, she was still unconscious. Dean was lounging next to the bed, one of his hands enfolding one of Charlie’s, relaxed but for his shoulders, which were tense.

“Hey,” Sam said quietly. “Um. Tony wants you to go eat. Steve made eggs. I’ll sit with her for a while.”

“Fine,” Dean said. He brushed his thumb across the back of Charlie’s hand and relinquished it, crossing his arms and avoiding looking at Sam as he stood. “Be back soon.”

Sam dipped his head and took both Dean’s chair and Charlie’s hand. “Hey, Charlie,” he said softly after the door had closed behind his brother. “We’re all real worried about you.” Sam eyeballed the quietly humming and flashing monitors and lines, the IV trailing down to her other arm. “I, uh, brought you something.” He waved the tablet he had brought. “Friday downloaded it for me. I figured we could start at your favorite part?”

He turned the tablet on and began to read quietly. “Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum, a small, slimy, creature. He was dark as darkness, except for two big, round, pale eyes in his thin face…”

Sam read for twenty minutes or so, until Dean returned trailing Wanda and Clint along with him, Wanda’s copy of the Accords firmly in her hand. “Bilbo jumped at once to his feet and held out his sword…” he trailed off as the others entered, closing down the tablet. “Uh. Hey.” He couldn’t look Dean in the eye.

“The Hobbit, right?” Clint asked, nodding at the blank screen in Sam’s hand. “It was one of my favorites when I was a kid. Maybe I should read it to the kids next time I go see the nieces and nephews.”

Wanda shook her head as she pulled two chairs across the room (with her hands, Sam noted, not her mind). “I have never read it,” she said. “But I have heard Tony mention it before.”

“Yeah,” Dean chimed in. “Tony’s a big Tolkien nerd.”

They sat in awkward silence for a few moments. Clint murmured something to Wanda that Sam didn’t quite catch but then pulled a highlighter and a pen out of his pocket while Wanda flipped through the thick pages of the Accords. She pointed to a place where they had apparently left off and asked a question, Clint nodding in agreement.

The silent tension built, Dean still standing near the foot of Charlie’s bed, Sam in the chair next to it. The only sounds were the soft whispers of Clint and Wanda as they talked through the Accords and the beeping of machinery. Sam fidgeted, fingers tapping out an aimless rhythm on the edge of Charlie’s blankets, the sound muffled.
“But what if—” Wanda said a little louder. “That makes no sense.”

“It’s the government,” Clint said. “Doesn’t have to.”

“Going badly?” Sam asked the pair and they nodded in sync, Clint shrugging.

“It’s interesting, to say the least,” the archer said. “The way the Accords are structured… it’s weird.”

“They’re set up to regulate superheroes, right?” Dean asked leaning casually against the foot of the bed. “To put you under the control of the UN and say you can’t go places if they don’t want you?”

“Essentially,” Wanda agreed. “But they also do much more. They require superheroes to register themselves, to either never use their powers or to agree to restrict themselves, with heavy consequences.”

Dean and Sam both frowned. “I don’t like the idea of the government controlling superheroes,” Dean said. “How many times have they tried to arrest us, just because they don’t understand what we’re fighting?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “They’re not the best listeners. But…”

“But?” Dean cut in sharply. “You have a “but”? Come on, Sam.”

“Listen, Dean. How many times would our jobs have been easier if there had been someone to help regulate it? We probably wouldn’t have had to deal with the fucking apocalypse if we had some oversight. It’s not like we haven’t made mistakes.”

Sam’s last work landed in the quiet room like a deflated soccer ball, sitting dead between them all on top of Charlie’s motionless body in the hospital bed. Clint had lowered the highlighter, he and Wanda watching Sam and Dean cut back and forth like spectators at a tennis match.

Dean fired back. “I can’t believe you’re defending this, Sam. If you were a superhero, would you want the government poking in all the little details of your life?”

“No, but—”

This time, Dean didn’t even interrupt by speaking, just stood and left. Sam’s eyes dropped and he didn’t look at Wanda and Clint.

“So,” he asked finally. “Where do you two stand right now?”

“I’m retired,” Clint said. “This doesn’t affect me. But it affects my friends. We’re—” he gestured towards Wanda—“reading this through and I can’t see it letting any of them --us-- live normal lives, much less letting them help others.”

“And what about that young man…” Wanda looked thoughtfully up for a second, trying to recall the name. “Spiderman. In New York. Or all the young mutants under the arm of Professor Xavier? They’re just trying to live their lives; they don’t need a government telling them what to do.”

“So you’re against them,” Sam summed up.

“In their current form? Yes,” Wanda agreed. “If the UN is unwilling to change these Accords, I will not stand with them.”

Sam opened his mouth to ask another question but was stopped by a rustle of fabric. He whipped around to see Charlie blinking, eyes hardly focused.
“Charlie?” he asked, taking a few quick steps back to the bedside and taking her hand again. “Hey, Charlie, it’s me, Sam.”

Charlie blinked again, slowly focusing on Sam leaning over her. She opened her mouth but before Sam could warn her not to speak, her brow furrowed and she lifted one hand towards her throat. Her fingers ran over the bruises tentatively and then lifted, her eyes following the IV lines trailing from her arm into various hanging bags of drugs and fluids.

“Hey,” Sam repeated and she looked back at him, face pale. “It’s okay. You’re in the medical wing of the Avenger’s Compound in New York.” Clint waved and Charlie’s eyes hovered on Wanda for a moment-- she hadn’t met the woman before. “We recovered your laptop and got your notes. You’ve got a lot of injuries-- you’re not supposed to talk-- but you’re going to be okay.”

Charlie nodded, her eyes already fluttering closed as the pull of sleep --undrugged and natural-- claimed her.

Sam let out a long slow breath, feeling as if a set of iron bands around his chest had been released. “I should go tell them she woke up,” he said a moment later, tearing his eyes away from Charlie’s face to look at Clint and Wanda.

“We’ll stay here for a while longer,” Clint replied, answering Sam’s unspoken question.

He nodded his thanks and left, on the search for Tony.

However, he didn’t make it that far.

“What?!” Dean’s voice, filled with shock and anger rang out of a room just down the hall and Sam quickly sidetracked to find out what was wrong.

“What?!” Dean’s voice, filled with shock and anger rang out of a room just down the hall and Sam quickly sidetracked to find out what was wrong.

“Dean?” he asked cautiously as he entered, because his brother was perpetually angry with him these days. At the moment though, Dean’s face was a blank mask and he was sitting facing Steve Rogers as if he didn’t quite know who he was. “What’s wrong?”

Dean stormed out of Charlie’s hospital room, feeling the anger and red-hot irrationality from the Mark thrum through his body. Sam wasn’t right, couldn’t be right, couldn’t support the Accords. Tony might have been their cousin and he might have his own reasons for wanting the superheroes to be regulated, but after years of worry, tense nights of fear that the FBI was going to take away John, take away Sam, take him away from them, Dean wasn’t about to throw any support to the government.

“What?” The hunter looked up to find Steve there in front of him, leaning casually against the wall next to a doorway but holding lines of tension in his shoulders. “Could I, um. Talk to you for a second?”

Dean felt his eyebrows rise. “Sure,” he cautiously agreed and followed Steve into the room, which seemed to be a sort of recovery room/guest bedroom. Dean took one of the comfy chairs scattered around, Steve opting to sit in front of him on the foot of the bed. “What’s up?” Dean asked, forcing amicability into his voice.

“...what do you think about the Accords?” Steve asked. He didn’t fidget or look away from Dean, but his shoulders rose another fraction of an inch and Dean had to stop himself from swearing violently because why did everyone keep wanting to talk to him about this?
“I don’t like them,” Dean said. Steve’s shoulders relaxed; this was apparently what he wanted to hear. “But our situation is different than yours. We spent years getting chased by the feds. We operate on a national level only. We’re not dealing with the same level of property damage and casualties as you are.”

“But you don’t agree with the Accords anyway?” Steve asked.

“It’s not my choice to make,” Dean said, letting out a shallow breath. “Don’t tell Sam, because I just reamed him out for agreeing with them a little, but he’s probably right. They need to be fixed. They’re not perfect. But you guys probably do need some oversight.”

Steve’s eyes flashed. “So we just sit by and watch while people die? Just because their government doesn’t want us to help?”

“Look,” Dean said. “I’m not the person to talk to about this. God knows that Sam and I have done some shitty things, some morally dubious crap to help people. But it’s also gotten us in a lot of trouble, some of which could probably have been stopped. Sometimes…” he trailed off.

“Sometimes what?” Steve asked.

“Sometimes you have to compromise. To agree with things you don’t believe in a hundred percent just so that you can make things a little better for everyone.” Dean looked at his lap and thought of Sam, dying to stop Lucifer, of Bobby stabbing himself to kill the demon possessing him, the Mark on his own damn arm, taken so they could kill Abaddon. “Sometimes compromising is your only option. Good of the many, and all that.” Dean said. He glanced back up at Steve. “Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

Steve took a breath. “No,” he said. “I need some help with Tony.”

Dean’s guard was rising. “What kind of help.”

“I found out… well, for a while I thought, but then… the files--”

“Spit it out,” Dean said sharply.

“L– Hydra killed Tony’s parents. And…” Steve paused for a fraction of a second. “I think it might have been the Winter Soldier, specifically. That did it.”

“What?!” Dean asked.

Like a magic spell, his incredulity seemed to have summoned his brother, who stuck his head into the room. “Dean? What’s wrong?”

“Christ,” Dean said, looking at Steve, then Sam. “Get in here and close the door.”

Sam did, moving to sit next to Dean in a second chair.

Dean fixed Steve with a piercing look. “Explain.”

“It started when Natasha and I were talking to Zola in the New Jersey bunker. He was showing us… Hydra. What they’d become. How they’d grown. What they had done. And there was a flash of Howard’s face, but it was so short…” Steve shrugged. “It had been a weird weekend and so I sort of moved on but kept it in the back of my mind. But then, three weeks ago in Italy, I recovered a file. It was a mission report. December 16, 1991. It had all the planning, about about Howard and how he would be going to the airport, maybe with Maria, in a particular type of car. They would have a
newly synthesized version of the supersoldier serum with them.”

“So it was almost definitely Hydra. And you think it was Barnes because…?” Dean asked. Sam inhaled sharply-- he had missed that part before.

“It said “the Asset” would take care of it,” Steve said. “And there was a photograph, black and white, like a still from a bad video camera. It’s not clear, but there was the car after hitting the tree and there was a man on a motorcycle behind them. It looked like… it looked like Bucky’s arm. The new, metal one.”

“Damn,” Sam said. “So you think that not only did Hydra kill Tony’s parents, it was Bucky. Why haven’t you told him?”

“I didn’t… there just didn’t seem to be a good time. And then this fiasco with the Accords started, and…” Steve shook his head. “It’s such a mess.”

Dean’s hands had curled into fists. “Damn right, it is. You need to tell him. Now. Before you find Bucky or someone else finds out and tells him first.”

“I know. I know. I will. It’s just… what about Buc--”

He didn’t get to finish his thought because Tony’s voice burst over the intercom. “Avengers, to the briefing room, now. We’ve got problems!”

Steve and both hunters immediately stood, Sam and Dean making eye contact. “You back up Steve, find out what’s going on. I’ll keep an eye on Charlie,” Sam said. Dean frowned but nodded sharply and followed Steve from the room and across the building.

Dean stopped in his tracks the moment they entered the briefing room, eyes widening at the video footage playing in front of him. It was showing images of a fancy-looking building or rather, what had been-- a huge portion of the structure was now smoking, charred rubble. There were hordes of people surrounding it, covered in dust and debris and blood, most of them in suits and rescue gear.

“What happened?” Steve asked. “Is that the Vienna International Center?”

“Yes,” Tony replied tersely. He was wearing a neat, dark grey suit and a deep green tie, having come back to the Compound from the Tower when the explosion happened. “They were meeting to discuss the Accords in full for the first time today. So far there’s at least a half dozen people dead, including Wakandan King T’Chaka.”

“Suspects?” Steve asked. Natasha pushed a tablet across the table and Steve picked it up, exhaling sharply. Dean took stock of the room for the first time; it was packed with grim-faced Avengers, many of whom were half armed. Natasha and Sam Wilson were both packing utility belts and bulletproof vests, Rhodey was wearing close fitting exercise clothing and was cautiously fingering a metal bracelet that Dean would bet called his armor, Wanda and Clint had pushed in quietly behind Steve and Dean, and Vision was standing with his arms crossed next to Tony.

Dean looked over his shoulder to see grainy video footage of a man in black with dark, long hair.

“Is that…?” Dean asked.

“It looks like him, but no,” Tony said. Steve’s head snapped up to look at him. “I don’t think so. Friday pinged me not long before the explosion that we had a match on Bucky in Romania. There wouldn’t be time for him to get anywhere near the Center all the way in Vienna, much less set an explosive.”
“So it’s a set up,” Steve confirmed. “The UN and the countries with reps killed, especially, are going to want to go after Bucky. Why?”

“We don’t know, but we’ll need to go offer proof that it wasn’t him, as well as start gathering intel about who the bomber actually was,” Natasha said.

Tony hummed his agreement. “I’d say split into halves. I’ll take Rhodey, Sam, and Natasha with me to help in Vienna. Steve will take Vision, Wanda and… Clint? And go get Bucky.”

“No,” Steve and Clint spoke at the same time. Steve gestured for Clint to speak first. “All respect to everyone here, but I’m not going to go to either place.” Clint crossed his arms. “I’m retired, and going out with you guys is basically the same as signing my name either for or against the Accords, and that’s not something I’m willing to do.”

“Besides,” Steve cut in. “We need someone here to provide extra security around Pepper and Charlie. Not that Sam and Dean wouldn’t probably do a good job,” he nodded in Dean’s direction, “but it won’t hurt here to be extra cautious.”

“Who did you have in mind?” Tony asked, looking at the assembled group.

Wanda raised her hand, just as Steve said “Wanda.” They both smiled. “She’s a heavy hitter and is more than capable of watching both places. Plus, she can get between the Tower and the Compound quickly.”


Steve nodded. “Let’s do this.” Everyone stood and started filing out of the room. Steve leaned forward. “Tony, can I have a word. Before we leave.”

Tony lifted an eyebrow but nodded. “Sure.” A moment later they were almost alone; the eyebrow went right back up when Tony realized Dean was still there.

“Tony, I um. Need to tell you something.”

“Okay, big man, shoot,” Tony flopped down into a seat at the wide table, leveling a look at the soldier. “Is this why you were all pensive the other night?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. His hands danced across the back of the chair in front of him, as if he were unsure what to do with them. The soldier took a deep breath. “Look, I wanted to break this to you at a better time, not now, not with all this going on, but when it rains, it pours, I guess.” Tony’s slight smirk had faded. Dean crossed his arms, tension running through him. “Tony… Hydra is responsible for the death of your parents. And… I think it might have been him. The Winter Soldier. Who actually killed them.”

Steve met Tony’s eyes. The genius’ face was white. “Bucky? How-- what… when did you find out?” He gripped the edge of the table like a lifeline, watching as Steve’s eyes skittered away.

“When, Rogers?”

“A few weeks ago,” Steve admitted, voice hollow. “I didn’t want to--”

“Bull. Shit.” Tony hissed and Dean took a half step forwards, ready for anything, as Tony stood and leaned across the table, bracing himself with his hands. “Bullshit, Rogers. You had no right to keep that from me. Why? What did I ever do to make you think, ‘gosh, I shouldn’t tell Tony I know the guy we’re looking for probably killed his parents. That’s not something he needs to know.’” Tony’s
voice cracked. “What, did you think that I wouldn’t help you find him? That I would kill him on sight or something? Do you really trust me that little?”

“I just thought-- there were the Accords, and then the Tower, and Charlie, and you didn’t need--”

“I don’t care.” Tony said harshly. “I don’t care what you thought. You had no right,” he repeated.

He took a deep breath and settled back, shoulders straightening, chin coming up. “We don’t have time for this, Rogers. There are bigger problems. You need to go get Barnes. I need to go to Vienna.”

“Should I--”

Tony seemed to anticipate Steve’s question even as he walked toward the door, nudging Dean to follow him as he left. “Yes. You can bring him back here. We’re better equipped to deal with him than most places are.” He laughed harshly. “I’m not going to try to hurt him. I know… I know it wasn’t him.”

He turned to meet Steve’s eyes for a moment at the doorway. Steve held the contact for only a second before his eyes dropped again. Tony spoke. “I might even be able to forgive him someday. Although I might not be able to forgive you.”

Tony turned on his heel and strode purposefully down the hallway, ducking through a small corridor Dean hadn’t been into before. They were almost at the end before Tony’s stride faltered and he let himself slow to a stop, sagging against the wall and taking a slow, shuddering breath.

“Did you know?” he asked Dean, voice quiet and tired, like the answer couldn’t be any worse than what he had just learned.

Dean shook his head. “Not until about a half hour ago. Neither did Sam. We were talking about the Accords and Steve told us and we… convinced him, I guess, that he had to tell you.”

Tony nodded, pressing his lips together tightly. “Thanks. Thank you. For making him.” Tony reached out and clapped Dean’s shoulder before straightening again and continuing down the hallway. “What do you and Sam think about the Accords, by the way?”

“Well. In general, I don’t like them. Sam’s a little more for them than I am, but…” Dean grimaced. “He’s sort of right. They need to be changed. They’re too solid. Even though they might make governments feel more safe, they’re going to wreck the lives of a lot of superheroes who have never hurt anyone in their lives.”

Tony sighed. “The Accords were never meant to go into press exactly as is. They’ll have to be modified, compromises will be made. But Ross and his team of government lackies are pushing for as much legislation as possible right now. They’re the big problem we’re going to have to fight on this one.”

“Well, we’ve got your back, whatever happens.” Dean reciprocated Tony’s shoulder clap, pulling his cousin into a quick hug.

“What’s happening?” Sam’s voice startled Dean; he hadn’t realized they had zigzagged their way to the medical wing.

“I’ll fill you in,” Dean said. “But to answer the unasked question, Steve told him.”

Sam stepped forward and folded Tony into a fast hug of his own. “I’m sorry.”
“Yeah. Well. I’m just not gonna think about it for a while.” Tony peeked around the corner to see Charlie, still asleep. “Don’t know how long this is going to take, so I’ll keep you updated.”

The brothers watched as Tony visibly pulled himself together. His shoulders leveled, his spine straightened, and his chin came up. He ran a hand through his hair, straightened his tie, and looked at them both. “Wish me luck.”

Sam smiled. “See you on the other side, Tony.”

“Good luck,” Dean added. “We’ll hang out with Pepper while you’re gone, keep an eye on everything.”

Tony flashed his signature smile, the blinding brilliance genuine for a split second. “Don’t go destroying the company or stealing my wife away, now.”

Dean grinned and threw him a sloppy salute and then Tony was gone, the swish of the door at the end of the hallway followed by the sound of the Iron Man suit taking off moments later.

____________________________________________________

Avengers General Communications Room, the Compound

Everything was falling apart.

Again.

Sam resisted the urge to muffle a groan and let his head fall into his hands. Wanda had no such hesitation.

“This has gone from bad to worse,” she commented, pulling herself out of the uncomfortable chair and gathering up their paper coffee cups to throw away.

Sam had to agree. In the last seventy two hours, everything had basically gone batshit crazy.

The Avengers had gone, leaving Wanda, Clint, the Winchesters, and Charlie alone in a mostly-empty Compound with just a handful of staff. Dr Levann breezed through not long after and had done a brief exam on a mostly-awake and grumpy Charlie Bradbury, letting them all know that Charlie would be just fine, the stitches would come out in a week or two, and that she under no condition was to leave the bed. Since Charlie was now conscious, she found this exceptionally aggravating.

Since there wasn’t anything to do around the Compound, officially, anyway, she didn’t have anything to worry about, anyway. Sam and Dean had caught her up on the Accords, on Bucky, on Vienna, and (once Dean had left to assemble lunch) on the Mark of Cain. Clint beat the pants off of everyone at poker, which annoyed Dean to no end. Wanda levitated a huge stack of books into the room, along with one of Tony’s tablets. Pepper came through both the first and second evenings, bringing soup and pasta and mousse, all of which Charlie was cleared to eat if she was careful.

However, it was Sam’s activities that triggered biggest issue. For the first time since Charlie’s attack, Sam had the chance to sit down and read over the information she had sent him. There was a significant amount of information, all of which would have to be decoded through the Book of the Damned. But she had done it, and that was what mattered. Hope swelled through Sam; curing Dean of the Mark might not be as impossible as it had looked.

He had been just about to pray to Castiel, asking him for the Book and to tell Rowena they had a
cracked code, when the angel himself appeared in the kitchen. Sam blinked in surprise because the angel was considerably more disheveled than he had anticipated. “Cas? What’s-- did you come because I was going--”

Castiel cut him off. “Rowena is gone.”

Sam’s heart (and hopes) dropped like a rock. “What do you mean, ‘she’s gone’?” she asked, letting himself sink back down to the kitchen table. “Where’d she go? Where were you?”

“I was looking for Crowley. She… blackmailed me, I suppose.” He gestured at the notes spread out in front of Sam. “She refused to keep working unless I brought him to her. I didn’t think it would take long, but when I returned to tell her I had located him, she had gone. There was a casting basin on the table, a few different herbs she must have kept on her. She took the Book of the Damned with her.”

“Good.” Sam jumped but Castiel didn’t even flinch.

“Hello, Dean.”

“I’m glad she took it. Maybe you’ll both give up on this crappy plan of yours.” Dean glared at Sam’s notes spread around the table. “I thought you would have given it up when you almost got Charlie killed.”

“Dean--” Sam started, raising one hand placatingly.

But there was no stopping it now; all the pent up anger from the last three days-- from Steve telling them Bucky had killed Tony’s parents to the tired look in Tony’s eyes as he had prepared to fly off and fight a bureaucratic battle, Dean holding it in for Tony and Charlie’s sakes-- all of it was pouring out, augmented and strengthened by the Mark of Cain.

“No!” Dean slammed a hand on the table. “No more! I’m not going to sit around while you try and come up with a cure. I don’t need to be cured. And I’m not going to hang around while you try.”

“Dean!”

He stood and before Sam could do anything, was out the door. Sam sighed and started shuffling together papers, listening for a moment until he could hear the muffled roar of the Impala running away from the Compound.

“He’ll be back,” Castiel said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“Right,” Sam agreed. “Hit up a few bars, play some pool. Come back later.” But his voice was just as unsure as Cas’.

The uncertainty hung in the air between them for a moment before Castiel looked towards the hallway. “Charlie is here, yes?”

“Yeah, down this way,” Sam said. He led Castiel down towards the medical wing. “Can you heal her?”

“Mmm,” Castiel considered for a moment, his face blanking as if he were running a diagnostic, seeing how much juice he had. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. But I believe I can do at least part of it.”

“Great, right here,” Sam gestured Cas into the room.
“Cas!” Charlie croaked as they entered, voice still hoarse.

“Hello, Charlie,” Castiel greeted her, nodding to Clint, who was sorting through the books Wanda had brought. He surveyed her for a long moment, reaching out with careful fingers and waiting for her nod before gently touching the bruises at her throat. “I’m sorry.”

She didn’t have time to protest before he lifted his fingers to her forehead, eyes flashing blue for an instant as power ran through him and into the woman on the bed.

“Thanks,” Charlie said a moment later, her voice still rough but no longer restricted by the bruising swelling her throat. She looked much better; the purple cuts and bruises were gone and some of the color had returned to her face.

“It is the least I can do. Thank you for your help on the Book of the Damned.” Castiel turned back to Sam. “I’ll go now, to look. I’ll also keep an eye out for Dean.”

“Why? Where’s--” Clint and Charlie’s questions overlapped but Castiel was already gone, leaving their eyes to land on Sam, whose frown deepened.

“He’s gone. Rowena ran off with the Book, Dean heard Cas and I talking about it, got pissed, and took the car. Hopefully, he’s just at a bar or something. How do you feel?”

Charlie smiled. “Better. Stomach still hurts, but not as much. Everything else is loads better.”

“Stay here until Dr Levann comes back, but I wouldn’t be surprised if you get cleared to be out of bed. Or at least out of medical and into a comfier bed. We’ll get an actual bedroom ready for you,” Clint said.

“Thanks. Again. For letting me stay here, also,” she smiled at the archer as he reached for his phone to call the doctor.

“No problem. The person you should really be thanking is Tony, really. He funds everything around here.”

“Where’s Wanda?” Sam asked Clint as he waited for the doctor to answer the phone.

“Comms room,” Clint said. “I think she got a message-- Dr Levann! Hey, hate to bring you back this way, but you might want to come check up on Charlie; there was a visitor and I think you’ll find her greatly improved.”

Sam rolled his eyes at Clint’s on-the-phone dramatics and looked to Charlie. “I’m going to find Wanda; don’t let him do anything crazy.”

She rolled her eyes back but nodded. “Yes, sir!”

Sam strode out of the room, wandering until he found the comms room right next to the large conference room. The walls were lined with all sorts of systems, most of which he didn’t recognize. A series of sleek phones were seating between panels of buttons and numbers and screens. Wanda’s slim cell phone sat on the table next to a steaming mug and the young woman herself leaned back in a chair, her copy of the Accords in her hands.

She looked up when Sam entered. “Hello,” she smiled. “How’s Charlie?”

“Better. Um. You just missed Castiel, actually.” Sam gave her a run down on the last half hour, from Dean leaving to Charlie’s improved health. “How are things in here?”
“Quiet,” Wanda said. “But Rhodes told me earlier that he or Tony would call us to give us an update around this time.”

“Good,” Sam agreed. “I’m going to get a sandwich, do you want anything?”

Wanda shook her head and Sam left, returning a few minutes later with a sandwich on a plate and his own mug.

The pair sat for several hours, working their way through sections of the Accords as well as half a dozen card games. Sam slipped out to refill their mugs and returned just in time to see Wanda’s phone ring. She picked it up and waved him to a seat as she answered. “Tony? How’s it going?”

The slight smile dropped off her face. “I see. Hold on, I’m going to put you on speakerphone, Sam’s here too.”

There was a small burst of static and then Tony’s voice filtered through the exacting StarkPhone speakers. “Hey, Sam.” Sam frowned. Tony sounded tired; he could almost see the lines around Tony’s eyes and the shadows under his eyes, the tie around his neck loosened but the crisp lines of the jacket unchanged.

“Hey, Tony,” Sam replied. “How’s everything on your end?”

A gusty sigh echoed over the line. “Chaotic. We’ve talked the UN down; they’re raring to find whoever it was, but we have enough evidence to discredit the idea that it’s Barnes. So now they don’t know who it is to go after. In particular, Prince—well, now King—T’Challa is upset, and rightfully so.” Tony sighed again. “At least we have basically the entire Wakandan government helping us search for the bomber.”

“Is there any evidence so far?” Wanda asked sympathetically.

“A little.” There was the sound of shuffling paper on the other end. “We found a hotel room in the area willing to testify they had a guy who looked like Barnes leave that morning. However, the clerk swore up and down that Barnes hadn’t come it. A couple teams entered the rooms and found masks of Barnes; good quality and high tech, along with notes on how to implement the bombing. But besides continuing to prove that it wasn’t Barnes, it doesn’t get us any closer to finding out who it actually was.”

“So what happens now?” Sam asked.

“We’ll look for more evidence, of course, but we—my team, at least—are probably just about done here. There’s not much else we can do, so we’ll probably be coming back to the Compound in a day or so. Finish getting ready to meet Ross about these Accords. I just talked to Pepper and she said everything’s going smoothly at the company, so I’ll probably come right home with everyone else.”

“What about Steve’s team, any news?” Wanda asked.

Tony’s voice hardened, almost imperceptibly, at the mention of Steve’s name. “Last I heard, they were going to make a move on Bucky this afternoon. Since the entire world isn’t after his head about the bombing anymore, Rogers and Co probably won’t make the news or anything.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Things are mostly okay here. Castiel showed up and healed Charlie, although Rowena got away and took the Book of the Damned with her. Dean took off a couple hours ago, now, although hopefully he’ll be back later.”

“Dean left?” Tony asked, worry clear, and Sam groaned mentally; making Tony more stressed had
not been what he was going for.

“Yeah, he’s pissed about us still trying to cure the Mark,” Sam said. “But--” he was interrupted by
his own phone ringing from an unknown number. He frowned at it. “Hey, I have to go. Got a call, it
might be Dean.”

“Talk to you later, Sam,” Tony said. The hunter stood and stepped out into the hallway, Tony and
Wanda’s voices fading behind him.

He answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Sam?” Castiel’s voice echoed over the line. “I’m in a hotel, a few hours from the Compound.”

“...and?” Sam asked.

“The Stynes are here. Four of them, all dead. Sam…” Castiel hesitated. “I think they-- or at least one
of them-- were the ones who attempted to kill Charlie, and based on, well. Everything. I think Dean
killed them. The Impala’s not out front but the woman at the desk said that the man who owned it
booked a room for the night.”

“Should I…?”

“No,” Castiel replied. “I will wait here for Dean and ask him what he has done.” He changed the
subject. “How is Charlie?”

“Better,” Sam said. “She ate, Clint entertained her for a while, and now she’s sleeping in a real bed.
Thanks again for that, by the way.”

“Of course, Sam.”

“Keep me updated, okay?”

“I will.” Castiel said and then hung up before Sam could say anything else; the angel wasn’t great on
phone etiquette.

Sam went back into the room to find Wanda was no longer on the phone with Tony. “Any other
news?” he asked. “Cas found Dean’s hotel room and is waiting for him to come back to it.”

“No,” Wanda said. “Tony sends his regards, to you and Charlie.”

Sam nodded and sat down, sighing. “This is such a disaster.”

Wanda hummed. “At least Steve will be… content. He has been looking for Barnes for quite some
time.”

“Yeah, although I don’t know that bringing him back here is going to be great for our general levels
of tension,” Sam said.

They sat in silence for almost half an hour, contemplating the wide gamut of problems facing them
all. It was all such a disaster; the situation in Vienna, the impending tension between Bucky and
Steve and Tony, Dean’s entire situation, the Accords. Everything was falling apart.

Again.

Sam resisted the urge to muffle a groan and let his head fall into his hands. Wanda had no such
hesitation.
“This has gone from bad to worse,” she commented, pulling herself out of the uncomfortable chair and gathering up their paper coffee cups to throw away.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “We should probably go to bed. Get some sleep before everyone gets back here.”

The pair walked through the silent halls, the dim lights reflecting off the glass and steel walls and blocking the views of the late night sky. They had just entered Charlie’s room, cracking the door open softly and just far enough to see that she was asleep, when a loud crash shattered the silence.

Sam threw on the lights, Charlie jolting up in bed and crying out, Wanda shoving the door open and throwing her hands up to bring her magic to defend them. Sam heard fast, stumbling footsteps in the hallway but by the time he identified them as Clint, the archer was also pushing into the room, handgun at the ready.

“Stop!” Sam cried, the chaos of the last few seconds suddenly dropping as they all found the source of the sound; a glass of water and a vase knocked off the bedside table and shattered by the sudden appearance of Castiel, swaying on his knees, covered in blood and his face swelling.

“Sam,” Castiel said.

“Cas?” Sam and Clint moved forwards, the latter stowing the handgun somewhere on his person as they carefully pulled Cas to his feet and deposited him in an armchair near the bed.

“Hello. I apologize for my… abrupt appearance,” Castiel said, eyes lingering on Charlie, who was clutching her abdomen.

“S fine,” she said. “I mean, it hurts, but it’s not too bad. You just startled me.”

“Yeah, all of us, too,” Sam said. “Cas, what happened?” He winced as Wanda stepped forward with a box of sterile wipes, cleaning the blood from Cas’ forehead and revealing a gas, as if someone had hit him hard, someone holding something in their hand, like a pistol or a length of pipe, or… Sam’s heart sank and stomach dropped as the answer dawned, like someone holding a large and very heavy bone knife.

“It was Dean,” Sam said. “Dean did this to you, didn’t he.”

Castiel looked steadily at him and Sam had to close his eyes as the angel delivered the verdict. “Yes.”

He reached out blindly and found the back of the chair, using it to steady himself as Castiel continued. “I waited for Dean at the hotel, cleaning up the… mess he had left behind in the Stynes’ room. He returned and we fought.” Cas sighed and went silent for a moment. “Sam, Dean does not wish to be found.”

Sam looked at Cas’ face, still bloody despite Wanda’s efforts. “I can see that.”

“He wants us to stop looking for him, to stop trying to find a cure for the Mark.” Cas frowned. “I am not sure he knows his own strength or his own actions, anymore.”

“So…” Charlie spoke up. “What are you going to do?”

There was a moment of silence. Then Castiel lifted his chin, piercing each of them with those bright blue, slightly unearthly eyes. “I will remain here for a few hours until I am sufficiently healed and then I will go continue my search for Rowena or Crowley. You, Sam and Charlie, and Clint and
Wanda, if they wish, will continue to try to decipher the notes we have for the Book of the Damned. And together, we will save Sam’s brother.”

Sam slept fitfully for the rest of that night, dreams of Dean beating Castiel bloody drifting in and out with images of Demon Dean coming at him with a hammer in the red-lit halls of the bunker.

He woke early, still exhausted, and checked his phone to find a message on it. The name was Rudy and he squinted at his phone for a moment, searching mentally until he found a face and a story to attach with the hunter’s name. It simply read “call me,” and Sam mentally groaned; a case was not what he needed right now. At all.

But he was a hunter and maybe all Rudy needed was advice. So Sam took a deep breath and dialed.

“Rudy, what’s up?”

“Hey, Sam,” Rudy’s voice echoed through Sam’s room. “It’s Dean. He’s… off the Res. But I’ve found him at a hotel. Your car is here. You want the address?”

“Um.” Sam took a second to collect his scattered thoughts. “Uh. Yeah, I’ll take it.” He scrambled for a notepad and took down the address of a seedy motel in Tennessee.

He exhaled slowly. It looked like he had a drive to make. He’d have to ask Clint about the car, and… he did some fast mental math. As long as getting Dean didn’t take too long, he could be back around the time Tony and Steve’s teams should be arriving.

Now the only problem would be leaving without Charlie knowing and insisting on coming with him.

Five hours later, Sam was kneeling in front of Dean in a seedy mexican knock off restaurant in the middle of Tennessee nowhere, both of them looking behind Dean in shock at Death, who had his own scythe protruding from his chest, as the ground began shaking around them. Death slowly crumbled into ash and dust, the scythe clattering to the floor.

Dean reached out and pulled Sam to his feet. “You okay?”

Sam winced, the bruises and cuts from Dean’s brutal beating making themselves known. “I’ll live. You?”

“Fantastic,” Dean said sarcastically. “I think I just killed Death,”

They awkwardly headed towards the door, Sam taking a quick glance at Dean’s now-bare arm. “This is good, Dean, this is good. The-- the Mark is off your arm, nothing crazy happened.” Sam was almost shaking from adrenaline; the Mark was gone, Death was dead, but they were all fine. “You get your baby back,” Sam added, pulling out the Impala keys and handing them to Dean.

“Yeah,” Dean said sarcastically. “I’m sure everything’s perfectly fine.”

Both of them threw out their hands for balance as the ground rumbled ominously, as if in response to Dean’s words. There was a loud cracking sound and both brothers looked up to the sky to see the color change to a deep red, streaks of red lightning starting to stretch across the clouds.
“What the h--” Sam was interrupted by several strikes of red lightning, hitting the ground all around them and throwing up dirt into the air, shaking the earth beneath their feet.

“What did Death call this?” Sam asked.

“The Darkness,” Dean responded grimly.

The shaking of the ground grew stronger and black columns of smoke erupted from the ground, rushing from where the red lightning had struck towards the pair of hunters.

Dean’s voice was too calm. “Get in the car.”

“...yeah,” Sam agreed and both fumbled to do so. “Let’s go, let’s go!” Sam called as they yanked the doors shut behind them and Dean fired up the car, backing up but jerking to a stop as the rear wheel fell into a hole.

Dean swore a blue streak and hit the gas, Sam reaching out to smack him on the arm.

“Dean.” Dean looked ahead and stopped his frantic motions as the cloud billowed towards them with incredible speed. “Dean!”

But darkness had already enveloped the car.

Steve Rogers stood abruptly as the jet was plunged into sudden darkness. “Sam! Status report! He couldn’t see Sam in the cockpit but could hear Falcon frantically toggling switches.

“I don’t know! It just--” But before he could finish his sentence, the lights were back. Wilson’s face was set. “It-- I’ve never seen--” he gave up trying to articulate, just closed his mouth.

“Hope that never happens to me again,” he finally added a moment later.

Charlie was about to finally, finally beat Clint Barton at poker. Her moment was there. Wanda was smiling at her knowingly over her own set of cards, but Charlie was going to win this. She was ready.

Until she dropped all her cards as the lights in the room blackened without warning and the sunlight coming in from the window was simply no longer there.

“Clint?” she asked, voice high with fear. He found her hand quickly in the darkness but she didn’t have time to do more than squeeze her fingers before the lights were back just as suddenly, as if nothing had happened.

“What was that?” Clint asked. Wanda shook her head.

“Nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“Sam and Dean,” Charlie said. “It has to be.”
Tony Stark let his head rest against the window of the jet for a moment, closing his eyes against the stress and worry of the last few weeks.

Suddenly, Rhodey swore loudly and Tony opened his eyes to… nothing. It was pitch black, as if the plane had been dipped in liquid night and all lights had been extinguished.

He blinked but before he could do more than that, the lights were back as if nothing had happened.

“What the hell?” Rhodey asked, looking bewildered. Natasha poked her head back from the cockpit, looking at him expectantly.

“I don’t know,” Tony replied. “But I would bet it has to do with the Winchesters.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Hope you all liked this chapter! Drop me a line and let me know what you thought. Just so you know in advance, it may be several weeks before I update again; finals are coming this week and either I’ll have this written in a few days and it’ll be up next weekend or I’ll miss the window and you won’t have it for a good bit.

Just a warning for the next chapter… sometimes people unexpectedly die in “Supernatural.” Sometimes, they don’t stay dead. And sometimes, they do.
Chapter Notes

I had someone ask about how the Mark was actually cured; it’s essentially, in my mind, the same as the TV show except Sam has less knowledge about what was going on. So Cas and Rowena and Crowley take care of it and Sam and Dean just know the Mark has been cured.

Important for this chapter; Season 11 Episode 1 will essentially take place after this. So instead of them rolling into that town which had been hit by the Darkness immediately after leaving Amara and the Mexican restaurant, they make it back to the Compound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was exhausted. It might have been midday in New York, but he had been crossing time zones for several days in a row, now. He’d lost all sense of where his circadian rhythm should be and all he knew is that he was damn tired. And stressed. And angry.

He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and take a quick nap, but Rhodey had told him that they would be back at the Compound in just five minutes and it wasn't worth it at this point. Tony groaned and let his head clunk against the window; he hated flying overseas the "normal" way; the suit might not have been perfectly comfortable-- even if he put it on autopilot, it locked the joints around his wrists and ankles in positions that seemed fine at first but were extremely uncomfortable two hours later. But at least it was only two hours, instead of this six hour monotonous flight nonsense.

Mental note-- Tony thought-- make the quinjets (and the company planes, why not go all out) a lot faster.

On the other hand, the sooner they landed, the sooner Tony had to deal with things. A lot of things.

King T’Challa had promised to send over information as it was recovered, since they still didn't have any leads on who had bombed the Accords gathering, and the UN wanted updates what seemed like every five minutes. Ross had, thankfully, extended their deadline by a week in light of recent events; there had only been a few days left until the team members had originally needed to give their official opinions on the Accords. It had been days since he had seen Pepper and desperately needed a hug (and maybe a little more), Charlie was there, recovering from her violent stabbing, and Dean had the Mark of Cain. No to mention, that weird moment of complete darkness that Tony would still swear had something to do with the Winchesters.

Plus, Rogers' team was on it's way back as well, bringing with them the Winter Soldier-- Bucky Barnes, Tony amended mentally-- the man who killed his parents. His mother.

"Hey," a smack on his shoulder brought him out of his thoughts. "We're here." Rhodey gestured at the door to the quinjet-- Tony, lost in his thoughts, had completely missed the landing.

Standing with a groan-- he added "more comfortable seats" to his mental list of quinjet modifications-- Tony smoothed out his wrinkled suit jacket and followed Rhodey onto the landing strip bordering one edge of the Compound's cleared land. Surveying the empty region in front of him,
Tony frowned; Rogers' team wasn't back yet, and there was no one else in sight. He stretched and followed Rhodey and Natasha across the manicured grass, entering the compound through the garage and past rows of cars--jet black jeeps, armored SUVs, a few classy sports cars for undercover missions in high stakes places, one of his own sleek convertibles, and there, at the very end, one long, dirty but sound, classic black Impala. The metal ticked as he walked past it and his eyebrows went up; if the Impala's engine was still cooling and it was that dirty, that meant the Winchesters had been somewhere and must have just gotten back.

This suspicion was confirmed when he entered the building proper, faint voices filtering around corners and through walls, higher pitches interspersed with Sam, Clint, and especially Dean’s deep timbres resonating through the building.

However, no matter what he might have been imagining in the kitchen, it sure wasn't what he saw; the moment Tony rounded the corner into the open living and dining area, Charlie Bradbury laid a hard hitting, open handed slap across Dean Winchester's face.

Dean actually stumbled sideways from the force of the blow but didn't fight back. Tony's eyebrows went up for a second time in as many minutes and his eyes flew towards Dean's arm, but he couldn't see it well at his angle.

"Ow," Dean said, rubbing his cheek like a petulant child before Charlie pulled him into a hug.

Sam looked like he was trying not to laugh and wow, what had happened to him? Tony surveyed the younger of his cousins as the man nudged his way past Clint and Wanda, who were making sandwiches, to pull out a bottle of water. There were bruises swelling up half his face, a spectacular black eye set off by purple splotches over his cheekbone and down to his jaw. Small cuts littered across his face, hands, and forearms, but the hunter ignored them as he tossed his brother another water bottle. "Come on, Dean. You just might have deserved that."

Guilt flashed across Dean's face, so fast Tony almost missed it, and then across Sam's face as he watching Dean feel guilty.

"Yes, he did," Charlie agreed, plopping herself down and looking remarkably good for someone who had been stabbed in the stomach and strangled just a few days earlier.

Tony finally had too many questions to keep silent. "What is going on?" he asked, drawing eyes to him.

Dean frowned. "Well," he said, taking a chair of his own next to Charlie. "Short version? Castiel healed Charlie mostly, I beat up Sam, the Mark of Cain is gone, and the Darkness is free."

"And you killed Death," Sam helpfully supplied from behind his brother.

"Oh, yeah. That too," Dean added, smirking and then smiling at Tony as if he had just listed the most normal pastimes in the world.

"Um," Tony latched on the first thing he had understood. "One thing at a time. Castiel was here?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "He came to give me an update; he was still looking for Rowena. But my guess is he found her, because the Mark is gone and it sure wasn't anything on our end."

"Okay, and Dean beat you up because...?"

"He's an asshole," Charlie said fondly. "He took off, a hunter called Sam and told him where the Impala was, long series of events but Sam ended up in a Mexican restaurant with Dean, who beat
"And that's why you slapped him."

"I slapped him because he's an idiot who wouldn't listen to his brother and basically sister and cousin and angel friend and team of superhero friends and instead decided he would have the Mark of Cain forever."

"Ah," Natasha said, taking a seat at the long kitchen island.

"Anyway," Sam added. "We might have killed Death-- don't look that alarmed, he's just a supercharged reaper, people aren't going to just stop dying or anything--"

"--we hope," Dean cut in.

Sam rolled his eyes. "--and the Mark is gone but we think something called the Darkness has been released."

"Okay," Tony said. "Well. You're going to need to fill us in with some detail later, especially about "the Darkness," but on our end of things, we haven't caught the bomber yet, we've been granted an extension on the Accords, and I'm going back to the tower after everyone else arrives." The "so I don't have to be here with Steve and/or Bucky" was implied, but Sam and Dean both picked up on it loud and clear.

"We'll come," Dean said. "We should fill Pepper in on the good news and besides, tech genius girl here has never been to the Tower."

Charlie's eyes lit up and Tony felt a little happier for the first time in days. "You'll love it kid, it's candy land." He looked around at the motley crew. "Anyone up for lunch?"

They had eaten their way through a large stack of sandwiches before Friday spoke up.

"Boss, Captain Rogers is landing with his team. Readings indicate that they have Sergeant Barnes with them."

Tony set down his plate in the sink, letting his hands drop under the edge of the counter so that nobody could see the tremor run through them. "Noted."

“What’s, um. The plan exactly?” Sam asked. “Like, with Barnes.”

“Not sure,” Tony said. “Friday, tell Steve to settle Barnes wherever he’s planning to house him-- any of the guest rooms except the ones that Sam, Dean, and now Charlie usually stay in-- and then meet me in the conference room for a fast debrief.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Want us to come with?” Dean asked.

Tony hesitated, then shook his head. “No. It’ll be fine. Go pack your bags and meet me in the garage in fifteen minutes.”

He stood and ran his hands through his hair, making it stick on end. Tony sighed internally-- he wanted a shower. Absently buttoning the middle button of the suit jacket, Tony made his way to the conference room only to find that Steve was already there.

“Where’s the, you know. Walking amnesiac.” Tony asked.
Steve frowned but apparently didn’t find it in himself to retaliate. “He’s in the guest room next to mine. Vision took him; he’s exhausted but he’s firing on all cylinders. Knew who we were, knew about the bombing and that he had been blamed for it, listened to us and agreed to come back to the Compound of his own free will.”

“Fine,” Tony said stiffly. “No problem. I’ll fill you in later on details, but we get two more weeks to decide on the Accords, King T’Challa is heading up the manhunt for the bomber, and Dean no longer has the Mark of Cain.”

Steve nodded his understanding. “We’ll work through Bucky’s psych profile for the official record, send you anything that might help T’Challa.” He hesitated for a moment. “Friday said you’re leaving?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. He didn’t elaborate.

“I’m sorry,” Steve apologized.

“Save it, Rogers.” Tony didn’t meet Steve’s eyes. “Sam, Dean, and Charlie are all coming with me.”

“Okay,” Steve said. Tony stood. He didn’t have anything else to say to Steve. Not yet. He heard Steve take a deep breath and paused, waiting for whatever Steve wanted to say.

“I just--” Steve broke off. “We’ll see you to talk about the Accords, at some point?”

“Fine,” Tony said again. “Good luck with Barnes.”

And he left without another word.

Generally, Tony would have argued with Dean until he was allowed behind the wheel of the Impala. Today, he just slid into the back with Charlie, ignoring the concerned looks of Sam and Dean as he closed the door with a little more force than was strictly necessary. “Let’s go.”

“Hey,” Pepper said, giving him a hug as he reentered the Tower via the “car wash”, Iron Man armor stowing itself in the floor behind him and the afternoon sun glinting off the metal. “How’d your meeting go?”

He sighed. “It was fine. Better than when they first got introduced, that’s for sure.”

“And?”

“He’s basically a kicked dog, so I still haven’t to actually interact with him. The Accords don’t apply to him, at least not yet, so he usually just lurks around the edges of everything and Clint keeps an eye on him.”

“Did you--”

“Yep,” Tony answered before she even finished, leaning back and dropping his lips on her forehead before pulling them both to sit on the sofa. “Steve’s not interested in having Barnes anywhere out of his sight or near the government, even if that means having the help of the NIH.”

Pepper frowned. “He’s too stubborn for his own good.”

“You’re telling me.”
Sam wandered into the room. “Hey, you’re back. How did the Accords meeting go?”

Tony waved. “Hey, Sam. It was fine. Complicated, as usual. I might drag you or Dean along next time, Clint’s having to play double duty to keep tempers in check and keep an eye on Barnes.”

Sam smiled. “Take Dean, he’s more invested in the Accords than you might think. I think he’d say yes to being a babysitter just to get more information about how this could make things more complicated for us. As hunters, that is.”

Tony pushed himself up a little straighter and gave Sam his undivided attention. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sam looked taken aback by the sudden laser focus. “Well, we don’t exactly operate inside the law, you know. I think he’s torn between wishing we didn’t have to worry even more about the government cracking down on what we do and wishing that, well.” Sam looked down. “Wishing we didn’t have to carry so much weight on our shoulders.”

“Do you think the Accords would do that for you?” Pepper asked.

“No,” Sam shrugged. “Probably not. It’s not worth dealing with the fallout of everyone knowing about monsters and the legal crap we’d have to wade through just to own the weapons. Still,” he shrugged again. “Some days… it’s easy to look at how crappy things are and dream of it being better, but a job’s a job and ours happens to be killing monsters. Illegally.”

Tony nodded and flopped back down bonelessly onto the couch. “Ugh,” he said, running a hand over his face and rubbing his eyes. “Where’s Charlie? Still in the lab?”

“Yep,” Sam said, taking a chair. “She’s halfway through inspecting every bot and their code, with help from Friday. Better keep an eye on her or she’s going to code one of her own and you’ll have the most bossy robot invading your lab.”

Tony smiled. “Please, what’s the worst she could do? Never mind—” he immediately redacted, holding up a hand. “It’s probably plenty bad, I don’t want to know. Pepper, how’s the paperwork going?”

“It’s almost done. She can probably come sign it all tomorrow.”

“When are you going to tell her?” Sam asked. “If I have to listen to her ask ‘what’s next’ one more time…”

“Tomorrow,” Pepper repeated. “Wait one more day.”

“Finally.”

_________________________________________________________

Tony badgered Dean into letting him drive and Sam into coming with them and so there they were, the three men of the Stark–Winchester extended family, barreling down the backroads outside Manhattan that lead to the Compound, music blaring, windows down to let in the warm spring air.

It wasn’t a long drive, as far as Sam and Dean were concerned anyway; two hours or so. They had all taken much longer trips over much greater, less familiar distances.

However, in those carefree two hours, everything changed.
They pulled in and parked, Tony patting the long car affectionately on the top as he got out and tossed the keys back to Dean. “Pleasure, as always,” he said, laughing as Sam rolled his eyes. It wasn’t until they entered the living quarters of the Compound that they knew something was wrong, Sam and Dean’s bickering about the car suddenly fading as the trio entered the living room to find Clint struggling to keep Rhodes in place, Steve standing angled between the airman and Bucky with an arm outstretched to keep back each of them, anger and despair warring on his face. Bucky was standing limply, arms loose at his sides and shoulders slumped forwards. His lips were set tight and guilty eyes were watching not Rhodey, Clint, or Steve, but instead the large television set into the wall.

“Tony, don’t—” But nothing Steve could say would stop it now; Tony had already seen what Barnes was watching, eyes lost in distant memory and hovering on the edge of panic.

He knew that car, knew the length and the color, Tony noted idly. He had, under Jarvis’ (the human Jarvis, the first Jarvis) careful and probably unnecessary supervision, learned how to drive in that car at the age of ten, once he was old enough to both look over the steering wheel and the long hood and touch the pedals firmly at the same time. He had almost hit a small stone wall that lined the edge of one of the gardens, missing it by a hair, and had been almost euphoric with giddiness when he got out to find that the paint job hadn’t been scratched and his father wouldn’t know about the close call.

Clint let go of Rhodes shoulders and the man stepped up behind his best friend, the friend who he had driven home, white as a sheet and silent as the grave but not crying yet, still wearing that stupid santa hat, after he found out that his parents had died. Tony had been at Rhodey’s, had just arrived at his apartment and had barely flopped down on the couch when the call had come from Obadiah Stane.

The news station wasn’t playing sound with the video, and for that Sam and Dean were both grateful; they knew, better than most people, the sound of facial bones breaking and distorting, the sound of someone crying as a loved one died, the sound of choked breath under unrelenting hands. The brothers moved in unison, standing on either side of Tony as the genius reached out to grip the back of the sofa with shaking hands, knuckles white as he watched the grainy footage—Hydra recording, bad camera with low capability for night vision, jury rigged to a tree to capture this exact moment at this exact location—of the Winter Soldier murdering his parents before the video cut to a concerned news anchor. Her mouth moved, but Tony wasn’t listening, the blood rushing in his ears cutting out all the other sound, as if he were learning about his parent’s death for the first time.

Sam, Dean, and Rhodey’s shoulders tensed as Tony pried his hands from the couch to turn and look at Steve.

“Now aren’t you glad you told me before this got out?”

“Tony, god, I’m so sorr—”

“Don’t.” Tony held up a hand and forced himself to look at Steve’s side, where Bucky Barnes stood cringing like a kicked puppy. His hair was up in a sloppy tie—he wouldn’t let anyone get near him with scissors to cut it—and he was wearing sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a glove over his metal hand and his eyes were dark and oozing guilt and self-loathing. It was a look Tony knew well, one he had worn himself after Afghanistan, after he realized how many deaths were really on his hands.

“I know it wasn’t you,” he said, letting out an explosive breath and shoving his hands in his pockets to keep from launching across the room and punching Bucky for a crime he might not even really remember or Steve for not telling him sooner because this was a lot to take in over just a week and a half and he really needed to go before he completely fell apart right here. “But you might want to stay away from me. For a while.”
He turned. “Rhodey, pack a bag,” he said. Already, he could hear Dean digging in his pocket for the keys he had just put away. “You’re coming with us. We’ll be back in a few days to have our last Accords meeting.”

Tony turned on his heel and walked out the door without sparing Steve or Bucky another glance.

“I can’t believe he didn’t hit someone. I would have,” Charlie said, pouring them all another round at the kitchen island. They had been drinking less, lately; Pepper had been on all of them to “drink less” and “eat healthier”, a program which was probably good for them all but at the moment seemed unimportant.

“I tried,” Rhodey said flatly. “If Clint hadn’t stopped me, I would’ve. Not sure if it would have been Steve or Bucky. Probably Bucky.”

They had gotten back to the Tower to find Pepper frantic—she was organizing a statement for the press regarding the release of the video and Tony’s reaction, she had been interrupted in the final stages of Charlie’s new job paperwork, and she wanted Tony back at the Tower. Fortunately, Pepper’s assistant whisked away the end of the paperwork, saying she would file it herself, convinced Pepper that the press for this could wait a little longer and she would prepare a statement for final approval, and that she should go upstairs to be there when Tony arrived.

Pepper followed all of this advice and so whisked Tony away the moment the elevator doors opened, leading him off to take a shower and to sit somewhere without any distractions or extraneous people to process what had happened in the last few hours.

Which left Charlie, Rhodey, Sam and Dean to get drunk. Charlie heard about events from Sam and Dean’s end of the story, gave her own (she was signing paperwork to accept a new position with both Stark Industries and, as she wished, to consult with new SHIELD. It was high paying, engaging, and Pepper was both willing to let her stay with them in the Tower and leave to hunt on occasion if she wished. They had been almost finished when the competent assistant came in, white as a sheet, and said there was something on the news that Pepper probably needed to see) and then heard Rhodey’s version.

“It’s weird, you know?” Dean said. “Cause it was him, but also not. It’s like…”

“Demonic possession, or any possession,” Sam filled in. “It was him, but not him. It was the Winter Soldier in charge, not Barnes. Doesn’t mean he won’t feel guilty for it, but it wasn’t him, really.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “Tony handled it better than I would have, probably. I mean…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Barnes just looks so ashamed all the time, you know?”

“Hard to beat up someone who looks like they think they’re deserving what they get,” Rhodes said. “Although, again, I almost tried, so.”

“Well. Here’s to Tony holding it together.” Dean raised his glass and the others clinked theirs against his, wry smiles and tired eyes across all faces.

Two days later, they were back in the car, this time with Rhodey riding along, windows up against the grey misty drizzle coming down and hitting the glass.

It had been awkward around the tower the previous day but not nearly as bad as it could have been;
everyone there, even Pepper, knew what it was like to lose friends or family, to watch them die, unable to save them. And so they had proceeded through the day acting as Tony was; as if, to the best of their ability, nothing had gone wrong. Of course, this wasn’t really possible. Tony had joined them at breakfast, dark circles under his eyes but wearing a neat suit and with immaculate hair, the corners of his lips barely turning up as he beheld the four hungover people struggling to make themselves food in the morning light.

However, any slight levity had immediately vanished as he stepped out a few moments later, standing with Pepper in front of a rabid press corp to tell them that yes, he had seen the video, no, he was not seeking action against Barnes, as he believed Barnes’ actions were not his own at the time. Yes, he would assist Barnes in getting aid and yes, the soldier was being closely monitored at the time. Yes, the Accords would not be impacted by the video. No, he didn’t want to talk about the video any more, and if one more person asked--

Fortunately, Pepper neatly took over and closed out the conference quickly, ushering Tony back out of the press rooms and sending him back upstairs with orders to spend no more than two hours in the workshop before getting lunch.

(And if she called the friends and family upstairs to make sure he was extracted from the shop for food and water, just in case, well. Tony didn’t need to know that.)

Rhodey had asked Tony at lunch if he was still sure he wanted to go out to the Compound, but Tony had been insistent. The Accords would be passed, in some form or another, if Tony had anything to do with it.

T’Challa had called later that evening, as they were all hanging around the living room watching cuts and news reruns of Tony’s press conference with tired eyes. He was coming to the Compound the next day, he told them, to join their talk about the Accords and to give them all an update on the manhunt for the Vienna bomber.

They hadn’t made much progress publicly, but under wraps there was much more happening. The King of Wakanda himself had flown out to follow a lead in Siberia and it was well he had; the scant bit of information had led to a massive payoff in the form of a hidden bunker. Tony took notes as T’Challa filled them in on the contents of the massive base, which included: one mediocre campsite, littered with empty military rations and blankets. One set of fancy broadcasting equipment, which as best they could tell had been used to release the video of the Starks’ murder to the press around the world. Five supersoldiers, all contained in individual cryochambers constructed decades ago and all of whom were dead of neat, single shots through the glass and into their heads. One red starred book, written in Russian and containing neat translations which described how to control the Winter Soldier. And one dirty notebook left in a damp corner, the name ‘Zemo’ written in unsteady lettering in the front cover.

It was this last that intrigued and concerned them all the most; while portions of the writing were illegible from mud, snow, or bad handwriting, the parts which could be read detailed a long plan, thought out through many contingencies, which sought to divide the Avengers and hopefully to end with at least one of them dead. The primary plan had deviated after the Vienna bombings; he had expected them to accuse Barnes without a doubt, forcing them to bring Bucky back to Vienna where the man had planned to trigger the Winter Soldier and then take him to Siberia. Afterwards, assuming they were still alive, Tony and Steve would also be lured to the Siberian bunker, where they would see the video of the Winter Soldier and Tony’s parents, triggering a fight. It was a plan riddled with holes, clearly devised by someone whose grip on reality was becoming more tenuous by the day, but it was just solid enough that if Tony had been less in control of his emotions, if the Winchesters hadn’t convinced Steve to tell Tony about Barnes’ role in his parent’s death, if they hadn’t been able
to immediately prove that Bucky hadn’t been in Vienna, it might have worked at the cost of lives and friendships.

“Unfortunately for Zemo,” T’Challa said over the noise of the plane he was calling them from, “he didn’t seem to plan on one particular thing: Mr Stark not only taking responsibility for his actions but also understanding that Barnes may not be as much at fault as he first seems.” There was clear respect in the young king’s voice. “In this way, Mr Stark, you are considerably more wise than many of us, myself included. And through this, you may have saved not only the Avengers as a unit but also many of your friend’s lives.”

Tony’s lips twisted downward at the praise; clearly he didn’t see much to be bragging about.

“At any rate, I would recommend that you all are on your guard; I will call also Captain Rogers tonight to speak to them about this, but as long as Zemo remains free, it seems he will hunt you all ceaselessly.”

T’Challa’s words echoed in the minds of the Winchesters as they got out of the car at the Compound, shoulders tensing as they prepared for what would undoubtedly be a long afternoon of wrangling Avengers and watching Bucky.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in the conference room with all the others, Dean sitting, Sam standing behind his chair, Tony to Dean’s right and Rhodey on Tony’s other side. Their posture was almost mirrored across the table, with Steve sitting and Bucky lurking behind him, hands flitting from the chair back to his sweatshirt pockets and back to the chair, as if unsure what to do with them. T’Challa strode in-- nodding regally at the assembled group-- and to their surprise, he was alone.

“If I may ask, your Majesty,” Tony said, “where are the Dora?”

T’Challa smiled, taking the empty seat near the end of the table, next to Wanda. “I managed to convince them that their services would not be needed to such an extent this afternoon while I am here among you all. They seemed to take this doubtfully and while they remained in New York to manage the security of our embassy apartments there, they have made me promise to call them every few hours.”

Tony laughed. “How very practical of them, your Majesty.”

“Please, Mr Stark” the king lifted a hand to stop him. “There is no need to call me ‘your Majesty,’ not here. In public, of course, appearances must be kept, but here among friends there is no need for such formality.”

“Well then, you’ll have to call me Tony, like everyone else,” the billionaire retorted.

“As you say,” T’Challa smiled. “Before we start with the Accords, there are several matters I would like to discuss. Firstly, your guests?” He raised an eyebrow at Sam and Dean.

Dean stood to greet him, exercising some of the social graces Sam claimed he lacked. “I’m Dean Winchester, this is my brother Sam. We’re Tony’s cousins and we’re here at his request.”

T’Challa’s eyes had widened at their names. “The Winchester brothers?” Tony opened his mouth as both of the brothers tenses, preparing to have to fight off yet another person who remembered the FBI warrants before Tony modified them and who thought they were mass murderers. However, before anyone could comment, T’Challa continued. “The hunters?”

Dean, startled, dropped back into his seat. “How do you know that?” he asked, feeling Sam’s fingers, tight on the back of the chair, digging into his back.
To their even greater surprise, T’Challa prefaced his answer by standing and giving the brothers each a short, half bow before retaking his chair. “Hunting in Wakanda is very different than it is the United States, or indeed, most of the world. We are a country soaked in history, a history of spirits and gods, monsters and those who would ruin the world. Unlike here, most people believe that these beings are real and that they walk among us, ready to cause harm. Hunters are looked upon with respect, as those who protect citizens from those that stalk in the shadows.”

“So hunters are… what, part of the government?” Sam asked, hands slowly starting to relax.

“No,” T’Challa said. “Nor are they regulated by anyone but themselves. However, we—government officials— are aware of their actions, monitor those who cause great harm, and punish those who step beyond their bounds as hunters of the supernatural. Hunters may also apply for funding, but with the knowledge that we may watch them more closely afterwards to see the money is well spent.”

“What happens if they overstep? I mean, what do you do?”

T’Challa shrugged. “Overstepping frequently means they are causing injury to the people of Wakanda. They are arrested and tried for whatever crime they have committed. Generally, they get prison time. However,” he smiled grimly, “up until twenty years ago, castration was also an option.”

The men around the table winced. Clint hastily redirected the subject. “That doesn’t explain how you know who Sam and Dean are, though.”

“They’re quite famous in the hunting world, you know. Even before I was king, I took pride in hearing what my father called ‘whispers of the kingdom,’ the gossip traveling by word of mouth. Sam and Dean have saved the world, and while some may hate them, they are generally held in awe for what they have done.”

Both brothers suddenly found the table very interesting, neither meeting anyone’s eyes. Sam’s ears were suspiciously pink and Dean reached out to examine a pencil with great focus.

“Anyway, my first question is now answered,” T’Challa amended, drawing attention away from the embarrassed/unbelieving brothers. “Now for the second order of business: Zemo. We are no closer to knowing where he is, although currently several members of my staff are investigating a man fitting his possible description— to the best of our knowledge, at any rate— who bought a plane ticket to Japan this morning. I’ve ordered that you all receive pertinent information as we get it.”

Murmurs of assent around the table.

“Anything else?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” T’Challa continued. “I want to offer asylum to Mr Barnes, if needed.”

The room went silent and several pairs of eyes darted over to Bucky, standing silently behind Steve.

“I know the atmosphere has been… tense,” the king said, his own eyes not on Bucky but on Tony. “And that many people will be after his head for his past actions as the Winter Soldier. However, after Tony’s actions of grace, it would be negligent for me to not offer a chance for reparation as well. In Wakanda,” T’Challa now spoke directly to Barnes, “you would be safe from all governments, including our own, as long as you agreed to abide with our laws. Our best medical teams would willingly work to assist you in regaining your memories, as you wish, and to cautiously manage whatever may remain of the Winter Soldier.”

His last two words fell heavily in the room and Steve turned to look at Bucky. Bucky swallowed, his pale face remaining stoic but a drop of fear mingling with indecision entering his eyes for them all to
“What if--” his voice cracked and he swallowed hard again before restarting. “What if I stay here?”

T’Challa inclined his head. “If you wish, we can bring medical experts here to assist you. I know Mr Stark has offered to contact and work with your own American National Institute of Health as well, if you feel safer with American doctors. Or no doctors, if you choose so.”

Bucky nodded, lips tightening for a moment. “Can I, um.” He seemed to fall mute at the prospect of asking another question and they all waited in tense anticipation for a long second-- they had been working on this for the last week. Bucky had a hard time with questions, had a hard time with asking, whether it was for something, about what was going on, or if he was allowed to go somewhere. It was as if he had suppressed all curiosity to the point where no query could even pass his lips. Even asking one, just a moment ago, hadn’t seemed to soften his fear of what might happen if he risked another. “Can I… think about it?” he forced the words out of his mouth and then flinched.

T’Challa graciously pretended not to notice. “Of course. If you do wish to go to Wakanda, you only need to tell us. I’ll share all the information and details with Captain Rogers-- Steve-- and the others as they wish so that we can better help you.”

Bucky nodded and cast a pleading glance at Steve, who smiled approvingly at him. In the tense silence that followed, he rounded the table, giving Tony as wide a berth as possible, before leaving.

Sam tapped Dean on the shoulder and went quietly after him.

“Now,” T’Challa said. “I don’t have anything else, so shall we move on to the Accords?”

“Hey,” Sam said, dropping onto a couch across from Bucky in the living room. “We still haven’t really been properly introduced. I’m Sam Winchester.”

Bucky eyed him for a moment, sizing him up and lingering, to Sam’s amusement, on his hair. Bucky’s hair was longer than Sam’s, but not by much. Despite it’s clean and almost fluffy appearance, his black locks were ragged and almost shaggy, dropping into Bucky’s eyes and forcing him to keep shoving it back out of his face. Sam knew that Bucky had refused to let anyone come near him with scissors but also showed no interest in cutting it himself. Mentally, Sam shrugged-- he was hardly one to talk about long hair, although he knew from experience it had to be annoying keeping it back after a while.

“James Barnes. Everyone calls me Bucky,” the soldier finally replied.

“Why?” Sam asked, genuinely curious.

Bucky’s forehead wrinkled and his face softened into a sort of blank expression the others had come to call his ‘contemplating mode’. It happened a lot when he was trying to remember something, to sort through scattered memories to find something seventy years in the past. “I don’t know,” Bucky said. “Steve probably does, but it makes him sad when I ask him things.”

Sam frowned. He wasn’t here to do a psych eval or anything, but he was mentally taking notes-- if Bucky wasn’t going to ask Steve questions because he thought (probably correctly) it made Steve sad, that was a problem. “You should ask him anyway,” Sam suggested. He hesitated and then offered: “There was a while, when, well. The reason isn’t important. I had a bad patch and I couldn’t always figure out what was real or not. I didn’t want to tell Dean because I knew he’d be mad-- he
gets mad sometimes when he’s scared-- and so I didn’t ask him what was real. It was a bad decision,” Sam told Bucky honestly.

The younger man-- because yeah, if you didn’t count the time frozen, Barnes could only be somewhere in his late twenties or early thirties, just a little younger than Sam-- leaned forwards, clearly quickly caught up in Sam’s words. “What happened?”

“I kept having hallucinations, they got worse and worse, until I had them all the time.” Sam swallowed hard, remembering how horrible those months had been-- Lucifer appearing off and on until he had just been there all the time, sitting nearby and making commentary, occasionally murdering someone or performing some gruesome task only Sam could see. “When I finally told Dean he was really mad, but then it got better.” For a while, Sam though but didn’t add. “It sucked, but everything was a lot clearer-- Dean helped me figure out what was really going on.”

Barnes snorted. “You know, you ain’t subtle at all,” he drawled and then stopped, looking surprised. For a moment, he had been pure Bucky Barnes, circa 1940, before the War and the Train and the Asset.

“It’s not supposed to be subtle,” Sam snarked right back, trying to catch the lightning in a bottle and hold onto it for a brief moment longer.

Barnes smiled faintly at him and then lapsed back into silence, looking out the window with distant eyes.

Sam joined him, watching as water droplets dripped down the glass. It had stopped raining, but everything outside was just as grey, the heavy clouds threatening to drop more nasty weather on all of them at the slightest moment. They watched together as the breeze ruffled the short grass, groups of SHIELD agents occasionally jogging by or a higher up driving a black SUV from the garage out into the world or vice versa.

“If I go to Wakanda, Steve will come with me.”

Sam blinked, startled slightly at Bucky’s abrupt return to T’Challa’s offer. “Probably,” he said.

“But Steve won’t go until the Accords are done,” Bucky continued, shifting his weight on the couch to tuck his socked feet under him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that; it’s for you, after all.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Sam said wryly, “Steve would do just about anything for you, short of-- well, actually, probably not short of murder, if it was really called for.”

“Why?” Bucky asked and Sam resisted the urge to get to his feet and bolt, calling Sam Wilson or someone else more qualified than him to have this conversation.

“Because… you’re basically brothers,” Sam said. “Even if you’re not related. You’re sort of... found family, and you’ve been through a lot together. Also, you’re a good reminder to Steve of the people you both left behind in the forties.”

Bucky sat as if considering this. “But I don’t remember all that. Just parts.”

Sam shrugged. “Steve does. And he wants to help you remember all of it too.”
"But he needs to get the Accords done!" To Sam’s surprise, Bucky’s voice was a little louder now and his eyes were bright. “They’re important. I don’t know all the details, but I know they’re important. For the world, not just for us.”

“Look, Bucky.” Sam considered his words carefully. “Yes, the Accords are important. And yes, if you go to Wakanda --which you should, if you want to-- Steve will probably try to come with you. But the choices are all up to you, even if you don’t want them to be, and nothing Steve does or doesn’t do should stop you from making them.”

Bucky didn’t say anything, just nodded. Sam hesitated, unsure if he should say something more, but by the time he had decided, Bucky had gone back to looking out the window.

“No!” Wanda dropped her pencil down onto her copy of the Sokovia Accords, pointing accusingly at Steve across the table. “Steve, you know that that won’t work-- I know you want to help everyone, but you’ve got to cede to the government at some point. If they don’t want us in their countries, we shouldn’t be able to go in. Look at Lagos!”

“Well, if we hadn’t been in Lagos, Crossbones and his team would have been able to get that biological weapon and take that wherever they wanted. It doesn’t matter what the individual countries want if it’s going to affect the world-- we’ve got a responsibility to stop those people!” Steve argued back.

“Yeah, but Lagos is imperfect as an example,” Tony pointed out. “Because they agreed to let you in. You had to get permission from the government to go after Crossbones in the first place; it wasn’t like you had just decided it was right to go on in and stop them.”

“The problem is we can’t let this go on a disaster by disaster basis,” Sam Wilson said. “Yes, Lagos agreed to let us in for that particular case. But if a government says they don’t want us there, something happens to make them change their mind, and they want a response team, by the time it makes it through all the red tape, it’ll be too late to stop what’s already going down.”

“Okay, shelving that problem for a moment,” Natasha said, “Did we ever make a decision about heroes like Antman? He’s got a kid, I think, and so he’s not going to like the idea of being at the government’s beck and call to go all over the world and fight. But there’s no way he’s going to just give up his suit because of these Accords; his moral compass is too strong. But, that means he’s going to get arrested-- he’ll be breaking international law every time he puts it on.”

Dean rubbed his forehead. The arguments over various aspects of the Accords had been getting gradually louder for the last twenty minutes. It was clear the solid framework of the new laws had a lot of room for interpretation and nobody was happy with the ways they were reading it. An idea that had been forming quietly in the back of his head for several days suddenly took form and Dean sat forwards and interrupted the escalating voices.

“What you really need, if I’m hearing this right, are rings.”

Everyone looked at him blankly. “Look, I have zero idea how laws work because Sam and I spend most of our time breaking them. But what it sounds like you need is something more flexible. Like, a really solid framework for the big picture and then something smaller for everyone else. Like…” He struggled for a moment and then spotted one of the stylus’ on the table, quickly scribbling a diagram on the smart surface and then gesturing to have Friday project it into the air so they could all see it.
was a big circle with the words “international/countries” written next to it and filled with a series of smaller circles labeled “heroes.”

“The Accords aren’t going to work for everyone if you try to set it in stone for everyone. There’s too many different situations. But if you made something solid for the countries and government, like ‘yes or no, do you allow us into your county as a group, how much each individual country wants to limit activity, do they want the Avengers as a whole, or just their own local superheroes’.”

“And then,” T’Challa said, catching on and looking at the diagram Dean drew, “each person who would be affected by this, the ‘heroes,’ would have to set down in writing what they are willing to do. Are they, like Daredevil, only willing to work in a small area? Are they willing to be called overseas? What lines will they cross and what won’t they do?”

“Right,” Dean said, pleased someone was getting it. “So you would have places like Wakanda, for example, where you would have both local superheroes doing what they’re comfortable with and then you’d be willing or unwilling to let the Avengers in to deal with a bigger problem.”

Tony leaned back meditatively in his chair. “It’ll be complex. And it’s not perfect.”

“No,” Steve agreed. “But it’s a start. What if--”

“Boss, there’s trouble,” Friday cut in, her cool and slightly metallic voice at antithesis to the words. “Two agents down outside, reason unknown. They just collapsed. They’re too far from the nearest sensor package for me to determine cause.”

All talk of the Accords abandoned, everyone was out of their seats in less than a second, bottlenecking at the door in a bid to get through as fast as possible. Tony was out ahead, Dean right behind him as they rounded corners, heading for the nearest door to scope out the scene before fully suiting up. Possibilities ran through Tony’s mind, each worse than the last; nerve gasses, neurotoxins, plain old bullets…

His heart dropped as they reached the final stretch and there, ahead of them, were Sam and Bucky, leaving the building even as Tony cried “Sam, NO! You don’t know what’s out--” But Sam wasn’t dropping dead to the ground so they followed him out, almost a dozen pairs of highly trained eyes laser focused on two figures in black lying on the ground, hands and arms twisted unnaturally around themselves and foam at the corners of their mouths. By the time Tony, Dean, and the rest of the team sprinted up, Sam was already kneeling next to the first man, fingers at the pale throat. He shook his head.

“Dead. It happened fast; we saw it from the window. Both of them jogged over here and then a moment later just dropped.”

Sam rocked back on his heels and stood. Steve stepped forwards to get a closer look.

“Hold on,” Natasha said. “They aren’t SHIELD. Those aren’t our uniforms. I mean, same color, but I don’t know either of the agents and there’s no emblem.”

“This is cyanide,” Steve said. “Think they’re Hydra?”

“No,” T’Challa said. “There’s a chance, of course, but I would think that they are part of Zemo’s pl-”

T’Challa was cut off by Tony, who, from nowhere threw himself at Barnes. Steve took a step forwards to intervene but by the time that happened, the muffled gunshots had echoed across the field, the sound almost covered by the sounds of Tony’s body knocking Bucky to the ground and out
of harm’s way.

When Dean thought about it afterwards, it always seemed as if the whole thing had taken long minutes or even hours instead of just seconds; Tony had been next to him, shoulders high and tense, eyes roaming from T’Challa down to the two men on the ground. And then he had moved, faster than any person had any right to move, his big, brilliant brain putting together the information T’Challa was giving them about Siberia and the foreknowledge he had about the Winter Soldier and the exact location they were standing in and the two men dead of their own accord right there and the little niggling corner of his mind telling him the flash of movement up high in his peripheral vision was more than just something shiny through the trees-- all of that input coming together in a lightning bolt of realization and jolting him into action, leaping forward to knock the target off his balance and hopefully, just enough out of the way. Dean felt as if all the noises were ringing in his ears-- Barnes’ grunt as Tony knocked the wind out of him, the clank of Tony’s expensive watch hitting the metal hand, Steve’s surprised exclamation as he reacted, the faint crack of gunfire carried over a distance, and then, and then, a horrible fraction of a second later, the wet thump of bullets hitting solid flesh and bone and something more metallic and hollow that happened to be sitting in the center of Tony Stark’s chest.

But no matter how Dean remembered it, it had to be only a handful of seconds and then everyone was moving; Wanda, Natasha, and Vision were gone towards the trees in a flash, Steve was roughly hauling Bucky out from under Tony’s sprawling legs so they could flip the genius onto his back, Sam was shoving Steve out of the way to get to Tony’s other side. Dean hovered helplessly for a half a second-- what did they do, there was too much shit in Tony’s chest already, supports and struts and still a shard or two of shrapnel and a pacemaker and now bullets and too much warm blood was coating his hands as he and Sam both scrambled to try and stop any more of that precious blood from gushing out of Tony. Rhodes and T’Challa were kneeling next to Sam and Dean respectively, Rhodes holding his best friend’s head steady as he could with hands that were less than steady themselves. Sam was babbling across from Dean, words falling from his mouth in a steady flow-- “Cas, god, Cas we need you here now, please we need you, Tony, just hang on okay man? Just hold on for us, Cas, we need you, Cas--”

But Cas didn’t appear and Tony made a soft choking sound, barely audible over Sam’s litany, and his hand pushed against Dean’s thigh. Dean abandoned his attempts at first aid in favor of reaching down to grip Tony’s hands, his cousins’ fingers tightening painfully around Dean’s own, slick blood making the contact difficult to maintain. T’Challa took Dean’s place at Tony’s chest, fingers cautiously probing through the shreds of clothing and flesh. His hands and Sam’s slowed to a stop and Sam reached out to take Tony’s other hand with one of his own, using the other to push back Tony’s hair where Rhodey’s hands had mussed it.

Dean met Tony’s eyes and his breath caught-- they were full of so much exhaustion and pain and acceptance that Dean almost couldn’t bear it. “Hey,” he said to Tony, leaning down closer into Tony’s limited field of view. “We’ll look after Pepper for you. Don’t wait around, okay?” he tried to grin, but it felt horribly mangled. “Trust us, heaven’s great. We’ll get Cas to look out for you. And we’ll see you on the other side.”

Tony’s lips twitched up in response and Dean had to clamp his lips together to stop himself from begging Tony to just stay with us but a moment later it didn’t matter. Tony blinked once, slowly, and as he opened his eyes the light slowly left them, the spark of genius and humor and kindness and life fading away until all that remained was an empty house with no one home.

Dean looked up to find Sam looking at him, face full of despair. “What’ll we tell Pepper?”

His breath caught; despite his words to Tony a moment ago, he hadn’t even thought.
“I don’t-- we have to.”

“I’ll tell her.” Rhodey cut in, his face drawn and grey with shock and grief. “I’ll go now. In the armor, I mean. And I’ll bring her out--”

“Zemo--” Steve cut in but Dean was already shaking his head.

“The public can’t know. You can’t blame it on him. It’s gotta be something else, a training accident or something. Your reputation depends on thinking nobody can get to the Avengers and the last thing you need right now is every supervillian coming after you all.”

“What about the funeral?” T’Challa asked.

“We’ll, if Pepper agrees, we’ll take care of it,” Sam said. He found Dean with his eyes, grief and hot anger battling the need for cooler heads to prevail. Dean nodded and Sam’s eyes swept the trees for a moment. “He deserves a hunter’s funeral.”

Rhodey nodded shortly. “I’ll tell her.” He pried his hands away from Tony’s head, brushing his best friend’s hair back with shaking fingers before swiftly standing and almost running for the Compound.

A shot and then a shout from a distance drew their attention and the all turned, Sam and Dean still gripping Tony’s hands, to see a flurry of movement at the base of a tree just beyond the treeline. A moment later, Natasha, Vision, and Wanda were approaching, Wanda using her powers to convey the limp body of a nondescript man in front of them.

He wasn’t very impressive; blondish hair cut fairly close and pale skin covering a boxy face. Although he was almost prone in the air, he gave the impression of being rather short but with broad shoulders and a square shape.

“Is he dead?” Clint, who was standing with Sam Wilson back behind T’Challa, asked bluntly.

“No,” Wanda said. “He tried to shoot himself when he saw us approach but fumbled the weapon. It fired into the tree when it hit the ground and we retrieved him. I believe he hit his head as we were… extracting him from the branches.” Her voice indicated she wasn't particularly sorry about his possible injuries.

“What do we do with him?” Vision asked, directing his words towards T’Challa, technically the person with the most authority.

They waited for him to answer, Bucky and Steve’s faces blank masks as they looked at Zemo, who had just tried to shoot Bucky.

“We lock him up,” T’Challa said finally. “Give him to the government, the American or the Wakandan. “We will take him, if you wish. There will be a trial, of course, but I think I can assure you it will be short, and not in his favor.”

Dean nodded grimly. “Do it.”

T’Challa nodded and pulled out his phone, stepping away from the group and speaking rapidly in Wakandan to someone on the other end.

“Sam,” Dean’s voice said and Sam’s attention was pulled from the King back to his brother and the body of their cousin lying between them. Sam nodded and stood smoothly as Dean did the same, lifting Tony between them.
“Natasha,” Sam said. “Could you…?” She looked puzzled for a moment and then nodded her understanding, walking to his side and taking the weight of Tony’s body he had been holding. Silently, the pair began to carry Tony off, his head lolling sickeningly between them. “Clint, Sam, you’re with me.” Sam turned without seeing if they were following, scrubbing his blood soaked palms on his jeans and leaving the matted patch of grass where Tony had died behind.

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Everything after that seemed to happen in short bursts of heavy emotion.

They were nearly ready when Pepper arrived by car with Rhodey and Charlie almost three hours later. Pepper’s face was white, making her freckles stand out against her skin, and her eyes were red and wet. She was clutching Charlie’s hand like a lifeline and the moment she saw Dean in the doorway, she half collapsed against his side. Dean pulled her close for a long moment, feeling her whole body shake silently. “Did Rhodey ask?” he questioned quietly and she nodded.

“How it,” she said, voice unsteady and muffled by his shoulder. “He would have wanted you to.”

“How you want to see him?”

Pepper hesitated, then nodded again. Dean carefully disentangled her from his jacket—clean, and he had never been more glad he had taken a quick moment to change—and wrapped an arm around her, guiding her down the hall to the last of the guest rooms, where Tony lay in state.

He didn’t look as bad, a new shirt covering his mangled chest and the blood having been wiped from his face and arms. Natasha had run a hand through his hair, sticking it up like it often was when he left the workshop after a long day. Tony’s eyes were closed, but it was wrong seeing him look so still; Tony was never still, even when he was sleeping, he was shifting and moving. His legs and lower torso were already wrapped in the clean white sheet, a bunch of dill and rosemary loosely held in his hands.

Pepper was crying again, tears sheeting down her face. Dean paused at the door to give her a moment, watching as she silently crossed and sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching out to cup her husband’s cheek.

“Hey, Tony,” she whispered, so quietly Dean almost didn’t hear it. “I’ll miss you.”

They stayed like that for an indeterminate amount of time, before Dean stepped back up and crossed to sit behind her, pulling her to his chest again. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be,” Pepper said. He couldn’t see her face, but he could hear that she was trying to smile a little, for him. “It wasn’t your fault, or Sam’s. At all.”

Dean couldn’t come up with a response so he simply squeezed her shoulder and used his other hand to rub her back gently. There was a creak in the doorway and Dean looked up to see Sam stepping into the room, Rhodey and Charlie right behind him. His brother crossed to them, standing so his leg pressed up against Pepper’s where they hung off the bed. Rhodey tucked his chin against his chest and was taking deceptively steady and even breaths; Charlie came up and took Sam’s hand.

Dean mimicked her and took Pepper’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “Are you ready?”

She nodded again and Dean looked to Charlie; by some unspoken agreement, the redhead released Sam and came to take Pepper by the arm, leaving Sam free to help Dean cover Tony’s face and torso quickly and neatly in white cloth.
Everyone else was waiting at the edge of the treeline as Sam, Dean, and Rhodey crossed the open empty space under the grey sky, bearing Tony’s body between them and with Pepper and Charlie behind them. It was silent as they laid their burden down on the pyre of logs and sticks Sam, Sam, and Clint had made earlier and Dean, without fanfare, lit the fire.

Pepper let out a unintelligible noise and fell to her knees.

Sam looked to Steve, who stepped forwards and held out one of Tony’s best bottles of whiskey. The hunter took it, and dumped a generous amount onto the pyre, one last salute as the flames rose and engulfed their friend, their teammate, their cousin, their husband, and their friend.

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“It is with deep sadness and profound grief that we must tell you that Tony Stark, Owner of Stark Industries and the hero known as Iron Man, along with four government agents, was involved this afternoon in a plane accident and has died.”

A burst of noise from the assembled press-- the young blonde woman, Pepper’s competent assistant, waved them down. “We won’t be taking questions at this time. Mr Stark was returning from a brief trip to Vienna when the plane he and four agents were flying on experienced a technical malfunction. Mr Stark communicated with us and indicated he was unable to fix the issue with the equipment and time available and their plane crashed over the northern Atlantic ocean at approximately two thirty this afternoon. While we are still searching, preliminary runs of the area have found only small pieces of debris and have yet to recover any remains or find further information about the cause of the crash.

A small, private memorial for Mr Stark will be held later this week. Further details will be released as we learn more. Thank you.”

Pepper’s assistant stepped back as the media exploded into questions.

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T’Challa nodded. “Pack whatever you wish, we’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Wait, we can’t leave tomorrow,” Steve said, stepping forwards to stand next to Steve and crossing his arms. “We can’t leave until the Accords are done.”

“No,” Bucky cut in, looking at Steve. “You can’t. But I can.”

“Bucky…”

“Steve.” Bucky rolled his eyes, looking more like that kid from Brooklyn than Steve had seen him look in a long time. “You have to stay here. The Accords are important. For you, for the world. But if you’re worrying about me, you’re not going to focus on them.”

“Don’t worry, Steve,” T’Challa said. “We’ll take care of Mr Barnes. He will, of course, be free to contact you whenever, and we won’t let him do anything dire medically.”

Steve still looked worried, but didn’t move as Bucky moved to stand next to the king. “Where do you get these crazy idea, Bucky,” he asked, forcing himself to smile.

“Just some good advice someone gave me,” Bucky replied.

Steve hesitated, then nodded. “Be careful.”
“Steve, I’m not leaving right this exact moment,” Bucky pointed out.

“Still.”

“Besides, you should be worrying about the Accords,” Bucky reminded him. Again. “Just don’t do anything stupid until I get back.”

An echo of a warm evening in a noisy fair—don’t do anything stupid— and Steve couldn’t stop the smile as he replied. “How can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you.”

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Charlie planted one hand on the roof of the Impala and leaned down to speak through the open window. “Be careful, you two. Don’t forget, whenever you figure out how to stop the Darkness, you’ve got me, Pepper, and a whole team of superheroes ready to help you out so give us a call.”

“We will,” Sam promised. “Look after Pepper for us? We’ll try to stop by more often, now that…”

’Now that she doesn’t have Tony anymore,’ was unsaid, but not unheard.

“I will,” Charlie promised in turn. “See you soon, then.”

“See you soon,” Dean smiled before cranking up the music and rolling up the window.

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Three weeks later, the revised Accords were beginning their first run through the vicious claws and teeth of an international council and were, so far, coming out without too much damage.

Three weeks later, Sam and Dean Winchester were hunting Werepies/Nachzehrer in Oregon.

Three weeks later, Charlie Bradbury sat in her new office, checking the code one of the young guys working with her had just sent and nodded approvingly before plugging it into her own set of the newest Stark Industries security software.

Three weeks later, a young man sat in a waiting room outside Pepper Potts-Stark’s office a backpack held on his lap and his brown hair slightly disheveled. Heels clicked and the office door opened, the woman herself coming out, the picture of business professional. Pepper Potts-Stark smiled at him.

“Peter Parker? Nice to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve been crying, pls drink some water:)

Thank you all SO MUCH for the reviews, messages, and ideas; they mean the world. Finals are indeed over, and (most of them) went well! Good news-- if my planning is any indication, this story isn’t ending anytime soon! Additionally, once this is done, I’m possibly going to write a sort of companion series of things I thought of later are sort of missing pieces from earlier in the story.
“Oh! Sully says hi,” Sam blurted out and then groaned. That was possibly the most idiotic thing that could have randomly come out of his mouth. It had to be the concussion or the meds talking. Then again, Dean had a concussion too and you didn’t hear him blurting out weird crap.

“Sully.” Clint said.

“Sully,” Dean agreed. “Your childhood invisible friend.”

“Yeah, I know who Sully is.” Clint said, then shook his head like there was water in his ears. “Wait. I’m… how do you know about Sully?”

“Oh, Sam!” Sully jogged after them. “Dean! Wait!” They turned around to see him reappear. “I almost forgot!”

“What?” Dean asked.

“You guys know Clint and Bruce, right?” Sully asked enthusiastically.

“Bruce… Banner?” Sam answered bewilderedly. “And Clint Barton?”

“Yeah, that’s them!” Sully grinned brightly. “Clint was one of my kids! And Bruce was with my friend Daphne! Say hi to them for us!”

“He’s Sam’s childhood invisible friend, too,” Dean said, the smirk audible even though Sam wasn’t looking at him.

“Ah… okay then?” Clint finally said. “Look, Sam. No offense, but I think you probably need to go back to bed if you’re going to start talking about my childhood imaginary friend. That’s probably the concussion.”

“No, no,” Dean said. “Sully’s real. Weird as hell and I can’t believe I had to talk to him, but real.”

Clint sighed. “How come every time I talk to you guys I learn some weird new thing?”

Hours before…

Clint was swearing profusely when his phone rang-- despite the very early hour, he was working on repairing the door to his sister Laura’s barn and he had, despite his title of ‘world’s best marksman,’ managed to hit his thumb, instead of the nail, with the hammer.
He dug his phone out of his pocket with one hand, scattering sawdust everywhere and shaking his free hand in pain as he thumbed open the call.

“‘Lo?” he asked.

There was no answer.

“Hello?” Clint repeated, pulling the phone away from his ear to look at the caller ID: Sam Winchester. “Sam?” he asked.

Fumbling, he turned up the volume on the side of the phone and checked his hearing aids: both on. He could hear, faint and ill-defined with distance, the shuffling of fabric on the other side followed by a series of thumps that sounded like someone was walking on an old wooden floor. The call was punctuated with crackles of static and hazy reception, but that didn’t stop Clint from clearly hearing the harsh breathing that was filling the air or the low gasp of pain. “Sam!” Clint called a second time, but the phone must not have been loud enough because the younger Winchester didn’t respond. There was another cry of pain, this one louder, and then the signal cut out.

Immediately, Clint was moving. He quickly ducked into the kitchen and scribbled a note, telling Laura there was something he needed to go do and he probably wouldn’t be home for a bit and then he jogged for the car, starting a trace program Natasha had insisted Tony install on all their phones. It could find any call source, if the line was still live or not, providing it hadn’t been too long since the initial call. Clint slid into the car, twisting to check the back seat-- two quivers and a bow. Good.

His phone chimed and a robotic voice spoke. “Coordinates to previous call are 37.530923 North, -78.269999 West. This is a match to the greater Bear Creek State Park, Cumberland, Virginia area.”

“All right,” Clint said out loud, hitting the gas. “Let’s break some speed limits.” He watched the speedometer needle shoot up and reached for his phone again, hitting speed dial and waiting for Steve to answer; he would be awake, despite the hour.

Finally, Steve picked up. “Hey Clint. What’s up?”

“Hi. We’ve got problems. Maybe. I don’t know yet, but for now I’m assuming we have an issue. Or several.”

There was a long moment of silence “… what?” Steve finally replied.

“Sam called. Winchester, that is,” Clint elaborated and explained the nature of the phone call and how he was driving out to find the brothers. “I don’t know if they need backup or not. Or it’s just one of their hunts gone wrong or if it’s part of this whole crappy ‘darkness’ thing,” Clint continued. “So I’m giving you a heads up and a stand by-- I’ll call you back if I can as soon as I get there and figure out what’s going on. Otherwise, ask Friday what’s happening and she can keep you updated.”

“Roger that.” Steve responded. “We’ll call Pepper, tell her what’s happening. Be careful, Clint, and say hello to the guys for us.”

“Will do. Call you later,” Clint ended the conversation.

Six hours and twenty two minutes later, Clint was speeding over the edges of a series of rolling, tree covered hills when the small medical center finally came into view. His phone had changed his course several times over the last few hours as Sam had, apparently, slowly made his way across a dozen miles of woods. He let out a quick sigh of relief as he rounded the last corner; immediately in front of the clinic was the Winchester’s black Impala. Clint skidded to a halt next to it and jumped out of his car, taking a quiver and bow with him and dropping his phone in his pocket. To his
surprise, his keen eyes could easily make out the keys to the Impala, still in the car’s ignition. He tested the Impala’s handle, and his surprise and worry only increased as the door opened. The archer quickly leaned in across the driver’s side, pulling the keys from the ignition and slipping them into his own pocket. As he pulled back, his right hand, which had been bracing him against the driver’s seat, slipped and his heart dropped-- the seat and now his hand was covered in just-congealing blood.

The alarm bells in Clint’s head were getting louder and louder-- who drove here, Sam or Dean? Were they alone? Or were both brothers hurt so badly that whoever was driving was simply the less injured of the two, despite the quantity of blood?

He spun on the spot, closing the car door and jogging up the steps into the hospital. The door had barely closed behind him when a gunshot rang out, echoing through the halls. Clint’s hurried jog turned into a flat out sprint, almost leading him to collide with a pair of nurses who looked like they were coming from the second floor and across the building, respectively. To their credit, neither looked too fazed that a mysterious man carrying a bow and arrows had just almost run them over, just continued on, the man carrying a trauma kit and the woman pulling on a pair of latex gloves as they ran. Clint pulled an arrow out of the quiver as he followed them around the corner, coming to a halt for a split second and taking in the scene in front of him.

A young blonde woman was on her knees at the end of the hall to the left, one hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face and running the length of a cut that had been pulled together with small medical strips. The body of an older woman in medical scrubs and a white coat lay against the wall, blood pooling out from under her. A few feet closer to Clint, a man in ranger’s clothing was face down on the floor, arms and legs akimbo and a gruesome, gaping hole all the way through his chest. Next to him, Dean Winchester was shoving the body of another young man off of him, the bearded man’s hands featuring elongated fingers and sharp nails that were all coated in blood and a bullet wound in his back. Dean was struggling to sit up, rubbing his neck and taking shallow, painful looking breaths.

Sam Winchester was on the floor nearest to Clint and the male nurse made a beeline to him first. His legs were under him awkwardly and it was clear that he had just collapsed to the floor, one red coated hand holding the pistol that Clint would guess had shot the werewolf (Clint thought-- he had done some research since they had first met the Winchesters). But it wasn’t until he started towards Dean-- stowing the arrow back in his quiver-- and then glanced back at Sam that his heart felt like it had been grabbed by an icy hand; from this new angle, he could see why Sam hadn’t been talking when he called Clint and how there had been so much blood in the car. The hand not holding the gun was clamped over his lower abdomen, closer to the right side than the center. Blood was seeping out around his hands and the multiple layers of fabric that Sam was wearing were all soaked through.

Clint winced; he had seen a lot of wounds in his time and he knew that had to hurt.

But Clint forced himself to keep going-- the second nurse was at the end of the hall, having checked the three bodies for life signs and now had her hands full of a sobbing young woman. Dean had finished forcing himself into a sitting position, one hand on his side. “Broken ribs?” Clint asked, recognizing the protective posture.

“Yeah,” Dean said, voice hoarse. “Five of ‘em.” Suddenly, Dean seemed to realize who was kneeling in front of him in an old t-shirt and jeans. “Clint? What-- How did--”

“Hey, Dean,” Clint replied, smiling slightly.

“Why’re--” Dean stopped to cough and grimace, rubbing his throat. “Why’re you here?”

“Sam called me.” He reached out to run a hand lightly over the bruising that was already forming on
Dean’s throat. “On accident, I think,” he added, as Dean’s eyes flicked behind Clint to his brother.

Clint turned to see the male nurse and Sam barely managing to get Sam into a wheelchair. Sam was white as a sheet and looked a little out of it, but he managed to give Clint a half wave before the nurse wheeled him quickly off into a nearby room. “Dean. Was it a case? Or…” Dean was already shaking his head.

“Just a case. Nothing else. A case gone wrong. There are a few more werewolves out there, I think, but they can wait a couple more hours and then I can go out and take care of them. Already got the one that shot Sam, and his partner.” Dean coughed again.

“You won’t.” Clint stared Dean down even as he helped him slowly to his feet. “I want the full story, I need to call off the Avengers, and you need to rest. You look almost as bad as Sam. What else is wrong?”

Dean opened and closed his mouth and looked away under the guise of forcing himself to stand up straight, starting down the hall until Clint stopped him with a hand. “Dean, it’s my job to read people and I know something’s not right. What else is wrong besides your ribs?”

Dean wouldn’t look Clint in the eye. “I have a concussion. I was on a lot of meds. And… I thought Sam was dead.”

Somehow, Clint knew those sentences meant more than survivor’s guilt and post-terror adrenaline. “Dean, what did you do?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Dean.”

“It doesn’t matter, Clint.” They had made it to the room Sam and the nurse had vanished into. Sam was on the bed. The nurse had put on a pair of gloves and was cautiously cutting off Sam’s shirts. Sam was clearly out of it-- his eyes were closed but at the sound of their footsteps he blinked them open to reveal eyes glassy with exhaustion. Now that he was closer, Clint could see how bad Sam really looked; besides the obvious, there were shallow cuts littering his arms and bruises across his mouth, jaw, and neck.

“Hey,” Dean said, crossing the room and leaving Clint in the doorway. “Nice job, Sam.”

“Thanks,” Sam got out, giving Dean a small grin despite the obvious pain he was in.

The nurse looked up at Dean. “Are you related?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Dean replied. “He’s my brother.”

“Great,” the nurse said, shimmying the last of the fabric out from under Sam and using his free hand to clamp a piece of gauze over Sam’s lower abdomen. His eyes lingered over Sam’s shoulders, down his chest, and to the new injury, taking in the extensive scarring and new bruising, not to mention the bullet hole. “I’m going to need some medical history. I’ve paged another clinic, they’re sending over another team to help out.”

“Dean, I need to go call Steve,” Clint said. “We’ll take care of the bills.”

Dean nodded absently and stepped up to take over putting pressure on Sam’s stomach so the nurse could go to a nearby cabinet. Sam closed his eyes and Clint cast a wary look around the room, checking out security, before leaving to go find whoever was in charge.
Three hours later, they were ready to go, albeit somewhat against medical orders.

There had been a lot of paperwork, a lot of arguing, and Clint had needed to talk down at least three people who were angry that he was carrying a bow around a medical center.

But at the end of it, almost everything was settled. Sam had been patched up, given some heavy painkillers and more than a quart of blood. Clint had paid the remaining staff from the SHIELD accounts, with commendations for a job well done, and then took a moment to call Laura and tell her he was fine but probably wouldn’t be home that night. Two SHIELD agents showed up, sent by Steve, who took care of the dead and swore everyone present to secrecy (and, Clint thought, might have done some recruiting; he would have sworn that he saw the levelheaded nurse who had been taking care of Sam pocket a SHIELD business card). Clint had to soothe some ruffled feathers about something concerning Dean, the girl, and a number of stolen drugs, although, to his frustration, he hadn’t been able to get details from anyone and would probably have to pry the story out of a taciturn and tired Dean. Sam, although he had been half unconscious for most of the time, managed to convey to his brother that he had killed the other two werewolves the brothers had been hunting. Clint could see Dean wanted more information about this as badly as Clint did, but he didn’t ask.

Dean managed to convince Clint that he was okay to drive-- the good nurse, after handing Sam over to a new doctor, had forced the older hunter to submit to a quick examination of his broken ribs and had passed him a subscription with a warning eyebrow that Clint didn’t miss. The medical staff, in fact, didn’t particularly want either of the brothers to leave yet but apparently could tell that the men weren’t going to wait. But despite this, Dean argued, he would be fine until they got back to the hotel.

At which point Clint drew the line.

“’Nope!’” he said cheerfully, supporting a drugged and slightly wobbly Sam as they approached the front steps. “You’re coming to the Compound.”

Dean protested, but Clint was ready.

“Come on. We can keep an eye on Sam for a day or two while you both recover. I want to hear the whole story here-- I’ve been waiting for almost ten hours to find out what’s going on. And I’m pretty sure Steve called Pepper and now she and Charlie are coming out as well. It’s almost Pepper’s birthday, and she’d love to see you…”

This, more than anything, might have broken Dean’s weakening resolve.

They hadn’t seen Pepper and Charlie, much less all the Avengers, with any great frequency since Tony had passed. Tony’s death itself had been hard for all of them, even the Winchesters-- maybe especially the Winchesters. They had seen a lot of people, themselves included, come back from death before. But it had never happened after the deceased’s body had been burned on a funeral pyre, even if someone made a deal. Castiel, in a short and painful conversation with the Winchesters, had confirmed that Tony was in heaven. The brothers had passed this on to Pepper and the others and while it didn’t make anyone less sad, it made them less willing to look for a way to drag Tony back to the land of the living.

Everyone had also been incredibly busy for the last several months, each group burying themselves in their work. The Avengers, headed by Steve and supported by Clint, had presented their first copies of the Accords, with all the caveats therein and were now keeping sharp and watchful eyes on them as they worked through variable levels of bureaucracy. Charlie was firmly embedded in Stark
Industries, although she had come out to check up on the Compound’s internet security and give Friday’s extension a quick going over once.

Sam and Dean had had to stage a minor intervention for Pepper only a handful of weeks after Tony’s death. She had been working harder than ever, as she was now the CEO but also the owner of the vast majority of Stark Industries, per Tony’s will. She had thrown herself into the company, working to bring the stocks back up after their plummet at the news of Tony’s death. And she had personally recruited a young man named Peter to her R&D team, although neither Sam or Dean had met the kid.

Charlie had called them about six weeks after Tony’s death and they had driven out to the tower right away. It had taken less work than they had thought; she had looked, well, not great when they arrived, dark circles under her eyes and pale skin not doing her any favors. But at the sight of Sam’s black eye and Dean’s careful, slightly limping gait, she had forced them (and herself) to sit down, eat some good food, and relax for a weekend. She seemed much calmer afterwards, some color had come back into her face, and she seemed more ready to face the world. After that Sam and Dean made a point of swinging by every once in a while when they were able, just to make sure she was okay and to press forced relaxation upon her.

It had been more than a month since they had last visited, though, so Clint was pretty sure the idea of checking up on Pepper might have been the straw that broke Dean’s resolve.

“Fine. We’ll follow you there.” Dean agreed as he opened the door and helped Clint lower his exhausted brother into the passenger seat.

Clint had never been happier for the positioning of the Compound; the back roads meant just about no traffic and they were able to make the drive in just under four hours, Clint leading and Dean not far behind.

Fortunately, Steve had pulled the team into action; as soon as Clint had told him that Sam and Dean were coming, he had called Pepper and then begun preparations. There would be food, medical supplies as needed, and clean bedrooms for both brothers, Clint, Charlie, and Pepper.

The sun was setting as they pulled up to the Compound, an orange glow backlighting the building and reflecting off the edges of the steel and glass structure. They parked their respective cars, Dean looking mournfully at the dried blood still smeared over the Impala’s side, door, seats, and wheel. Clint stepped to the back of the car before Dean could, and it was a true testament to how tired Dean was and how much his ribs must have been hurting that he didn’t stop Clint from pulling their two bags out of the trunk and slinging them over his shoulder.

“Hey,” Clint heard Dean say softly to Sam, leaning into the passenger side of the car. He frowned; he had hoped that Sam would sleep in the car but based on the tight lines around his eyes and the set of his lips there had been very little sleep, conversation, or relaxation during their trip. “Hang on a few minutes, okay? We’ll get you to the living room and then we’ll check your side, get you some grub, and then you can sleep, okay?”

Sam must have agreed because a minute later, he was standing next to Dean, bracing himself against the car. His meds must have really worn off in the last few hours of driving because his face was set and lines of pain were worn around his eyes and the tight corners of his mouth.
“You need a hand?” Dean asked, his voice rougher than usual from the attempted strangling and his own shoulders slumped.

Sam took a deep breath, then winced as it stretched his stitches. “I’m fine.”

“Sure,” Dean said looking doubtful. He didn’t make a move to support Sam, though, and a moment later his brother seemed to gather his resolve and was moving towards the living area under his own steam, although Dean hovered slightly behind and to the side.

Clint saw them pause, out of the corner of his eye, just before entering the last sets of doors, both brothers, despite the injuries to their chests, stomachs, and ribs, taking a moment to pause and prepare to present themselves as best they could, chins rising and shoulders straightening. He mentally shook his head and rolled his eyes fondly; that stubborn Winchester pride was a force to be reckoned with.

“We’re here,” Clint announced somewhat unnecessarily as he came through the door to the kitchen and living area, crossing to deposit Sam and Dean’s bags next to the door on the other side leading to the bedrooms. He took a quick moment to scope out the room; Steve was at the stove next to a huge pot that contained some sort of chicken-y soup, from the smell. Sam Wilson was next to him cutting up a loaf of bread and Wanda was next to him pulling bowls from the cabinets.

Pepper and Charlie were on the sofa, Pepper’s feet tucked up under her, her hair in a neat bun and her navy skirt wrinkling from the way she was sitting. Natasha entered a moment later, first aid kit in hand.

“Where’s Vision and Rhodey?” Clint asked.

“They’re at the tower,” Pepper said, “making some modifications and doing some repairs on Rhodey’s armor. He leaves for Langley Air Force Base in a few days on a mission. Where are the boys?” she asked in turn.

“We’re here,” Dean’s voice responded from the door, looking amused. “Don’t worry your pretty little self about us.” He smiled at Pepper to let her know that it was, in fact, a compliment before reaching out to touch Sam’s shoulder, steering him away from the deep chair he was headed for and towards the tall island chairs. “Tall chair first, injured boy.”

“You’re one to talk,” Sam huffed but eased himself down onto the lightly padded stool. He started undoing buttons, looking over at the extensive set of medical supplies Natasha was unpacking on the newly cleaned table. Pepper stood and came over to join them, settling next to Sam while Charlie joined Wanda in finding dishes.

“You’re right, Sam,” Clint said, fixing Dean with a faux glare. “You too, Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes but took the seat on Sam’s other side, starting to gingerly pull off his own shirt as well. He was ready to go before Sam, taking off his last layer to reveal layers of extensive and painful looking bruising up and down his torso which almost seemed to lead to the rings of purple fingerprints around his neck.

“Wow,” Natasha said from the sink where she was washing her hands.

“Yeah?” Dean asked.

“I mean, you’ve got some impressive colors going on there,” Sam Wilson agreed. “How many are broken?”

“Five,” Dean grunted as Clint prodded a particularly painful-looking spot on his side. “And a few
more bruised.”

“But you almost got strangled to death,” Clint helpfully reminded him, gesturing at his throat.

“What?” Pepper gasped.

“It’s been a long day,” Dean told her, voice rasping in a way that was not very reassuring. “Or maybe two days.”

“Well,” Sam said, as he finally got his last layer of clothing off and let Natasha start picking at the bandage on his side and stomach. “We started the hunt a week ago, if you really want to think of it that way. Otherwise, it all really went down hill about… oh, two o’clock yesterday morning?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Dean agreed. “Clint said you called him, when was that?”

Sam looked confused. “I didn’t call—” he gasped slightly as Natasha peeled off the bandage and exposed his stomach to the air. Everyone winced; his stomach and torso, like Dean’s, was covered in bruises, but Sam’s focused on the area below his ribs and to the side, where the flesh was red, raw, and stretched tight, a line of eleven stitches holding together the sides of the bullet wound and the white mark of what looked like a burn intersecting it. “Ow,” he breathed on the exhale, closing his eyes.

“Oh, Sam,” Pepper said from behind him, reaching out to gently touch his hand with hers.

“No kidding,” Charlie said. “Sam, what happened?”

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, “I’ve been waiting for the whole story for, like, ever and I would really like to know.”

“Can we have half an hour, or something?” Sam begged. “Please?”

“Fine,” Clint said, teasingly. “If you want to eat and get some meds in you, I suppose we can allow that.”

But it was soon clear they weren’t getting a full story out of either of the exhausted brothers.

Dean had asked Sam if he wanted to move to a more comfortable chair. Sam—his face pinched from Natasha’s quick bandage change despite her care and still waiting for the painkillers and the antibiotics Clint had handed him and Dean to kick in—had eyed the twenty feet between himself and the lounge area and had declined, opting instead to practically inhale the bowl of soup and thick slices of bread Wanda and Steve passed him.

Taking his own bowl, Dean had relaxed into the chair his brother had passed over, eating almost as quickly as Sam and making idle chat with Sam Wilson and Wanda about how the Accords were progressing.

He had started to drift, the pleasant sensations of a full stomach of homemade food, a warm room, and the dulling of his aching ribs making it hard to focus on the conversation and easier to remember that he hadn’t slept in more than forty eight hours and precious little the days before that, even. It was as if he were floating slightly; time seemed to be flowing like water and he wasn’t sure how long they had been sitting there but he blinked and his bowl was empty and on the coffee table, although he didn’t remember putting it there. Another long blink and it had been taken somewhere else and the table was empty again. A third blink and he forced himself to look at his phone; it had been nearly half an hour since he had first settled into the chair.
Dean was roused a little more fully between blinks by Pepper softly calling Sam’s name. The older brother rolled his head sideways and his frown relaxed into a bittersweet smile; Sam was asleep at the table. Jaw propped upright by one hand and elbow on the counter, Sam’s hair was falling into his closed eyes. His relaxed face, the small crinkle between his eyebrows, always reminded Dean of how Sam had slept in the Impala when they were both younger; arms tight around himself, one free leg always seeming to shove the blankets off.

“Sam,” Pepper reached out to gently shake Sam’s shoulder and this, more than his name, seemed to wake the hunter. It was indicative of how tired he really was-- sleep had been rare for both of them, recently-- that he didn’t jolt into consciousness, the military awareness that followed him and Dean even in their sleep worn off by pain and hours of fighting for survival.

“Hey,” Sam said, lifting his elbow from the table and scrubbing at his face with his hand. Dean could almost hear the movement from across the room; both brothers needed a shower and a shave, their faces scruffy.

“Hey,” Pepper smiled back. “You should go to bed. I know it’s only…” she checked her watch. “Eight-ish, but you could use the sleep. You can shower and tell us the whole story in the morning.”

“You too,” Wanda said to Dean, not budging from the couch but reaching out with her socked foot to poke Dean in the leg. “Don’t pretend you’re not more than half asleep right now.”

Dean thought about arguing, but since Sam was clearly already working on falling back asleep, he thought it would be best to go with it, if only to get Sam to sleep.

“Fine,” Dean grunted. He flailed, exhaustion making him uncoordinated, until he found the arm of the chair and then levered himself to his feet, ignoring the muted twinge from his ribs. “Sam?”

“Coming,” Sam replied, smiling faintly at Pepper and cautiously standing. He looked around until he found Clint. “Thanks for the save,” he said. Clint rolled his eyes; he hadn’t even gotten there until the action was over.

“No problem,” the archer said. “Go to bed, both of you.”

Sam woke with a start, goosebumps breaking out over his exposed skin.

He thought he might have heard a noise which had woken him, but as he listened there were no sounds but the soft hum of the Compound’s air conditioning. He hesitated; his side was throbbing, he was comfortable despite the fact he had gone to bed without a shower, and sleep was already pulling once again at the edges of his mind.

But years of seeing people who had ignored the sounds in the night and ended up dead or worse flicked through his mind and Sam flopped back with a groan. He was going to have to get up and go see what sound he had probably imagined.

However, his brief moment of speculation was broken by a very real sound of something shattering followed by a shout of “Don’t move!” in a voice Sam knew very well. In a moment, Sam was moving, adrenaline shooting through him as he forced his legs off the side of the bed to pull the knife out from under his pillow-- the Compound might have been warded to the best of their ability and protected by every bit of tech Stark Industries had to offer, but Sam still didn’t trust it completely. Bare shoulder bouncing off the doorframe as Sam stumbled into the hall, clad only in a pair of sweatpants, he almost ran into Clint.
“Dean, right?” the archer asked even as he pulled an arrow from the quiver slung over the shoulder of his t-shirt.

“Yeah,” Sam said and then coughed, voice rough with sleep and the previous day’s strangling.

A moment later, they were in the dark kitchen, tiles cold against their bare feet. Dean stood before them, back to the door and hip braced against the kitchen island. He was lit only by the moonlight filtering in from the floor to ceiling windows across the room, bright enough to pick out details but casting the scene in an eerie glow. Like Sam and Clint (and now Steve and Natasha, who pressed into the doorway behind them), he was dressed in sleep clothing. Also like Sam, he looked like he hadn’t bothered shaving yet, although his mussed hair indicated he had probably showered. Despite the pain probably radiating from his ribs, Dean’s hands didn’t shake as he held his well worn pistol level in front of his eyes, the short barrel of the gun aiming at a figure almost hidden in the shadows. Sam’s eyes strayed for a moment, noting the broken glass and puddle of water by Dean’s feet— he must have dropped the cup when he went for the gun.

“Step forward slowly,” Dean barked, Sam’s hand tightening on the handle of the knife and Clint drawing back the bowstring a few inches as Dean gestured with the gun.

The figure did, lifting his hands and smiling faintly as he slowly moved into the moonlight, streaks of grey in his curly hair catching beams of light.

“Please don’t shoot.” Steve inhaled sharply at the familiar voice.

It was Bruce Banner.

Nobody moved.

“Sam,” Dean said gruffly and made a jerking motion with his head. “Check.”

Sam padded across the room silently, avoiding the shattered glass, and dug under the kitchen sink, coming up with a flask of holy water. Bruce held out a hand over the already wet floor and let Sam pour the water over his skin. Nothing happened. He set the flask down and twirled the knife in his fingers for a moment, unsure of how to proceed.

Bruce voiced what Sam was wondering. “You, um. Probably shouldn’t use the silver knife to check the color because my blood’s radioactive. Not great. But I can touch it if you want?”

Sam nodded and held the knife out, Bruce reaching forward without hesitation and running his fingers over the side of the blade. Sam looked back at Dean and shrugged. “Good enough for me. He got past the traps at the doors, so…”

Dean nodded and lowered his pistol, gritting his teeth as he bent to scoop up the biggest pieces of broken glass and drop them on the counter.

An awkward silence filled the kitchen, broken only by the quiet sound of Sam pulling out one of the chairs and dropping into it, left hand worrying the bandages at his side.

“Bruce…?” Steve finally asked quietly.

“What the hell, man?” Clint said at the same time, considerably louder.

And then suddenly the room was bubbling with quiet sound as everyone tried to keep their voices low while they pestered everyone else with questions. Steve stepped up and pulled Bruce into a bear hug, which the physicist accepted with surprise. Natasha shooed Dean away and quickly swept up
the rest of the glass. Clint joined Sam, smacking the hunter’s hand away and groaning out loud when he realized the hunter had managed to pull one of the stitches in their hurry to get to the kitchen.

“It’s fine, leave it,” Sam said, jaw tight as Clint probed at his side and pulled the broken stitch to be thrown away. “Just do the bandage tight. And I’ll take another set of-- thanks,” he said to Natasha, who had anticipated the request and was handing both him and Dean antibiotics and a slightly lower dosage of the painkillers they had taken earlier.

“Look, you should all go back to bed,” Bruce’s voice rose over the questions Steve and Dean were pestering him with and then lowering as a hush fell on the group. “I’ll just sleep on the couch or something and then we can all fill each other in later this morning.”

Steve was already shaking his head. “Nah, there’s room for you in the guest rooms. We’ve still got all your stuff-- we cleared out your room, sorry-- but you can at least sleep on an actual bed.”

Bruce nodded his thanks. Steve started to turn to everyone else but Bruce’s hand shot out to catch his shoulder. “I found out about Tony,” he said and the room fell silent. “Its a long story, but I did a little research when I got… back, and saw about the plane accident.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Natasha said quietly. “But it’s a long story. You should know, though, that Pepper’s here. Be careful.”

“I will,” Bruce said.

The group disbanded slowly, everyone back to their own rooms where some would sleep and some would lie awake and wonder, waiting for the morning and the answers to come.

The next morning, everyone who had been privy to Bruce’s nighttime arrival was awake and in the kitchen bright and early, despite their nightly interruption. Sam and Dean were both looking much better, their haggard appearances greatly reduced by the opportunity to shower, shave, and put on clean clothing over their bruises and bandages. However, no amount of clothing could hide the stiffness with which they moved.

They waited impatiently, drinking cups of coffee and assisting in the kitchen as Clint ordered everyone about during breakfast preparations. The sight of Bruce and Clint standing shoulder to shoulder and making eggs jogged a memory and before he could scramble his brain to mouth filter, Sam found himself talking.

“Oh! Sully says hi,” Sam blurted out and then groaned, resisting the urge to injure himself further by smacking his head on the marble countertop. That was possibly the most idiotic thing that could have randomly come out of his mouth. It had to be the concussion or the meds talking.

“Sully.” Clint said, looking at Sam oddly.

“Sully,” Dean agreed. “Your childhood invisible friend. Wears a yellow striped shirt, rainbow suspenders, the whole nine yards.”

“Yeah, I know who Sully is.” Clint said automatically, then shook his head like there was water in his ears or his hearing aids were acting up. “Wait. I’m… how do you know about Sully?”

“Oh, Sam!” Sully jogged after them and Sam could see Dean resisting an eye roll at having to talk to Sully for even one more minute. “Dean! Wait!” They turned around to see him reappear. “I almost forgot!”
“What?” Dean asked.

“You guys know Clint and Bruce, right?” Sully asked enthusiastically.

“Bruce… Banner?” Sam answered bewilderedly. “And Clint Barton?”

“Yeah, that’s them!” Sully grinned brightly. “Clint was one of my kids! And Bruce was with my friend Daphne! Say hi to them for us!”

“He’s Sam’s childhood invisible friend, too,” Dean said, the smirk audible even though Sam was pointedly not looking at him.

“Ah… okay then?” Clint finally said. “Look, Sam. No offense, but I think you probably need to go back to bed if you’re going to start talking about my childhood imaginary friend. That’s probably the concussion talking.”

“No, no,” Dean said. “Sully’s real. Weird as hell and I can’t believe I had to talk to him, but real.”

Sam shrugged. “Kind of our M.O.”

Dean finally took pity on Clint. “Turns out they’re called Zanna. They’re not human, but they’re not monsters. Weird, though. I still can’t believe…” he trailed off, lips quirking.

“‘Family that showers together stays together’?” Sam said and Dean started laughing while the others looked on in confusion.

“Wait!” Clint begged, holding up his hands like a sports referee. “So my childhood imaginary friend was real and by the way, he’s also Sam’s childhood imaginary friend? And Dean got to meet him?”

“No,” Sam said. “There was a girl killing Zanna because her sister had died and she saw it as Sully’s fault. Sully just showed up in the Bunker one morning and asked for our help finding out who was killing Zanna. It was weird, seeing Sully as an adult.”

“Yeah,” Sam said again but didn’t elaborate. “I guess the guy seemed happier afterwards so it went well?”

Dean glanced up at Bruce as the man slid him an omelette, catching the slightly wistful look on the physicist’s face. “Oh, and we’re supposed to tell you that someone named Daphne says hi. Apparently she’s a friend of Sully’s.”

Bruce’s expression flashed through surprise, confusion, and slight happiness. “No way.”

Dean shrugged, mouth full of eggs.

The conversation about imaginary friends was stopped by the arrival of Pepper, dressed in an immaculate pantsuit, Charlie, dressed in sweatpants, and everyone else.

There was an immediate bottleneck in the doorway as Pepper stopped dead at the sight of Bruce. “What’s going--” Sam Wilson called from the back of the group but his words choked off as he caught sight of Bruce. Wanda was staring at Bruce with a combination of confusion and well-hidden fear, understandable since the last times she saw him, she had rolled his mind, he had destroyed part
of a city, and then he had threatened to kill her.

“Hi,” Bruce gave a slight wave to everyone, spatula still in hand.

Pepper let out a choked sound that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh and rushed forwards, forcing Bruce to quickly drop the spatula before he got egg all over her when he wrapped her in a hug. “Hey, Pep,” he said. “I’m sorry about Tony.”

She sniffed, catching a tear before it could smear her makeup. “You heard?”

“Yeah, they filled me in this morning. Didn’t think you needed to hear the story.”

“When did you get here?” Wilson asked, taking a cup of coffee and gently nudging Wanda to sit at the table.

“In the middle of the night. I almost got shot by Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Please, like it would have done anything.”

Bruce rolled his own eyes in return. “It would have hurt! And I probably would have taken out the kitchen!”

Dean acquiesced and watched as Bruce smiled at Wanda and passed her a plate of eggs. “Hi, Wanda. I’m Bruce Banner. We’ve never really been properly introduced.”

Wanda and Bruce exchanged a long look and they must have seen something in each other’s eyes because Wanda smiled, a real smile. She set her plate down and reached out to shake his hand. “Nice to meet you, Dr Banner.”

“Call me Bruce,” he said, sitting down with his own plate.

“Pepper,” Dean called, “do you have to go back to work today? Or can you stay and swap stories with us?”

The CEO hesitated, then whipped out her phone. “What are executive powers good for if you don’t carefully exercise them now and then?” she asked. “Stephanie? Clear my schedule for the day. I’ll be back early tomorrow morning.” Pepper continued quietly chatting with Stephanie; Dean turned and gave Steve a victory high five.

Thirty minutes later, after Steve and Bruce had both finished their obscenely large meals and Sam and Dean had done their best to match them, Clint insisted on checking on Sam and Dean’s various injuries (with Bruce peeking over his shoulder as he poked and prodded), and everyone had settled into various chairs with coffee, the storytelling began.

Everyone’s curiosity about what had happened to Sam and Dean had been superseded by the arrival of Bruce and the scientist ducked his head as everyone waited for him to start.

“So…” he said. “I’m not actually clear on all the details myself, because Hulk doesn’t have the best memory. But here’s basically what happened.” Hulk had decided to leave after the battle of Sokovia, Bruce’s concern about hurting people bleeding over into his alter ego until Hulk set a course for the arctic. “We went over the arctic circle… it was weird.” Bruce looked thoughtful. “It was like a sort of tingling feeling, and this shimmery silver light. Like…” he grappled for a way to describe it. “A Star Trek transporter.” Half the group nodded, the other half looking at him in confusion. “Never mind. Anyway, I woke up as me, not Hulk, in a little rocky cave somewhere cold. There wasn’t anyone around and I had to follow a pack of wild engloings-- they’re sort of like giant wolves-- until
I found a sort of village.” He shivered at the memory. “It took forever to get there; I kept transforming because I was so cold but it only made me more tired… when I finally found this sort of town I realized for the first time that I wasn’t on earth because the people were huge and also blue.”

Bruce smiled. “I think I amused them because I was small and green-- and then smaller and tan. But they fed me and I was sort of a pet, I guess.” He shrugged. “Anyway, really, that’s the gist of the important parts. After that, I basically wandered around the planet for a little more than a year, best I can reckon, going from village to village. I checked in at the cave every time I was close, but nothing happened until yesterday when I went in. Same shimmery light, same tingly feeling, and then I was in the woods in Pennsylvania.”

“How’d you get here?” Wilson asked.

“Hitchhiked,” Bruce shrugged. “The driver let me borrow his phone and I did some fast research-- it was strange finding out what year it was. He dropped me off a few miles away and I walked the rest.”

“We’ll have to talk to Thor the next time he’s here,” Pepper suggested. “He can probably figure out where you were and how you got there and back.”

“Probably,” Clint said. “He’s got what’s-his-name, Heimdall or whatever.”

“You said the driver told you about Tony,” Wanda asked. “Did you hear about the Accords?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “But not in a lot of detail. I want more information, especially about Ross.” For a moment thunderheads seemed to be gathering and Bruce’s fingers tightened on the handle of his mug to the point where Steve was momentarily concerned about the stability of the cup. Then the physicist took a deep breath. “But enough about me. I can see there’s more stories that need to be told than mine and I can always give you more details later.” He leveled a look at Sam and Dean. “Looks like you two are up.”

Sam ran a hand through his hair and looked at Dean. “Where do we start?”

“There’s a lot you guys don’t know,” Dean informed the group. “It’s been a busy few months.”


“Well,” Dean began, running a hand through his hair. “We were taking a break from research by hunting a pack of werewolves. It was going okay-- two rescues, a girl and an asshole--” Sam snorted, interrupting. “--chained up in a cabin. We were taking on the two werewolves and doing okay but then one of them got ahold of a pistol and shot Sam.” Even now, Dean’s hands tightened on the arm of the sofa at the memory. “I killed him, got the bullet out, and Sam patched himself up best he could while I got Michelle and Corbin down.”

“Were they okay?” Bruce asked.

Sam and Dean shared a look. “Shaky as hell, but fine,” Dean commented. “We thought. Anyway, I was going to leave Sam with them and go for help, but Corbin said there were two more werewolves running around and so we figured we had to take our chances, see if we could get back to the car.”

Again, Dean grimaced at the memory-- Sam half draped over his shoulder, his brother trying not to make too much noise but in obvious agony, Corbin supporting Michelle, the woods looming around them. “We found a ranger station but Corbin insisted we keep going to get Michelle out and that Sam was slowing us down.”
“I mean, he was right,” Sam interjected, shrugging. “I was moving too slow. Dean got pissed and I tried to get him to go get the Tilghmans out and then come back for me, but he went to get wood to make a stretcher and, um.” Sam cast a short, sidelong look at his brother and rushed out the next sentences, as if saying it more quickly might keep Dean from getting mad. “When Dean left Corbin decided to take matters into his own hands and tried to kill me.”

“That little son of a bi--”

“He was, um. Strangling me,” Sam sort of gestured at his face and throat, the livid bruises, talking over Dean. “And he was strong, stronger than he should have been and there was a bite on his arm but I couldn’t get him off and I passed out.” He looked at Dean. “And I’m not really sure what happened with Corbin and Michelle after that. I woke up later-- it was still dark, but not long from sunrise-- and everyone was gone.”

“My guess is that’s around when you called me,” Clint said. “There wasn’t anyone talking, but I could hear you moving. It sounded like it hurt.”

Sam barked out a dry laugh. “Bit of an understatement. But yeah, that was probably when. The other two werewolves arrived-- one of them was Rose, the bar lady,” he directed to Dean and Dean swore again. “So I made for the basement and made it down-- actually, I fell down the stairs,” he amended deprecatingly. “The second one, the dude, must have smelled me and came down but I had the silver knife still, got the drop on him and then when Rose followed I got her, too.” Sam shrugged, like it had been no big deal.

Everyone was staring at him in slight awe and his ears turned pink. “Almost passed out afterwards,” he added.

“From the bullet wound in your side and being suffocated, which you basically ignored long enough to take out two werewolves by yourself,” Sam Wilson pointed out. “Dude. Bad. Ass.”

The pink ears turned darker. “Thanks. Um,” Sam ducked his head. “I kept going, made it through the woods to the Impala, thank god. I called Dean and finally got through for a couple seconds but it cut out, I think before Dean heard that Corbin was a werewolf.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “I had made it with Michelle and Corbin to the road-- Corbin had forced me to leave Sam behind to save Michelle.” There was a tightness in Dean’s lips that indicated he was regretting that moment. “We flagged a ranger and I tried to go back for Sam’s body, but the guy wouldn’t let me go so I, uh.” Dean had the good grace to look slightly abashed. “I punched him and took off and then he tased me.”

Sam laughed and winced. Dean shot his brother a “I did that for you, you asshole” look and went on. “Woke up in the Urgent Care. Michelle told me she was sorry that you were dead. That death wasn’t the end. All that shit,” Dean told Sam. “But there was something… not right. I got out of the building and tried to call you, hoping…”

Dean could feel Clint’s eyes on him, knew that the spy knew there had been something more, another event missing from the timeline. But to his relief, Clint didn’t say anything.

“And you answered.” It was clear, even now, that Dean had never been so relieved. “But I couldn’t hear you. Someone screamed inside-- probably Dr Kessler-- and I went back in to deal with it. Corbin had turned. Had the whole ‘shaggy hair, long nails, sharp teeth, weird eyes’ going on. Michelle was freaking because Corbin wanted to turn her I think, so I jumped Corbin. He was going to strangle me, the way he had Sam I guess.” Dean rubbed his own throat, decorated like Sam’s with rings of finger shaped, purple and black bruises. “Any way, I was probably a goner, but then Sam
showed up and shot Corbin. Then Clint was there and the rest was cleanup.”

Pepper let out a gusty sigh. “You boys are going to worry me to death. Thank god I never know about it until after it’s all over.”

“Yeah, about that…” Sam hesitated. “Everything is really far from over. So…”

“The Darkness,” Steve said, taking the topic and setting it squarely between them all. “So it was related to the Mark of Cain, right?”

Bruce half raised his hand. “The what?”

Everyone frowned. There was a lot of catching up needing to be done.

“Well. Okay,” Sam started. “Abridged version: there was a demon named Abbadon who we really needed to get rid of, so Dean and Crowley-- that’s the king of Hell-- went to meet Cain…”

And so the story began. It took Sam and Dean nearly an hour to work their way through the bare bones-- The Mark of Cain, what it had done to Dean, how they had gotten rid of it not long ago (just days before Tony had died, actually), and how doing so had released “the Darkness,” otherwise known as “Amara,” otherwise known as “God’s actual sister.” Sam talked in brief about how he had been having visions, gave Bruce and Clint a quick rundown on the Zanna situation, and told them how they had been working to find something, anything, powerful enough to take down Amara.

Dean took over part way through, just as Sam’s voice was becoming uncomfortably raspy from the previous day’s difficulties and Steve was going around filling up coffee cups. They had been leaving out bits here and there-- Sam hadn’t told them how he had been infected in that little town, or how he had prayed for God to help them. But now they were coming to bits that were too important to leave out, no matter how uncomfortable or painful the memories were.

“...and so I went after Sam with Crowley, and that Rowena had double crossed them. Sam was… well. Sam and Crowley’s plan had been to use Rowena and a spell to get--” Dean cut himself off for a moment and glanced over at Sam, as if doing a quick stability check before continuing. “They went to get Lucifer out of the Cage.”

There was a general gasp from the group, Natasha, Steve, and Clint’s faces becoming impassively blank, Pepper, Charlie, and Sam Wilson turning pale. Wanda, however, just looked confused. “The Cage?” she asked.

Sam straightened his spine and looked directly at her, avoiding the eyes of everyone else. “It’s a box in the lowest levels of Hell,” he said, voice level, as if he was just compounding on a particularly interesting piece of lore. “It’s sealed off, not very large, and it traps Lucifer.” He took on a slightly pleading tone as he tried to explain. “We needed to get someone powerful, powerful enough to take down a being equal in strength to God, basically. And an archangel would have helped. And we weren’t actually going to get him out of the Cage, just into something else.”

“But Sam…” Pepper asked. “Wouldn’t he have been trapped unless he could take a vessel? And doesn’t it have to be…” she trailed off, as if saying his name would summon the devil to take command of Sam’s body.

“He asked. It’s complicated, but Rowena, Crowley and I basically had lifted him into limbo-- that’s where we were, a sort of replica of the cage covered in sigils and surrounded by holy fire so we could talk to him. But then Rowena double crossed us and…”
Dean took over as Sam trailed off. “By the time I got there, Sam was in the Cage.”

Sam blinked slowly. “We, um. Talked. He showed me… some stuff. He told me it was the only way-- I had to say yes.” For a moment, Sam’s eyes seemed to be a million miles away before he abruptly came back to himself, the corner of his lips half quirk ing up in a very brief smile. “I said no.” Minding his side, Sam leaned forwards to set down his coffee cup with a finality that seemed to indicate the end of this particular discussion, but the movement was belied by the faint rattle as the cup neared the coffee table, Sam’s lightly trembling hands given away by the sound.

Wanda still looked confused, but Dean redirected before the conversation could go any further. “So I go there, there was a big fight, and Sam, me and Cas got out of the portal and back to the realm of the living.”

“Speaking of Castiel,” Clint cut in. “Where is he?”

Clint wouldn’t have thought it possible, but the brother’s faces became even more grim.

“Well,” Dean said. “He’s not exactly home right now.”

“What, exactly,” Natasha said slowly, “does that mean?”

Dean shrugged. “Sam didn’t say yes, but the Devil still got out of the box.”

Pepper gasped audibly for the second time in the last handful of minutes. “You don’t mean..”

“The way the spell worked,” Dean explained, “was that Rowena sort of brought Lucifer out of the actual cage and into the one in Limbo. He couldn’t get out without a vessel and as long as he was in it, we could send him back to the original cage. But…”

Clint had figured it out. “Castiel let him in.”

“Yeah,” Dean confirmed grimly. “We didn’t know, not for a while. Weeks. We were still working on Amara, trying to find a Hand of God to get rid of her. Cas-- well. Not Cas, but we didn’t know-- sent me to the past temporarily so we could try to get one from this submarine that had sunk in World War II.”

Sam cut in for a moment, still avoiding looking at everyone. “A Hand of God, by the way, is an object imbued with God’s power. The one we were looking for at the time was a piece of the Ark of the Covenant.”

“Meanwhile, Lucifer revealed himself, tried to kill Sam, and brought me back to the present. Sam got rid of him with a sigil, and we’ve been working on how to get rid of both of them-- Amara and Lucifer-- ever since. Plus a few other hunts.”

“Everything’s starting to happen, though; Amara’s only gaining power.” Sam sighed. “It can’t be long now.”

“Well,” Steve said encouragingly. “We’re not exactly busy at the moment; the Accords are out of our hands, we’re not able to go on as many missions until they’re approved, and all we’re reall doing is training. So we’re at your disposal.”

“Yeah,” Charlie agreed, dropping her voice and dramatically adding: “You have my sword.”

Dean grinned at her and a little bit of the shadow seemed to leave Sam’s eyes.
“And my axe,” Bruce smiled. “Seriously. I’m back, it looks like I have a lot to catch up on, and I want to help.”

The group, now burdened with the trials that faced them but a little happier for knowing they would be going into it as a team, temporarily disbanded. Sam stood and took few steps only to drop himself down onto the other couch, where he could more comfortably talk to Steve. “What about Bucky?” he asked. “How’s he doing?”

Steve let one shoulder raise and drop. “Okay. Better. They had him in cryo-- voluntary-- for a week so they could figure out what all Hydra had done to him. Fortunately, there wasn’t too much in terms of implants or anything-- it was just the brainwashing. Well, not just.” Steve shrugged again, his lips sinking in sadness. “Seventy years worth of it. But they think they can help him through it, especially since he had been doing pretty well on his own before we found him and brought him back.”

“And his arm?”

“Not bad, either. They’ve got some great engineers in Wakanda and they’ve checked it for anything that could give Hydra a hold on him. Plus, they’ve fixed it up a little and reinforced some areas with vibranium.”

“So things are actually going pretty well on that front,” Sam summarized, his own shoulders relaxing. “That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “Nice to have something going well.” There was a quick lull before Steve asked about their other hunts and Sam was caught up in an animated description of the Zanna, Clint coming over to hang out on the back of the sofa.

Across the room, Wanda stopped Dean by the kitchen island. She touched his arm, drawing him a half step away from the group, his eyes tracking Sam as his brother went to get his laptop. “What?” he asked distractedly.

“The thing Sam does, with his hands,” Wanda asked. “He was doing it while you talked about the Cage. Why does he do it?”

Dean’s eyes flicked to her as he lost sight of Sam down the hallway. “It’s a reminder that he’s not in with the Devil anymore.”

“Can I ask…” she hesitated. “What happened?”

“Sure,” Dean said.

She looked surprised at his willingness to share and he shrugged. “It’s been almost five years and everyone else here was around when it was actually going down. It’s not fair to leave you out of the loop and wondering.”

“Do you want to do this here?” she asked and Dean shook his head as Sam reentered, reaching out without thinking to grab Wanda’s hand and pull her from the room and down the hall to the training room.

There had been a cold snap overnight and the ground outside was shimmering with frost as the pair sat in front of the large floor to ceiling windows on a stack of wrestling mats. Dean awkwardly dropped Wanda’s hand and she smiled as he quickly looked away.

“It’s beautiful,” Wanda said, gesturing to the icy grounds.
Ean took a long second to look at it. “Yeah, it is,” he agreed, sounding almost surprised. “Sam’ll hate it, though.”

“Why?”

“Lemme start from the beginning.”

It took Dean nearly forty-five minutes to sketch out everything without going into detail. It helped that Wanda already knew a little, like that angels had to have a vessel. But it still took time, explaining how the bloodlines had lead to Sam and himself as the vessels of Michael and Lucifer, the apocalypse, how they had started it and ended it. How he had gone to Hell himself for Sam and Cas had brought him back so he could fulfill his duty. How Sam had gone to the Cage and come back, memory full of holes and nights full of shattered dreams, how the wall had been placed and come down, leaving his brother a disaster of nerves and hallucinations.

“So, yeah.” Dean finally wound down. “That’s what’s up with the Cage. Why Sam doesn’t want to talk about it and, well. I’m not exactly a fan of Hell either.”

“I understand,” Wanda said. She smiled sadly at him. “And I am amazed.”

Dean barked out a short laugh. “Amazed? What the hell for?”

“Well, mostly at you and Sam.” Wanda’s smile became more genuinely happy. “Somehow, you have endured horrors, things beyond imagining and beyond the knowledge of most people and you’ve come out the other side.”

“Not without problems,” Dean argued.

Wanda’s eyes glistened and this time she reached out to take his hand. Dean didn’t pull his away. “But you’re still such good people, both of you. You may not be perfect—” she forestalled as he opened his mouth to argue. “But you’re both kind and compassionate, willing to help when it would be so easy for you to both ignore the problems in the world. And that’s amazing to me.”

Dean didn’t know how to respond. His throat felt tight and he frowned, rubbing at the bruises with his free hand. Fortunately, Wanda didn’t seem to think a response was warranted. They sat quietly for a long moment, hand in hand, watching the frosted grass slowly melt from silver to green.

“We should probably get Clint or someone to look at your ribs,” Wanda finally said. “And Sam’s side.”

“ Probably,” Dean agreed, his voice rough from the sheer amount of talking he had done that morning alone. He reluctantly released Wanda’s small hand and slid off of the mats, the Avenger following him gracefully.

As they neared the door, Dean asked a question that had been bouncing in the back of his mind for the last hour. “Are you all really going to come help us with this? Amara, I mean?”

Wanda looked surprised he was even asking and stopped in her tracks, shoulders square and back straight. “Do you really have to ask?”

“Just wondering.”

“Dean, you’re part of our makeshift little family as much as any of us are. Of course we’ll help. Besides,” she rolled her eyes. “If you don’t save the world, that’s sort of bad for the rest of us who live here.”
Dean laughed, not a harsh laugh like earlier, but a full, bright laugh. “Good point.”

“Don’t worry, Dean.” Wanda said. “We’re with you. And we’ll stop the Darkness and save the world.”

Dean was surprised it took Clint as long as it did to hunt him down.

“Hey,” Dean said, tossing a wet sponge in Clint’s direction, forcing the man to stop crossing his arms and tapping his toes and catch it. “I’ve already done the inside-- took a while, Sam bled all over everything. Now she just needs a good wash.”

“Dean,” Clint said, voice low. “We need to talk.” He rounded the car and crouched, scrubbing at the wet chrome near Dean’s feet. “I’ve got a guess about what happened, but I’d rather not air it if I’m wrong.”

“You’re probably right,” Dean admitted, thinking about how Clint had seen the nurse’s eyes on him when he handed over the prescription, how Clint had smoothed out the “stolen drugs” info, how he had watched Dean with careful eyes when Dean had said he was good to drive.

Clint apparently hadn’t been expecting Dean to give in so easily to the conversation and the subject lapsed for a moment.

“Why’d you do it?” Clint asked bluntly.

“I wasn’t really trying,” Dean said. “To kill myself, I mean,” he clarified.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Dean!” Clint exploded, dropping the sponge and standing to look Dean square in the face. “What the hell were you trying to do?”

“I was trying to find out about Sam! Trying to save him!” Dean shot back. He threw his own sponge into the bucket of water at his feet, sending a plume of soap bubbles and dirty water into the air. He leaned back against the car, apparently indifferent to the water soaking into his jeans. “We’ve done it before; to talk to a reaper, you have to be dying. I wasn’t planning on actually dying, I had Michelle ready and she called the doc right away.”

“Jesus, Dean” Clint repeated, scrubbing at his face. The anger was gone from the words, though, leaving Clint sounding tired. “What if it hadn’t worked?”

“It was a risk I had to take.” The hunter shrugged, some of the tension leeching out of his shoulders, and bent to pick back up his sponge.

Clint followed suit and rinsed his own dirty sponge off, rummaging around in a garage cabinet to find some clean towels.

They worked in companionable silence for almost fifteen minutes before Dean spoke up again.

“Are you going to tell Sam?” he asked. He rushed on before Clint could actually reply. “Because all that will happen is he’ll get mad at me, we’ll have the same argument we always have when one of us does something risky. He’ll probably pull some of the stitches waving his arms around and then he’ll probably worry about me instead of about Castiel and the Devil and the Darkness.”

“No.” The word was ready on Clint’s lips; he had been expecting the question. “I won’t tell him. Because you’re probably right about all that and there’s no point worrying about it now. But--” he
pointed an accusing finger at Dean and a smile started playing on his face. “If you do something that stupid again, I’ll not only tell Sam about this, I’ll also tell him about you, Steve, and the jello shots incident.”

Dean’s worry drained away and he raised his hands in mock horror. “Anything but that. I’d rather those pictures remain under firm lock and key, thanks.”

“That makes two of us,” Clint gave an exaggerated shudder at the thought of the photos locked away carefully. “No need to expose that travesty to the world.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Thank you all so much for reading and leaving me notes, as always. You're the best.

As I've told a few people, it looks like this work will have a sort of spin off of stories that would have happened between earlier chapters, things I didn't get around to earlier but don't want to work in at this late date. This includes things like the Avengers/Tony meeting Jody Mills, the brothers seeing the Hulk etc. If you have ideas and you want to share, send 'em my way here or on tumblr!

If you want to follow me on tumblr, you can find me with the username @dare-to-do-our-duty
Sam and Dean were frozen to the spot next to the Impala, the amulet glowing bright through Dean’s fingers, both brothers staring at the man—not man—in front of them. Chuck seemed to be waiting for a response, but Sam couldn’t come up with anything.

The tense silence had lasted only seconds but had seemed like much longer when Sam’s cell phone rang, shattering the building awkwardness. Sam automatically scrambled to pull the phone from his pocket and answer the call without even bothering to check caller ID. “Yeah, um, hello?” he stuttered out, brain still not firing on all cylinders in the presence of Chuck Shurley, the prophet, who was apparently not just a prophet but God Himself.

“Sam?” The hunter’s attention was very briefly distracted from the deity by the voice—Steve Rogers.

“Uh, yeah. What’s up?” Sam asked. Dean made a sound of incredulity and Chuck—God—whatever—looked patently amused that Sam was taking a phone call and making small talk in the present situation.

“Where are you?”

“Small town in Idaho. Look, Steve this really isn’t a good—”

“We’re at the bunker.”

“You’re where?”

“The bunker. We’re here to help. We’ve got the quinjet, so we’ll just hang out in that until you guys get back. How long do you think that’s gonna take?”

Sam’s head was spinning, so he looked to Dean. “Steve and a few others are at the bunker. They’re there to help us, apparently, and want to know when we’ll be back.”

Dean ran a hand through his hair. “Um,” he cast a sidelong look at Chuck, clearly conflicted about the thought of having Chuck ride with them back to the bunker. “Hold on. It took us like a day and a half to get out here, but if we drive it straight, it wouldn’t take as long. But, we’re not going anywhere with him. Okay? How do we know that you’re really Chuck and not just some—”

Chuck raised a hand and before either of the brothers could react, Chuck snapped his fingers. Sam blinked and then almost dropped his phone—hey were in the garage. The bunker garage. All three of them. And the Impala.

“...crazy spell or manifestai—” Dean broke off and looked wildly around, startled. When they traveled with Cas, there was a feeling of motion, brief but powerful, the angel’s wings pulling them through the ether. This was different, the bunker appearing without any change but the echoing click of Chuck’s finger snap.

“Wow, uh,” Sam raised the phone clutched tightly in his hand. “We’re back. We’ll be up to let you in.”

Sam ended the call and looked over at Dean, the brothers trying to formulate a plan of action. Did
one of them stay with God, offer him a room to stay in for however long he was going to be there? Something to eat? A drink? Did God even need or want any of that?

Apparently the answer to the last two questions were both yes, because Chuck cleared his throat. “Why don’t you two go let in the Avengers and I’ll just go get something to drink.”

“Okay,” Dean said, with the faint air of someone frantically grasping for anything that made sense. “We’ll go get them. Sam?”

Dean shoved the amulet in his pocket and led his brother out of his room and down the hall until they were out of earshot-- not, Sam reflected, that earshot mattered when the person you were getting away from was almighty and omniscient-- and reached out to grab Sam’s shoulder for a second, stopping him.

“What the hell? We’re on the same page, right?” he asked. “You’re seeing Chuck Shurley, the guy we thought was a prophet, who wrote the books Cas calls the Winchester Gospels, and who we talked to days before the apocalypse and a couple times afterwards?”

“Um. Yeah.” Sam shook his head incredulously. “If you’re crazy, I’m crazy too.”

“All right. Okay.” Dean let go of Sam’s shoulder. “Let’s just… go let the Avengers in.”

It was a testament to how strange their lives were that the sight of the landing outside the bunker door was funny instead of weird. The dingy stone pad held a cramped group of slightly confused Avengers. Dean actually barked out a laugh when he saw them all because instead of looking like a crack team of superheroes, they looked more like a group of nondescript tourists. None of them were wearing uniforms; in fact, more than half the group were in baseball caps, hoodies, and sunglasses. Everyone had a suitcase or two and there were various pieces of weaponry slung over pillows, suitcases back to back with bags of tactical gear.

Sam stepped back to let them in, Natasha reaching out to give him a cheery pat on the cheek as followed Dean down the stairs and into the library. She was followed by Clint, then Wanda, Charlie, Steve, and Bruce, each hauling a load of luggage behind them as they trooped in, Wanda looking around with interest, as she had never been in the bunker before.

“So…?” Sam started to ask for a little more detail than he had gotten on the phone, closing the door behind him and following them down the stairs.

“We’re your new team,” Clint told him brightly, leaning his hip against the library table and shifting his weight so he could pull a quiver packed with arrows and with what looked like a purple unicorn pillow pet velcroed around the strap.

Sam chose to ignore that last bit of sensory input in favor of asking more questions. “What team? Is there a problem? Something we don’t know about? Is Pepper okay?” Despite the lack of dangerous stimuli-- the Avengers all looked pretty relaxed-- alarm bells were starting to go off until Charlie stepped forwards, her hair poking out from under her ball cap.

“Sam, Sam, everything’s fine.” She raised her hands placatingly. “Well. As fine as they can be with the Devil on the loose and the Darkness and all. But Pepper’s okay, and the rest of the team-- Wilson, Rhodes, Vision, a new kid who’s sort of interning with us, his name’s Peter, and Thor-- are holding down the fort at the compound until we give them the call to come join us.”

“Join you? Wait, did you say Thor?” Dean dropped into the chair Sam usually sat in. “Hang on. There’s some stuff you should know about before we get any farther.”
“What?” Steve asked, game face on even as he pulled off his (Brooklyn Dodgers, Dean noticed) ball cap. “New developments?”

“I would imagine,” a new voice said from the doorway. The avengers were startled to see a new man standing there, wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans. He had curly hair, tired eyes, and a slightly higher voice than his physique would suggest and was leaning on the doorframe with a bottle of beer in his hand. “That they’re talking about me.”

The eyes of the spies and superheroes shifted to Sam and Dean. Dean frowned and shook his head pointedly and Sam gave a minute shrug, apparently accepting that he was in charge of introducing the newcomer. “Guys,” he said and gestured to the man, “this is Chuck Shurley. Um. Otherwise known as God.”

It took them nearly an hour for everyone to understand what was happening to both parties.

The first twenty minutes were Dean and Sam trying to sort out what the Avengers were explaining--a lot of explanation for what was essentially a five minute story. Since they didn’t have a lot to do at the Compound at the moment due to the Accords and a lull in superpowered crimes that probably had to do with the bigger monster in town-- Amara-- the Avengers had decided to go make themselves as useful as possible against their opponent. Since the Compound didn’t have a trove of books, papers, and items to fight against the supernatural and the Bunker did, it was only logical for them to put themselves at Sam and Dean’s disposal within the Bunker.

The following forty minutes were a bit more complicated, with Sam and Dean trying to explain not only what they had been doing to try and stop Amara but also their complicated past relationship with Chuck Shurley. God.

“And he brought us back here. To the bunker, car and all.” Dean crossed his arms, clearly still unhappy about their mode of travel.

“Well, there was a reason for that.” Chuck took a sip from the beer bottle. “More than one, I should say, but first…” Chuck set the bottle down, the soft clink masking the first footfall of a person behind him, stepping forwards from nowhere at all.

Sam found his voice first. “... Kevin?”

Most of the Avengers and Charlie switched from looking vaguely confused to looking concerned, startled, and in Clint’s case, being about three seconds from bolting.

Kevin waved. “Hey guys. You’re looking stressed. Especially--” he nodded at Dean-- “you.” Dean looked away, guilt in his eyes. Kevin smiled softly. “It’s cool. Trust Chuck. Whatever it is he needs you to do, he must think you can handle it. I always trusted you.”

Dean stopped looking guilty long enough to snort audibly. “Yeah, that went well.”

Sam interrupted. “How did you-- Are you okay, or-- I’m sorry--uh--”

“Um,” Kevin cut him off. “Yeah, I mean I’m fine. You know, given the circumstances.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Chuck cut in. “But there’s kind of a plateful here. And Kevin… you’ve been in the Veil long enough. It’s time you had an upgrade.” He waved his hand and Kevin’s form
shimmered, transforming into a misty cloud of light Sam and Dean remembered all too well from the second trial. The light-- Kevin’s soul-- floated up, lifting through the ceiling and vanishing.

Clint and Charlie spoke in unison. “Holy crap.”

Everyone fell silent, the tension in the room building as everyone waited for someone else to get the ball rolling again on the big save-the-world plan. Chuck relaxed back in his chair, seemingly oblivious as Sam and Steve made eye contact and tried to have a silent conversation.

Finally, Sam broke. “Okay. So, wow, um, Chuck--” he laughed, but it was strained. “Well, I guess we don’t call you that now, huh--”

“I prefer it,” Chuck broke in.

To his credit, Sam took it in stride and persevered. “Okay, uh. Chuck it is. I’m sorry, but you’re still probably gonna have to give us, um, a few moments to process this. Dean and I, we didn’t even know you were around. And the rest of the team I don’t think even knew about you at all, except maybe Charlie, and we knew about Chuck, but we just didn’t know about… you know. Chuck. I mean, I--” Sam took a short breath. “I was hoping you were around, I prayed and I-- but I don’t know if they uh, got lost in the spam or if--”

“Sam.” Dean had been doing his best scowl at the prophet, arms crossed and leaning as far back in his chair as possible without falling over. Sam shut up and looked at him. “Babbling.”

Sam shot an awkward, embarrassed look at the superheroes and nodded. “Okay.”

Chuck deliberately ran his gaze over everyone, leaving Dean for last. “I’m getting that not everyone’s totally on board.”

That was the lit fuse. Dean leaned forward, letting the feet of his chair thump loudly on the floor and flashing a brittle smile. “Here’s the thing, um… Chuck. And I mean no disrespect. I’m guessing you came back to help with the Darkness and that’s great. That’s you know, fantastic.” His voice dissolved from its fake cheer as the fuse reached the gunpowder. “But you’ve been gone a-- a long, long time. And there’s so much shit that has gone down on the Earth for thousands of years. I mean, plagues and wars, slaughters. And you were-- I don’t know-- writing books, going to fan conventions. Were you even aware, or did you just tune it out--”

“I was aware, Dean,” Chuck said calmly, but Dean just steamrolled on. “But you did nothing. And again, I’m not trying to piss you off. You know, I don’t want to turn into a pillar of salt--”

“I actually didn’t do that.”

“Ohay,” Dean kept going. “People--” he gestured around the room, encompassing Sam. “People pray to you. People build churches for you. They fight wars in your name. And you did nothing. Sam and I, we asked. We talked to you. In person! During the apocalypse! You let Sam take down the Devil the first time we had to get him out of the box and he spent years-- decades or centuries or whatever-- in the Cage with him. People fight all sorts of battles all the time and you don’t do anything.”

Sam took a quick survey of the room’s internal tension; aside from Dean, Steve looked the most tightly wound, with Bruce as a close second. Wanda seemed to hardly be paying attention, her eyes wandering around the room and catching on book titles, but her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. Natasha was actually on her phone, probably texting Wilson or someone else back at the
Compound. And Clint and Charlie basically looked like they were watching the most exciting soap opera they had ever seen, laser focused as Dean’s voice grew louder. Sam half expected a bowl of popcorn to materialize between them.

Chuck leaned forward. “You’re frustrated. I get it. Believe me, I was hands-on – real hands-on for, wow, ages. I was so sure if I kept stepping in, teaching, punishing, that these beautiful creatures that I created... would grow up. But it only stayed the same. And I saw that I needed to step away and let my baby find its way. Being overinvolved is no longer parenting.” Chuck sighed and took another sip of his beer. “It’s enabling.”

Dean didn’t sway. “But it didn’t get better.”

“Well, I’ve been mulling it over and from where I sit, I think it has.”

Sam frowned. Dean sat back, crossing his arms. “Well from where I sit, it feels like you left us and you’re trying to justify it.”

Chuck sighed again and Sam had a sudden sense of foreboding, even before Chuck spoke. “I know you had a complicated upbringing, Dean, but don’t confuse me with your dad.”

Sam’s head snapped back like Chuck had slapped him and Dean stood up so fast his chair toppled. He leveled a short glare at Chuck and stalked from the room in the direction of the kitchen probably, Sam thought, to get a drink.


Despite Dean’s obvious hesitation about the whole situation, he was there when they reconvened in the library an hour later, their guests having been settled in a variety of rooms and everyone now holding a beverage of some description or another. A bowl of pretzels was in the middle of the table for everyone to grab from but they didn’t pull Dean from his bad mood; Steve had practically see the resentment radiating off of him as the hunter took his place at one end of the long table, several seats away from Chuck.

“You have to understand this about the Darkness—she’s relentless, a force beyond human comprehension. It’s the only reason I came off the sidelines.” Chuck finished his description and Steve felt a moment of panic— they had to fight that? But he squashed it down, years of training in the battlefields of World War II and then on the streets of New York, Chicago, and a dozen other strange alien crap magnets kicking in—panicking would not help.

“Must have been great being her brother, huh?” Clint asked.

Chuck grinned around at them—most of them, Sam suddenly realized, had siblings or friends close enough as was no difference. “It was the worst. Always telling me what to do, making me do what she wanted. I mean, you guys know how that works.”

Dean was not amused. “So, where is she?”

“No freakin’ idea, fellas and ladies. She’s warded herself specifically against me. What have you all come up with?”

“Nothing on our end,” Steve admitted.

Dean nodded. “Zip and we’ve been at it for months.”
“Well, matter of time. I’ve always had faith in you… even if you didn’t return the favor.” He shrugged minutely. “Now, if you all don’t mind, I’m going to take a shower.” He stood but before Chuck could leave the room, Dean spoke back up.

“Hey, Chuck. You, uh. Know that she’s got Lucifer, right?”

Chuck nodded.

“The way we heard it, um,” Sam rubbed the back of his neck. “Last time when you bottled up the Darkness, it took more than just you. I mean. We heard that Lucifer was involved.”

“No.”

“No?” Natasha confirmed.

Chuck looked at her steadily but she didn’t quail under his gaze. “Lucifer was perhaps my greatest hope and my bitterest disappointment. Do you think if I could have trusted him for a moment, I would have put him in the Cage?” His eyes flashed to Sam for a moment. “And I wasn’t going to mention this, but thank you so much for springing him.”

Dean swayed forward but Sam was already talking. “That wasn’t really the plan, um…”

“Now, as bad as he was, after all this time in prison, he’s probably worse. And by now, he could have formed an alliance with Amara. Not walking into that trap, guys. So no.” He shook his head. “Thus spake the Lord.” And with that, God left to take a shower.

Sam put his face in his hands. Wanda stood and started collecting beer bottles, letting her fingers run over Dean’s tense shoulders as she went by.

“Back to work, then,” Sam said, face still covered. He took a deep breath and stood, letting his arms fall to reveal a face carefully removed of emotion.

Clint nodded unenthusiastically. “Back to work.”

_______________________________________________

Wanda was the first up in the morning and made tracks for the kitchen for a cup of coffee. She frowned as she passed by the entrance to the library-- Sam was asleep, head on the table and his laptop still running in front of him. She hesitated for a moment before deciding to wait until she had a cup of coffee for him before waking the man.

By the time the coffee had brewed, she had finished surveying the steel and plastic shelves of the Bunker kitchen and could hear Dean’s voice coming from the library, where he had undoubtedly woken his brother. She poured a third cup of coffee and carefully doctored her own before picking them all up and going to say good morning.

“…he takes really long showers,” Sam was saying with a shrug as he rolled his shoulders.

Dean looked at Sam like he was the only one making any sense in a suddenly strange world. “Right? And sings, too-- like, crappy old folk songs. I had to tell him to cool it three times.”

Sam opened his mouth but Wanda beat him to the punch. “You told God to… cool it?” she asked from the doorway.

Dean beamed at the sight of her (although, if she was being honest, it might have been the sight of}
the coffee). “Yeah, I sleep. Well, I was trying to anyway.”

Sam shrugged, smiling at Wanda as he accepted the offered coffee. “You know, I know this is a really strange situation and all, but it’s also really amazing. I mean, it’s God.” Apparently, the previous day’s upbraiding regarding Lucifer hadn’t fazed the hunter. Sam half laughed and Dean rolled his eyes at Wanda. “There’s so many things I want to ask him, like, uh, the planets, you know? Why are they round? Or ears. I always thought they were strange—”

“Okay, fanboy.” Dean cut him off. Wanda looked like she was trying hard not to laugh at the thought of Sam and Chuck discussing the creation of ears. “Let’s stay focused. We’ve got to find Lucifer before it’s too late.”

“Too late?” Sam asked.

Dean looked into the depths of his mug. “Amara is— she’s in my head.” Sam looked at him sharply and Dean sent a sidelong glance at Wanda, as if gauging her reaction. “Hey I didn’t ask for it, okay? She just showed up, but she’s showing me visions. Of Lucifer. And by Lucifer, I mean Cas, and he looks like crap— like she’s really doing a number on him.”

He opened his mouth to continue but Wanda hurriedly shushed him as Chuck entered, Steve, Bruce, and Natasha trailing behind looking bemused at the sight of Chuck in a bathrobe and slippers. Dean did a doubletake.

“Is that my robe?”

“I’m telling you guys,” Chuck shot them a faintly admonishing look. “It’s a mistake to get mixed up with Lucifer. Much as it pained me, I had to walk away.” Sam’s shoulders tensed, as if he was about to tell Chuck just how mixed up with Lucifer he had been and if he could do it so could God but Chuck didn’t give him a chance. “Too much drama. Do you have any bacon?” Chuck added, making a beeline for the kitchen.

Dean smiled. “You eat bacon?”

Sam rolled his eyes and went back to his laptop.

Chuck looked surprised that Dean would even ask. “Yeah.”

“Hey, guys.” Sam re-drew their attention. “This just came up. Looks like that fog, the um. Amara fog, hit another town.”

“And…?” Steve asked.

“And this one wasn’t as lucky as the last one. Thousands died. Uh everyone died except for one man.”

Dean raised a scornful eyebrow at Chuck. “How’d you miss that one?”

“She’s baiting me,” Chuck replied. “I can’t respond every time. I won’t be manipulated.”

Steve “can’t sit by while people are in danger” Rogers cut in, clearly getting over his awe as her heard God brushing off this recent development. “But thousands of people are dead!”

Chuck nodded. “Unfortunately. So find her.”

Dean just shook his head and lead the way into the kitchen, procuring eggs and toast and finding
coffee cups for everyone, including Charlie and Clint, the last two to emerge, both with bedheads and bleary eyes.

They had finished and were starting to unenthusiastically work on a plan for the day when Dean’s phone rang. He looked down and frowned-- flashing it at Sam so everyone could see the caller ID: “scribe calling”. Picking up, Dean didn’t bother with pleasantries. “What.” A pause. “Okay, say it. You have got to be kidding me. Where? Fine.”

He hung up with a grumble and found all eyes on him. “It was Metatron.”

“The Transformer?” Clint asked. Natasha flicked him on the ear. “Ow!”

“The guy-- angel-- whoever that tried to take over heaven when Dean had the Mark?” Charlie asked.

“That’s the one,” Dean frowned. “He says he’s got some info for us, but he’ll only tell us in person.” Sam groaned.

“But first, we have a police station to visit.”

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Eight hours later, Sam, Dean, and Charlie swung into a police station to meet the lone survivor of the Amara fog, having left everyone else at the bunker.

(“I know you all don’t need FBI badges to look official, that’s the point,” Sam had told them in exasperation. “The only person who’s not incredibly recognizable who could really come with us on this short of notice, without a ton of makeup or whatever, would be Bruce and we don’t have time to make him a badge. You all stay here and take up the research end of things. We’ll be in touch.”)

Dean took the lead as they were shown into a conference room where a guy in a red sweater vest under a grey suit jacket was already sitting. “Professor Redfield? We’re with the FBI.”

The man nodded. “Call me Donatello. Yeah, I’m named after him.” He laughed, but nobody else did.

“The… Mutant Ninja Turtle?” Dean asked. Sam threw him a look. Charlie couldn’t hold back a grin.

“The Renaissance sculptor.” Donatello looked at Dean like he had grown a second head.

Dean just smiled serenely. “Right, of course.”

“The cops think I’m a terrorist. I teach chemistry at the university. I lead a quiet life. I, uh, have a cat! Had. A cat.” His voice grew louder but also more tremulous with every word.

“Well, we are sorry for your loss.” Sam began. “Just a few questions. Other than the fog, did you notice anything or anyone who seemed out of place in the streets last night?”

“It-- it all happened so fast. I uh.” He cleared his throat. “It was like it came out of nowhere. We hardly ever get fog and never like that. It was horrible. They were clutching their throats like--like they were choking.” Donatello reached up and touched his own throat as he remembered. “And oh, their bodies-- oh, my God-- these terrible back streaks...and that’s when it happened.”

All three hunters leaned in.

“It was like nothing I’ve ever felt before in my life. It was like… my head was exploding, only not
with pain -- with -- with knowledge and-- clarity! Things that I’d never known before. Symbols and, and voices in languages I don’t speak! Then visions… horrible visions of destruction and death and…” he shook his head. “You think I’m crazy.”

Sam shook his head. “No. Not at all. Just, you know, will you give us a moment?”

The trio conferred quietly by a table covered in coffee paraphernalia. “You get that this is all sounding familiar, right?”

“Um, no,” Charlie said.

“It’s like what Kevin said it was like when he found out he was a prophet,” Dean quietly explained. “So what, this guy’s a prophet?”

“I thought Crowley rounded up all the future prophets and tried to kill them.”

“Yeah, but we rescued them and Donatello wasn’t a part of that. But yeah it’s possible Crowley missed a few.”

“And obviously,” Charlie added, “Crowley had no idea this dude was in line after Kevin.”

“How would he?” Dean agreed. “He hadn’t gotten hit by the God power yet. So Amara’s fog—could it have been Amara’s God power?”

Sam shrugged. “It’s still God power.”

Dean sighed. “All right. I need a coffee.”

“Yeah.” Sam and Charlie chorused in unison.

Sam turned and headed back to the table, though.

Donatello was fidgeting slightly. “Am I, uh, under arrest?”

“No, just wanted to check out a few more aspects of your story.” He pulled out a piece of paper and snagged a pen from the center of the table, scribbling a few words of Enochian. “Would you look at this? Try to read it a little.”

He was hyper aware of Dean’s eyes across the room, supposedly getting coffee so Donatello wouldn’t feel trapped but telegraphing his every move to Sam as he tested the potential prophet.

“Oh, I can’t, I don’t know anything about it.” He glanced down at the paper anyway and his forehead crinkled. “Behold the face of God!” he proclaimed, looking thunderstruck. “That came right to me… who speaks this language?”

Sam shrugged casually. “Angels.”

Dean spoke up. “Right. Let’s bounce.”

They hustled out, Sam, Dean, and Charlie flashing badges as they hurried Donatello between them, forcing the protesting prophet into the back of the car with Charlie, who cheerfully explained the situation as well as she could.

“I can’t be a prophet!” Donatello stuttered out. “I’m— I’m an atheist and a chemist! I believe in molecules, not God!”
Dean glanced at him in the mirror. “Well, we’re pretty sure prophets don’t even know they’re in the game until they’ve actually been touched by God, so…”

“I was touched by God?”

“Or possibly his sister, Amara,” Charlie helpfully clarified, clearly far too amused.

“He has family?!”

“Yeah. She wants him gone so she can annihilate the universe,” Sam answered. “That’s the headline.”

“What?”

“And since you might have a hotline to her, we’re hoping you can help us find her,” Dean got around to the point.

Donatello looked shocked. “Why would you want to find her?”

“We need to rescue this guy she’s holding.”

“Who is it?”

Sam grimaced. “Lucifer.”

“Her nephew,” Charlie threw in.

“Who’s possessing an angel at the moment,” Dean clarified,

“Oh.”

Charlie watched as the newly anointed prophet reached out slowly and tried the door handle, making it rattle. Dean rolled his eyes at her in the rearview mirror. “It’s locked,” he pointed out. “The other one, too. Sometimes we keep monsters in the back.”

Donatello pulled back his hand like he had been burned and was starting to look like he was on the edge of panicking. “I-I-I can’t do this!”

“Yeah, you can,” Sam said.

“No, I promise you I can’t.”

“Look,” Charlie touched his shoulder quickly. “We can’t force you to do this. You’ve got to want this.”

“It’s like asking me to believe in Santa Claus.”

Dean smirked. “Well, actually--”

“Dean, not now.” Sam shot him a glare.

“Okay look,” Dean amended. “We’re not asking you to believe that this is true. Just act like you do. People do it all the time.”
Hours later, Sam and Dean finally sat down at the bar on either side of Metatron. They had dropped Donatello and Charlie off at the bunker, where Donatello had successfully been introduced to God without having a complete breakdown, mostly.

Charlie was in charge, something that had left her cheerful, despite being left out of this next leg of the adventure.

“Okay, so why did you have to see us? What so urgent?”

“So I, uh, notice you’ve been in touch with Chuck, AKA you know who.”

“Yeah, yeah, is this going anywhere? Chuck agreed to take on Amara.” Sam said.

“He said that?” Metatron leaned forwards. “Used those words?”

“Pretty much,” Sam hesitated. “So what, he’s not confronting Amara?”

“No,” Metatron downed his drink. “No, no. He’s– He’s going to… meet with her. He’s not just gonna take her down. He’s gonna sacrifice himself.”

“Do you really expect us to buy this?” Dean asked.

“Read it yourself,” Metatron grunted, tossing a manuscript onto the table in front of Sam. “It’s his own words. Ignore the typos. It’s not an autobiography like he told me. It’s a suicide note.”

Dean slid a beer across the old Men of Letters map table to Donatello. “Got you a beer. I don’t know if you drink.”

Donatello took a hefty swig. “I do now.”

“Well.” Dean sighed. “I don’t know if Chuck is leaning our way.”

“You don’t know?” Donatello asked. “Didn’t you have a conversation about it when you and Sam got back from meeting the other guy. Megatron?”

“Yeah. But Chuck was not very helpful.” Dean grumped. “I’m hoping… If we do get Lucifer for added muscle, then maybe he’ll play ball.”

“I thought they hated each other.”

Dean shrugged again. “They do.”

The door scraped open as Donatello heaved a sigh of his own, Sam and Metatron descending from the landing. “I miss being an atheist.”

Sam loomed at Metatron’s shoulder. “All right, Metatron. Make it quick. Don’t touch anything.”

“Fine,” the angel snapped back. “Dean! Thanks for inviting me!”

“Inviting you? Ever since we left you at the bar, you’ve been following and circling the building all night. You sent me two hundred text messages with dumbass emojis. So you got three minutes.”

“Oh, Donatello!” The angel smiled with pretentious benevolence at the prophet. “Pleasure to meet you. Metatron, scribe of God. I was there when you were designed. I wrote your name on the inside
of the angel’s eyelids.”

Neither Sam and Dean nor Clint, who had just entered the room, could contain the force of their eye rolls. Donatello cut his eyes sideways at Dean. “He’s freaking me out.”

Dean intervened. “Okay, you said you wanted to help. What, besides world class douchery, do you have to offer?”

“Oh, nothing,” Metatron replied sarcastically. “I just transcribed the angel tablet and know all the spells. And I know what makes Amara tick. And I had a relationship with the big guy for eons. Shall I keep going?”

“Still a dick,” Dean muttered.

Metatron picked up a random beer bottle off the table and Sam lunged forward and swiped it. “That’s mine!” He set the bottle back on the table and turned to Clint, Dean, and Donatello. “Much as I hate to admit it, he sort of has a point.”

“I don’t know…” Clint was still watching Metatron doubtfully, clearly unimpressed.

“You need all the help you can get— even douche help,” Metatron tried.

“Yeah? And since when did you jump on the God wagon? You never used to give a damn,” Dean retorted.

“Well, I didn’t. Now that he’s gone all kamikaze, leaving us with the Darkness…” Metatron ran a hand through his hair and heaved a melodramatic sigh. “I was by his side since the creation. He believed in me. If there’s something I can do to help save him and his creation, then, uh. It sort of seems like I should.”

Sam nodded sharply. “The plan is to rescue Lucifer from Amara. Then he teleports us out of Amara’s hideout and we convince Chuck to use him to fight her.”

Metatron looked incredulous. “That’s your plan? Do you even know where Amara is?”

Donatello half raised a hand. “I might know where she is. I’ve been getting this… vibe. It’s like a sort of ping in my cerebral cortex.”

“Oh, so either Amara or a stroke. And how are we supposed to keep Amara busy while we’re liberating Lucifer?”

Dean looked grim. “That’s where I come in.”

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Dean blinked in the wood’s dappled sunlight. Amara smiled gently, dark hair waving over her shoulders and onto the top of the dark and gorgeous gown she wore.

“Thank you for reaching out to me, Dean.”

Dean swallowed. “You said you wanted to meet.”

“I missed you.” Amara smiled again and something about it was so powerful he felt dizzy for a moment. “I know you feel the same way. So… what do we do?”

Dean took a deep breath. He had been drunk a lot of times in his life but somehow, this sort of
intoxication was different, clouding some thoughts and not others, leading him down the paths of false facts and bad decisions. “There can be no us. We should just walk away,” Dean managed, although he had been hoping to make a stronger refusal.

“Then why don’t you, Dean?” Amara asked, reaching out with one hand to stroke his cheek.

Two sets of car headlights cut through the early morning haze as they pulled up to an abandoned-looking building and shut off, the sound of doors opening and slamming shut filling the dawn as Sam, Metatron, Donatello, Clint, Wanda, Natasha, and Steve piled out of the Impala and a Jaguar that Natasha had procured from somewhere.

(Sam didn’t ask and to be honest he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. It was a great car, though.)

Everyone converged silently at the doors. “Ready?” Sam asked the small band of fighters, the scribe, and the prophet.

There was a general murmur of quiet agreement and Sam reached out to softly open the door. He entered and slid to the left, Natasha and Clint right behind him, Steve and Wanda behind them, and Metatron and Donatello at the back. The group of Avengers and Sam fanned out, moving on almost silent feet through the dim light of the warehouse, passing stacks of rotting wood crates, metal beams holding up the slowly decaying ceiling, and filthy puddles of dank water.

Sam made the final approach, knife in hand and Metatron and Donatello on his heels, as they moved towards a splash of dawn in the center of the building, the weak light falling on Lucifer-- Castiel, Jimmy Novak-- as he sagged towards the ground, wrists chained above him to a railing.

He looked like crap, breathing wet and heavy. But he still found the energy for snark. “Good,” Lucifer began, eyeing Sam, Donatello, and Metatron. “Larry, Curly, and Moe. Oh!,” he added, as Steve, Wanda, Clint, and Natasha emerged behind the other three. “And all four Beatles. Search and rescue? Wow.” He locked onto Donatello. “It’s one of Dad’s favorites. Your ticket finally came up, huh? It’s wacky, isn’t it? One minute, you’re nobody. And then-- SHAZAM-- you’re Joan of Arc. Let’s hope this one ends better than that.”

Sam was not amused. “Can the small talk. We’re busting you out of here.”

“Well, it seems fair, since I wouldn’t be here if you lunatics hadn’t set me up to be grabbed by Amara,” Lucifer said.

Everyone smirked. “You’re going to help us take her down,” Sam announced and Lucifer’s grin faded. “If you say no, we’ll just leave you here in Abu Ghraib.”

Metatron’s voice caught the corner of Sam’s attention; the scribe was chanting something quietly and indistinctly behind him.

Lucifer coughed. “Say no? You see what she’s done to me? Do I look like a fan?”

Steve and Wanda took the twelve and six positions while Natasha and Clint joined Sam, pulling lockpicking tools from various hidden pockets. Metatron’s chanting grew louder. “Eeroh, mahday saytah!”

Lucifer raised his eyebrows at the scribe. “You grab him from the steno pool?”
Sam fired back. “You understand you’ll be working with your father. Is that gonna be a problem?”

“That’s family. This is bigger.”

“So you’ll table all the old stuff?”

“What happens in Heaven stays in Heaven.”

Metatron’s chanting rose again like the wind. Sam turned slightly his way, keeping an eye on the half chained Lucifer. “Are we getting any closer? Dean can’t stall Amara forever.”

“Kahtoh, mahday, tayroh!” Sweat beaded on Metatron’s brow. “I’m- I’m narrowing it down.”

Dean forced himself to take a half step back from Amara, trying to clear his head.

“You’re right. I am drawn to you. And it bothers the hell out of me cause I can’t control it.”

“Then why fight it?” Amara asked, hand dropping back to her side. “What you’re feeling is that I am the end of your struggle. Something stops you. Keeps you from having it all.”

Dean closed his eyes and tried to turn away, but something-- someone-- was keeping him in place.

If his eyes were still open, he would have seen Amara’s sudden frown.

“Where are your thoughts?” she asked. “Something’s… different.”

The last lock clicked and Natasha yanked the chains away from Lucifer’s wrists.

Metatron stopped chanting and nodded at Sam.

“Lucifer, get us all out of here-- now!”

“Oh, no can do,” Lucifer positively drawled.

“What do you mean, you can’t do it?” Steve barked.


Amara, both to Dean’s pleasure and worry, backed away from Dean. “You’ve spoken with God. You’ve seen him. You betrayed me.”

Donatello’s voice was higher than usual and he smacked Sam on the arm with an uncoordinated hand. “Guys, I’m feeling her! She’s on the way!”

“Right,” Steve determined. “We’re out of here.” He and Sam stepped up, Sam’s face set as his skin made contact with Lucifer’s. They hauled the wobbly angel over their shoulders. “Okay, come on.”

The small band moved as fast as the could towards the door, Wanda’s red magic lighting the way
through the treacherously dim room and making Lucifer’s eyes lock on her with an intensity that Sam disliked but didn’t have time to deal with. He did a fast head count, then twisted to see Metatron, standing with his arms outstretched back in the dusty beams of light. “Metatron! Come on!”

“It’s okay, Sam.” The scribe’s voice was calmer than Sam had ever heard it to be. “You go.”

“What?! Come on!”

“I’m serious.” He took a deep breath. “I got this.”

Sam tore his eyes away just as Metatron produced a knife from somewhere and knelt to paint a sigil on the floor.

“Come on,” Steve said and they tumbled outside after everyone else, squinting in the light of the rapidly rising sun, Lucifer still sagging between him. Sam stuffed him ungraciously into the back of the Impala, Steve pushing in after him. Donatello slammed the passenger side door and a moment later, Sam had the key in the ignition and they were rushing away, the roar of their engine drowning out the Jaguar’s and fading into the distance.

They hadn’t gone as far as they liked when Amara appeared on the road between the cars. Sam stood on the brakes, the Impala screeching to a halt as he tried to avoid the godly woman. Ahead, Natasha threw the Jaguar into reverse and squealed back towards them. It only took Steve, Sam, and Donatello a moment to realize what she was doing; Natasha was trying to hit Amara.

Sam threw the Impala in reverse as well, trying to get them out of Natasha’s way, but before anyone could go any further, Amara reached out with a hand in each direction and, seemingly without effort, stopped both cars. She had a hand on the Impala’s undercarriage and the back bumper of the Jaguar and lifted the both neatly into the air, smoke streaming from both car’s wheels as their respective drivers tried to fight against the awesome force.

Amara’s frown deepened and she glanced back and forth between each car. “You really aren’t worth sparing. None of you.” She dropped both cars heavily and raised her arms to strike— Sam hit the gas- and a moment later, they were dropping heavily onto the floor, the Impala side by side with the Jaguar, smoke still filling the air.

“What happened?” Donatello asked, bewildered. “Where are we?”

Sam hauled the door open, waving the smoke away and coughing. “Back in the Bunker.”

He opened the back door and pointed Lucifer and Steve up the stairs, the occupants of the other car behind him.

They entered the map room to find Charlie and Bruce sitting uncomfortably at the map table with Chuck standing at the head, a beer in hand. He smiled faintly at them. “Occasionally, I do answer a prayer.” He took a long drink and looked Lucifer up and down. Everyone else was silent.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

“You’ve changed,” Lucifer said back.

Chuck shrugged. “Still, I’m pretty much the same.”

He crooked a finger and in the blink of an eye, the vessel was healed. Lucifer didn’t thank his father.
Hi! I was going to wait to post this until it was finished (that is to say, up through the beginning of season 12) but it was getting long and I figured I'd break it in half so you would have something to read while I work on the other half. It'll be slow business--midterms already here! But I'm trying to write every day so hopefully it won't be TOO long!

Let me know what you think!
Battle Royal, Part 2

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Large portions of text in this chapter are quoted directly from Supernatural, Season 11, episodes 22 and 23. I own none of it.

Get ready, y'all. This chapter is a crazy one!

The group slowly disbanded into awkward, smaller groups, everyone very, very aware of who was in their midst. Sam and Dean walked Donatello outside. Everyone else mostly made their way to the library, picking up books to feign interest in while keeping an eye on Lucifer and his father.

Lucifer picked up a book of his own. “So where were you?” he asked without even looking up at Chuck.


“Mm. Yeah. Great. Didn’t ask you to.”

Chuck sighed. “Son, be reasonable.”

Clint made eye contact with Natasha, completely weirded out at hearing Chuck-- God-- call Lucifer ‘Son.’

Lucifer apparently didn’t think much of it either. “One cosmic Band-Aid on my knee and what, you think we’re even now? Is it time for us to go play catch in the yard?”

The sound of the bunker door opening and closing echoed through the library as Lucifer snapped the book shut. “Screw you.”

Sam and Dean trooped down the stairs with a couple of bags of ordered food. “Guys?” Dean called, poking his head into the room before entering and setting down his bags. “How’s it goin’ in here?”
“Listen.” Chuck ignored Dean and kept on trying to talk to Lucifer. “I know I’ve been gone for awhile. I’ve missed a few… million… birthdays--”

“Yeah. And the second your *apes* send a distress flare, boom. Daddy’s home.” Lucifer snarled.

“That’s not what happened!” Chuck said while Dean said

“Hey, these apes saved your ass!” at the same time.

Lucifer scowled around them and raised one hand. Dean winced, Sam flinched, and everyone else turned pale as he snapped his fingers.

Nothing happened.

Chuck shook his head. “He can’t hurt you.”

Lucifer’s eyes flashed. “So you’re controlling me now!”

“Just a safeguard.”

Lucifer’s hand clenched into a fist, the other tightening around the spine of the book.

Sam took a seat, but his shoulders were still tense. “Hey guys? Uh, Chuck? Lucifer… uh, Dean… Think we can try and focus here? Y’know, end of the world, common enemy, all that?”

Lucifer slammed the book shut and tossed it onto the table. “Enemy of my enemy is my friend.” He took three quick steps to loom over Chuck. “Team Amara. Go Amara.”

Chuck raised his eyebrows. “You don’t mean that.”

“You’re really not gonna say it,” Lucifer asked.

Lucifer and Chuck had a five second staring showdown. Chuck blinked, but didn’t look away.

“He’s not gonna say what?” Charlie asked Dean quietly.
Lucifer looked around at all of them before ending back at his father. “Screw you. Screw all of you.”

He turned and pushed past Steve and Natasha, both of them stepping past to let him by.

Chuck sighed. “Kids, huh?” He stood as well, but left through the other door, leaving a group of befuddled superheroes behind him. Steve shook his head and started rummaging through the bags Sam and Dean had brought, passing out cartons of take out and forks.

“Hold on,” Dean said. “Where was Lucifer going? He doesn’t have a room!”

But the words had barely left his mouth when faint music started, barely audible from distance but distinctive nonetheless. Sam dropped his fork.

“No fucking way,” he hissed with such venom that several of the Avengers nearest looked at him almost in trepidation. Barely a second later, the anger had drained from his shoulders, leaving them sagging and leaving Sam’s face lined with resignation.

“Where--” Wanda asked.

“He’s in my room. Of course.”

“Nope. We’re not going to do this.” Steve stood up suddenly. Everyone watched him in trepidation.

“He’s in your house, he’s been in Sam’s head, he’s done horrible things to all of you--” Sam flinched -- “and God might not have been exactly what I expected but I will be damned if I let him take Sam’s room.”

“Steve, it’s--”

“No.” Steve cut Sam off. “It’s not okay. And if we didn’t have bigger issues to deal with, I would have us all down there and perform an extract and retrieve with the devil himself.” Steve sighed as Sam just raised an eyebrow at him and he sat back down, resigned. A silence dropped onto the room, only broken by the muffled music.

“Thanks, Steve,” Dean said. “But you’re right, we have bigger fish to fry.”

“We do need to get him out, though,” Sam said, reaching across the table to snag a box of fried rice. “So he can talk to Chuck.”

“Let’s go, then,” Natasha stood and everyone followed her down the hallway.

Sam slammed his hands against his own bedroom door. “Lucifer! You know, sometime you’re gonna have to come out and… talk… to God.”

The music got slightly louder.

Dean scrubbed his face with one hand. “It’s like the worst episode of Full House ever.”

Lucifer yelled through the door. “If Dad has something to say to me, I’ll hear it from him! Until then, I’ll be in my room.”

Sam leaned in. “It--”

The music got even louder.

“It’s not your room, it’s Sam’s!” Steve shouted at the door. He leaned forward and banged on the door himself. There was no answer.
“Whatever,” Dean flung his hands up in the air. “He’s an asshole.”

Clint and Natasha took their last shots, each landing the bullet perfectly in the center of their target’s foreheads. Everyone pulled off their ear protection.

“Wow,” Dean said. “I thought I was a good shot but that really is next level. Impressive.”

Clint grinned and started taking the gun apart. “Thanks.”

Wanda checked her watch. “I wonder how much longer they’ll be.”

Everyone muttered various opinions; Chuck and Lucifer had finally agreed to sit down and talk through some of their problems. However, they had refused to do it with the Avengers initiative, their techie, Dean, and Sam sitting and watching like spectators at a tennis match.

“Better go check on them and make sure the whole building’s not about to come down,” Charlie suggested and everyone began tramping back up stairs and through the long and narrow halls of the Bunker.

It was with some trepidation that they all entered the library, but they found Chuck and Lucifer lounging in the chairs, Lucifer’s feet up on the table. He was smiling, which sent a chill down several spines, but which Sam and Dean seemed to take as a good sign. “So… are we good?” Dean asked.

Lucifer and Chuck nodded at each other, and then at the assembled heroes.

“Okay! Great!” Dean rubbed his hands together like he was planning on taking over the world. “So now what?”

Chuck spoke. “We trap Amara. Put her back in the box. You were right,” he said, answering the confused looks. “She needs to be stopped. But I won’t kill her.”

“...Why not!?” Clint asked.

Chuck rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers; a moment later they were all sitting in chairs around the library table. Everyone blinked in surprise and Chuck just kept talking like nothing had happened. “Amara’s been caged for billions of years, but you know, she was always there. She had to be there, sort of a yin and yang, dark and light sort of thing.”

“English, Chuck,” Sam said.

Chuck held up his hands and waved them up and down, miming a set of scales. “There’s a harmony, a balance, in the universe. Light needs dark. Dark needs light.”

“Like the force in Star Wars?” Charlie asked.

God’s eyebrows shot up but he nodded contemplatively. “Well… yeah. If you blow one of them up…”

“It wouldn’t be a good thing,” Lucifer finished.

“It would be a really not good thing,” Chuck agreed. “Like, ‘end of reality’ not good.”

“Okay?” Sam said. “So we gift-wrap Amara. I mean, we got the team back together, so--”
“Hmm, not quite.” Chuck said. “We’re still a few members short of the original line up. First time it took the combined strength of Lucifer and his brothers to weaken Amara before I finished her off.”

“Even then, it was close. With just the two of us…” Lucifer shook his head. “We’ll lose.”

“Well, who else can we get?” Dean asked. “We need more group therapy between you and the archangels if we wanna have a shot at this?”

“Well, Michael’s in no condition to fight, and it’s outside my power to bring Gabriel and Raphael back,” Chuck said grimly.

“You restored Castiel, though?” Natasha asked.

“Archangels are different. They’re the stuff of primordial creation. Rebuilding them— it’s time we don’t have.”

Steve sat up straight, all business. “So. There’s you two. There’s Sam and Dean. And there’s us. What else do you need to win?”

Chuck leaned back in his chair, quirking an eyebrow at the Captain. “Whadda you got?”

In a sleek, state-of-the-art gymnasium half the country away, a slim phone chimed on a bench barely audible over the sound of exchanging blows. “Time!” A pair of feet rushed over and thumbed across the screen, taking the call.

“Hey, Steve,” Sam Wilson said, out of breath, shoving his flight goggles up on his forehead. “What’s happening?” He glanced over at James Rhodes, Vision, and Thor, who had gravitated towards him at the sound of Steve’s name. “Okay. Got it. Mmhmmm. Okay. We’ll see you in eight hours. Over and out, Cap.”

He ended the call and looked over at the rest of the present Avengers. “Everyone pack your bags. Natasha will be here with the jet in two hours. We’ve got places to be.”

“Where?” Thor asked.

Sam flashed a quick grin. “Lebanon, Kansas.”

The throne room of Hell was as dingy and dark as always. The King himself sat on the throne in his signature dark suit, drinking.

He peered casually into the dark shadows. “Stealing my movies, Dean?”

A moment of silence, and then Dean Winchester walked out from behind a pillar with no sign of how he had gotten there, hands casually shoved in his pockets.

“Let me guess,” Crowley sneered. “You got Lucifer back in the fold. He snapped you here.”

“No, it wasn’t Lucifer.” Dean reached out and snagged Crowley’s glass. “Ah-ah-ah! Time to sober up. Also, you smell like a dumpster outside the Liquor Barn.”

Crowley raised his eyebrows. “What’s this? Concern for my well being? I appreciate your attempts at bro-mantic rekindling. But I think we both agree that ship has sailed.”
Dean glared. “That’s not what this is about. We need your help.”

Natasha subtly bent her knees so she could look Peter Parker square in the face. Pepper, standing behind him, had clearly caught the move and was now silently stifling a fit of giggles.

Peter was biting his lip, clearly unconsciously, and for a moment Natasha felt a twinge of guilt for the job she was about to pass to him. She mentally pushed the regret away; there was a lot to do and not time to feel bad about this particular task.

“Peter,” she began. “Don’t… freak out.”

That didn’t calm him at all. His hands went from dangling at his sides to twisting awkwardly behind his back.

“I’m part of the Avengers,” she began. “We’re well aware that you’re a little more than the average intern. But of course, you’re doing your job well-- both jobs well, really-- and being careful, and the Accords are now moving slowly and without directly threatening you, so we weren’t going to bring up that you’re Spider-Man.”

Peter went a shade paler and squeaked out something that might have been a denial. Natasha ignored it. “We’re about to go do something dangerous. All of us. Every Avenger and back up. Steve even thought about calling in Bucky and T’Challa, but there’s not time, barely.”

“Am I coming?” Peter asked.

“No,” Pepper and Natasha said in unison, exchanging a small smile.

“No,” Natasha repeated. “You’re staying here. Not that she really needs protecting--” Pepper’s smile turned into an outright grin “-- but Tony made us promise to keep her safe. Now that’s your job.”

Peter swallowed hard, but nodded, resolve clear. “I’ll do it.”

The halls of heaven where shining white and Lucifer was standing at the head of an impressive boardroom table surrounded by unimpressed angels.

“And here I thought I had made real inroads with you guys.”

A tall, blonde angel holding his angel blade spoke. “You thought wrong, Serpent.”

“Serpent,” Lucifer frowned.

“We loathe you, we’ll always loathe you.”

“Welp. I came here to ask a good faith favor of you folks, but as you are clearly less than kindly disposed towards me, perhaps you’ll lend an ear to my very own Jiminy Cricket. Hmm?”

Something undefinable in his face shifted and a moment later, it was not Lucifer standing in front of the angels, but Castiel. “Hello, brothers. Sisters.”

“Castiel?”

“It’s me.”
The angel with the knife was still frowning heavily. “Do you think we see any daylight between you and the Adversary?”

“We’ve got the owl feather and the yarrow root,” Rowena said, the witch’s dark red hair tied back.

“Check and check,” Clea, a second witch, confirmed.

“And jaw of pig?”

“Check,” a much deeper, definitely male voice replied, a large hand reaching out and snatching away the jaw.

Rowena turned, hands on her hips, annoyance clear. “What are you doing here, Giant? Give it!”

Sam held the pig’s jaw high above her. “Not till we talk.”

“You’ve walked right into a powerful coven—”

“Actually,” Clea interjected helpfully. “It takes three for a coven.”

“A powerful *witches den*, then, without a weapon. I’ll turn you into a moose. An actual moose.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You can’t.”

Clea nudged Rowena. “Read his aura. He’s under some potent protection. Never seen that before.” She shrugged. “Hear the man out.”

Rowena glared at Clea for a moment before turning back to Sam. “Well?”

“We need you.”

It took Sam a few minutes, but by the time he was done, he had laid out the same facts Dean was putting before Crowley, Steve was telling the other Avengers, and Lucifer and Cas were discussing with the angels.

“So, we’re basically playing the God card,” he finished.

Rowena looked incredulous. “God’s back.” She stood on her tiptoes and stared at Sam. “You’ve tricked me before, Samuel. Why should I believe a word you say?”

“It would explain that aura of protection,” Clea said. “Not no regular magic, there.”

“Clea, dear,” Rowena sighed. “Is this how it’s going to be with us in Crete?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Even if God’s back, why would I care? Hello, pagan here. I serve magic, not God.” She reached up to Sam’s hand, which had dropped slightly, and snatched back the jawbone. “Sorry. Not interested.”

Clea half raised a hand. “I am.”

“No!” Rowena objected.

Clea took Rowena’s hand for a brief moment. “Ro, you brought me a plan to escape. Here’s an opportunity to fight and win.”
“She’s right,” Sam pointed out.

“Nobody’s talking to you, big and tall,” Rowena dismissed.

“I can enlist others. Sister witches.”

“You’re mad. We don’t stand a chance against Amara!”

“Rowena, honey?” Clea drew a card from a tarot deck and flashed Rowena the sun with a half smile. “There is a chance.”

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“All right.” Steve slung the famous shield over his back. The rest of the avengers stood behind him, fully kitted out. Charlie stood between them and Sam, wearing a bullet proof vest Steve had insisted on but otherwise in her normal sweatshirt and jeans. “We’ve assembled all the troops we’ve got. We’re ready to hit her with it so Chuck can finish her off.”

Sam nodded, light from the broken windows of the old power plant striking his face. “A plan from the original playbook. This time with witches, demons, and Avengers subbing for archangels.”

“I still don’t like it,” Dean shook his head as everyone frowned. “Why trap her when you can kill her, you now? I mean, you got to admit, there’s a lot less room for error if you shoot to kill.”


“Right, but why keep her in play? So she can escape and we can go through this all over again?”

“Dean, what’s this about?” Charlie asked.

“It’s-- I don’t-- it’s like this weird connection--” Dean struggled to explain. “I- I tried to kill her. And it didn’t work, the knife shattered.”

“Maybe it didn’t work because you didn’t want it to work. Maybe you didn’t want to kill her,” Chuck suggested.

“You want God to kill Amara because you don’t want Amara to be killed?” Sam asked, confused.

“Yeah, maybe there’s a part of me that just can’t hurt her, but if she’s already dead…”

“Then she’s already dead,” Sam finished.

“Well, this is weird,” Lucifer said snidely.

“Dean, we always worry about this stuff. If we’re doing the right thing. Making the right choices. But for once we have God on our side-- we can actually do things his way for once.”

Before Dean could answer, the building rumbled, a low sound that build rapidly. “Well,” Dean said, “looks like there’s no time to argue. Here we go, everyone!”

A light knock and the sound of bickering reached them over the fading rumble and the door was unceremoniously shoved open to reveal Crowley and Rowena, both with their arms crossed. “Ladies first, Fergus,” Rowena said, pushing past her son to join the group already waiting.

“Of course, mother,” Crowley agreed, rolling his eyes and looking over the assembled company speculatively. His eyes landed last on Lucifer. “Hello, Lucifer.”
“Crowley.” Lucifer nodded at him. “How’s having the old job back?”

“I don’t hold grudges. Besides, that dog collar was a lovely touch, really made my eyes pop. Almost wore it here today.”

Rhodey and Clint both caught Sam’s eye and mouthed “dog collar? Sam just shook his head.

Lucifer half smiled. “I’m glad you’re such a good sport.” He turned to Rowena. “Hey, Red.”

Natasha twitched at the name. “Lookin’ gorgeous as ever. I think a little apology is in order.”

Rowena waved him off. “You think you’re the first man to try and kill me?”

Natasha looked the witch up and down. “I like this one.”

Rowena smiled and went to stand by the spy, making every man around them very nervous.

Sam sighed. “Avengers, meet Crowley, King of Hell and Rowena, witch. And Crowley’s mother.”

Everyone awkwardly nodded and waved, without any stepping forward to shake hands.

Chuck waved at Crowley and Rowena. “Hello, my children.”

That made Sam, Dean, and Lucifer all roll their eyes. Crowley’s eyes went wide for a fraction of a second before they narrowed in disbelief. “Him? Really?”

“Rowena, Crowley, nice to meet you.”

“Okay, okay, enough meet and greet.” Dean waved his arms for attention. “Ground rules. No flirting. No fighting. And no deals. No talking about who gets what and who is owed if we survive this.”

“Nobody even likes each other,” Sam pointed out. “So it doesn’t matter.”

“Right,” Dean agreed. “Only the fight ahead.”

“Here’s the plan,” Chuck said. “Amara's looking for me. But I'm warded against her, for now. The second I drop the warding, she'll show. She'll be expecting a fight, and we'll give it to her. Shock and awe. Shock, and awe.” He turned to the group. “You have your troops in position?”

Rowena raised her hand. “Ah, fabulous plan, God, but doesn't this strategy strike anyone as a wee bit un-strategic? Shouldn't we at least try to catch her off guard?”

“Also,” Crowley interrupted, “is that sequence set in stone? Angel, demon, witch power, Avengers? Seems to me that the first response should come from the most disposable force.” He cast a sideways look at his mother and the Avengers.

“Right! Good argument,” Lucifer sneered. “Demons first, it is.”

The King of Hell looked down his nose as if he were talking to a child he particularly hated. “The weakest should go first. Naturally, that means the witches.”

Steve growled, “Enough.”

Chuck sighed. “After the demons, it's Lucifer’s turn. Physical attack. One-on-one.”

“What about Cas?” Dean asked.
“Oh, don't worry. Your pet's safety is my highest concern.” Dean glared at Lucifer, untrusting. Lucifer rolled his eyes. “Trust me, he's on board.”

“Then,” Chuck cut in loudly, “once she's been weakened, I will take the Mark back from Amara and use it to seal her away. You ready?” This last was directed at Sam Winchester, who nodded.

“Yeah.”

Dean flung out an arm. “Wait, what?!”

“God and I talked about this. Someone needs to bear the Mark.”

“Well, that should be me. I-I've had it before. I'm damaged goods.” Several Avengers made incredulous sounds at this, but Chuck spoke up before they could object.

“Exactly, Dean. You've already been marked. I can't transfer it to you. Sam volunteered.”

Dean pulled Sam a few feet away, a somewhat ineffectual move when the room was filled with superhumans and demigods and actual god himself.

“First Cas is making kamikaze side plans, and now you? You couldn't have talked to me?”

“We did talk,” Sam argued. “And I sat down with Steve and we worked through all the possible people who could take it; I’m the best candidate.”

“Yeah? And what happens when the Mark turns you psycho, then what?”

Sam pressed his lips together tightly. “You or the Avengers or both lock me up where I can't hurt anyone and you throw away the key.”

“Sam, no.”

“Dean, you told me you couldn't beat Amara, that it would have to be me. Well, this is it – me.”

Meanwhile, Crowley, Lucifer, and Rowena had begun arguing again, with Natasha looking highly amused.

“I'm just saying, angels can hurt her. It's worked before,” Lucifer said.

“If you call giving Amara a mild case of the pukes working.”

“Fergus, we're trying to disorientate her as much as hurt her. You underestimate witchcraft, Fergus, always have.”

“If anything, she's inoculated. Full-scale demon attack. That's our X-factor.”

Sam sighed and turned back to Dean. “Dean, we talked about this. It's time to do the smart thing.”

“So, what am I supposed to do, just sit by and watch?”

“No. We're both in this fight. You're leading this army. Steve’s good, he’s the best, but he doesn’t know the troops like you do.”

“Oh, you mean I’m babysitting the bad guys?”

Sam laughed a little and the tension broke.

He raised his voice, as if half the room hadn’t been listening to them intently and pretending they weren’t. “Everyone ready? Let’s get this show on the road.”

Rowena sighed. “All right, you lot. Give me room.” They all backed up, clearing the space around her. The witch began to mutter under her breath, her arms outstretched. Her head dropped forward, and when it lifted, her eyes had rolled back, only the whites visible. When she spoke, her voice echoed and they knew it would be visible through the whole bunker several floors below them. “Hellooo, Amara!” There was a pause, presumably as Amara responded. “Easy enough to find you. Take it you’re still looking for God?” the witch asked cheerily. “Well, I’m with him right now.” She blinked, her eyes returning to normal, before quickly nodding at the group and hurrying out the side door.

“No turning back now,” someone behind Sam and Dean muttered.

Sam clapped Dean on the shoulder. “Here goes.”

____________________________________________________

Amara was in Dean’s bedroom. She was eyeing the very… Dean decor; weapons on the walls, a stack of records on the desk. Something more out of place caught her eye; a series of framed and unframed photographs. She picked one up to examine it; a young blonde woman hugging a small child with a smattering of freckles who could only be a very small Dean. A much more recent picture, within the last decade, of Sam and Dean lounging on a fancy couch next to a Christmas tree. There were deep lines in Dean’s face but he was smiling and seemed to be in the act of throwing a ball of tinsel at a man standing next to the tree. The third man was dark haired and had a neatly shaved goatee. The largest frame had a small collage of images, all of them clearly from the same event: Dean and Sam, shadows under their eyes but with arms slung over each other’s shoulders. Sam, Dean, and a group of about ten people of varying builds, all in matching formalwear with gold accents. And the goateed man again, positively glowing, holding close a beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair and a white and gold gown, Dean and Sam bookending the pair and all four of them beaming.

Amara had just picked up this last one when Rowena’s voice echoed from seemingly everywhere and nowhere. “Hellooo, Amara!”

Amara set the photograph down. “Hello, witch. How did you find me?”

“Easy enough to find you. Take it you’re still looking for God? Well, I’m with him right now.”

Amara closed her eyes. A rustle of wind and she was standing outside the abandoned power plant which sat over the Bunker, a few old car sitting rusting around them next to a row of old generators. Rowena was waiting, chin up. “He’s here,” Amara said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. Right inside.” The witch stepped forward. “Our deal holds? Safe passage back in time? I’m going out on a limb for you, betraying God, of all people. Not to mention the Winchesters.”

Amara shook her head. “You’re not betraying God. You’re betraying me.” Rowena’s smile faltered. “I knew this was a trap the moment you called. I didn’t care. All I’ve ever wanted is a one-on-one with my brother. And you've just given it to me.” Amara tapped her chin ominously with a perfectly shaped nail. “The question is how am I going to repay you?”

Rowena thrust her hands forward, power surging from them. “Attenuare!” Light spiraled around
“That,” Amara scoffed, “tickles. Do you really think the power of one witch can hurt me?”

Rowena’s smile slid back onto her face. “I’m not just one witch.” She raised her arms as miles away, Clea and two other witches cast the same spell, a bowl between them containing an effigy of the Darkness. Purple flames rose in the bowl and flickered around Rowena’s hands. “Attenuare! Attenuare!” Rowena’s voice rose to a shriek. “Attenuare!”

“Enough.” Power rose in Amara’s voice and she raised her own hand, the power of Rowena’s spell bouncing back and throwing the witch to the ground. Power surged through the loop and a moment later, the cabin in the woods exploded, tossing the other witches to their own deaths.

Amara raised an eyebrow. “Points for trying.” She lifted her other arm to join the first uplifted hand. Thunder rolled overhead, and electricity cracked. Her smooth laugh filled the air, turning into a jubilant scream as a bolt of energy slammed down, blasting a hole in the side of the power plant and giving her an easy entrance to her prey.

Demons rushed her as she strolled in, the twisting, smoky tunnels full of their howling spirits as they streamed towards her. “No!” Amara shouted, the building shaking again as power continued to thrum through her, blasting back attackers as they began to gain ground, buffeting her from side to side and then, slowly, into the air. “No! Get back, no!”

A spirit, dark red and more powerful than the others, tore through the building, knocking Amara back out of the building; Crowley had left his vessel to fight. Amara hit one of the dilapidated cars, the rusted metal twisting and shrieking as she totaled the wreck.

The Avengers, Sam, Dean, Charlie, Lucifer, and Chuck waited, worry twisting all their faces as the building shook around them. They were ready, armed to the teeth; Natasha had a gun in each hand, Charlie was holding her longest knife, Thor’s hammer was at the ready, Bruce had taken off his shirt and was breathing steadily, ready to change at a moment’s notice. Crowley had left nearly ten minutes ago and they had taken up their positions, waiting--

Silence fell.

And then a moment later, Amara staggered into the room. Sam’s arm smacked Dean in the chest as Dean took a step forward. She glared at Chuck and the anger in her eyes almost withered the Avengers around him. “Hello, brother. You cheated,” she panted. “Again. But--”

“Now!” Lucifer charged up behind her, an angel blade in his hand, and stabbed deep, the blade biting through her chest. Amara dropped, the knife pulling free, and Lucifer raised it again.

“Son,” Chuck called.

Amara moaned, low and aching, as Lucifer backed off and Chuck stepped towards her.

“I’m sorry,” Chuck said. “For this. For everything.”

Amara’s voice was harsh. “An apology at last.” She paused to breathe heavily. “What’s sorry to me? I spent millions of years crammed into that cage alone and afraid! Wishing! Begging for death because of you! And what was my crime, brother?”

Chuck gestured around them, dropping to kneel in front of her. “The world needed to be born! And
you wouldn't let me! Amara, you give me no choice."

“That's your story. Not mine. The real reason you banished me, why I couldn't be allowed to exist you couldn't stand it. Yeah, we're equals.” Amara struggled to her knees, arms crossed over her bleeding chest, eyes accusing. “We weren't great or powerful because we stood only in relation to each other. You think you made the archangels to bring light? No. You made them to create lesser beings, to make you large.” She continued to fight her way up until she was standing. “To make you Lord. It was ego! You wanted to be big!”

Everyone was frozen, in stunned silence.

Chuck stood as well. “That's true. But it isn't the whole truth. There's a value, a glory in creation that's greater and truer than my pride or my ego. Call it grace, call it being! Whatever it is, it didn't come from my hands. It was there waiting to be born. It just is, as you and I just were. Since you've been freed, I know that you've seen it.” He glanced at Dean. “Felt it.”

Amara also looked Dean's way; Dean avoided her eyes. “It didn't have to be like this. I loved you, brother.”

For the first time, Chuck looked properly remorseful.


"I'm sorry,” Chuck raised his hands and Amara looked down in shock as the Mark began to burn away from her shoulder.

“No! No! Nooo!”

Between Charlie and Dean, Sam grunted, knees locking as the Mark of Cain began to sizzle to life on his forearm, where Dean had borne it for so long.

“No! Not again!” Amara, despite her wound, lunged forward, grabbing her brother by the throat and lifting him from the floor. “Never again!” Power began to flow from her, lifting Chuck from her hands and choking him, floating in the air high above. The Mark faded again from Sam’s arm.

Lucifer let out a whoop and charged from behind, Thor, Vision, and Steve rushing forward from the front. Amara barely gave the three superhumans a glance, throwing them hard across the room and turning to do the same to Lucifer, smashing the archangel into a pillar nearby. “Goodbye, nephew.”

Lucifer screamed, eyes and hands glowing as Lucifer was banished from his vessel. A moment later, the vessel slumped the floor, unconscious.

“Cas!” Dean cried, moving that way but Amara flung him away as well. Bruce yelled, the sound turning into a roar as his voice changed with his body, the man exploding into the large green monster, who charged forwards. Amara barely flinched, but offered him a little more attention than she had the others, stopping him in his tracks.

“Hm, I don't think so.” She spared one of her hands to make a small circular motion in front of him and the Hulk staggered back, unsteady and wobbling, shrinking and suddenly he was Bruce again, looking exhausted, and confused, and utterly unwell.

Wanda ran forward, hands pushing streams of red magic from her palms and towards Amara, but it was just as ineffective of everything else; Amara didn’t even glance her way, just flicked a hand at her. Wanda shrieked, high and shrill, as her magic suddenly vanished and she stumbled, exhausted.
Chuck’s efforts to escape were becoming weaker and Amara returned her full attention to him, waves of energy keeping back Sam and the rest of the Avengers as they tried to attack. “I’d die a million times and murder you a million more before going back there!” She tilted her head and sneered at him. “Tell me, if you won’t change, why should I?”

Tendrils of energy, black and swirling began to rise from the floor around her feet.

“Amara, no!” Dean called out, finally having swayed to his knees, but Amara spared him no more than a glance as the tendrils began to write around her brother, each smoky missile smashing into Chuck and leaving behind a wound of brilliant light, shining brighter until nobody could even look his way.

“Sorry, brother;” Amara said, then released the spell. Chuck dropped the floor with a sickening thud. Dead silence followed the panic of the last few minutes.

Chuck didn’t so much as twitch. Across the room, Thor groaned, eyes fluttering open. The sound seemed to break the spell.

“Amara, what have you done?” Dean breathed.

“He’s dead. God’s dead.” Sam said.

“No, he’s dying.” Amara shrugged.

Everyone began to warily move, Natasha and Clint heading for Thor, Sam Wilson making his way to Steve, who hadn’t moved since Amara had thrown him. Charlie draped a blanket over Bruce, who was now shaking like a leaf, and was trying to make him drink some water. Vision waved off Rhodey and stood cautiously, heading to help Wilson. Rhodey changed course and went to support Wanda, who was leaning shakily against a support beam.

Amara kept talking. “My brother will dim and fade away into nothing. But not until he sees what comes next. Not until he watches this world, everything he created, everything he loves turn to ash.” Amara began to glow. “Welcome to the End.” Everyone averted their eyes and she vanished.

When Sam blinked, he realized the orange-red haze wasn’t just from the aftershock of the flash. The light from the outside had changed from the chill glow of late fall to a more ominous shade.

Dean winced as he finally stood. “Well, that can’t be good.”

In the subdued aftermath, Charlie had taken charge, directing everyone back to the library and pushing damaged people into chairs and onto couches. Clint disappeared and reappeared with several first aid kits. Sam Wilson disappeared and reappeared with all the snacks and water the kitchen had.

“So he’s gone?” Dean asked Cas.

Cas nodded. “Amara ripped Lucifer from my body.”

“Where is he, then?” Charlie asked, gently pressing a bottle of water into Cas’ hand before heading back to rummage through the snack pile.

Cas hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t know.”
Sam handed Bruce a protein bar, then took it back because Bruce’s hands were shaking too hard to grip the plastic and open it. “All right, status reports all around. Chuck?”

Chuck did not look good. He was next to Bruce on the couch and was almost as white as the physicist. He kept listing to the side and onto the arm of the couch, although he did look slightly more stable since Vision had forced him to drink some water. “You know when you’re driving and a bug hits your windshield? I’m… the bug.”

“So… what Amara said about you,” Dean asked.

“Yeah,” Chuck grunted, pushing himself back upright to take another sip of water. “Dying. Whatever she did to me, I can feel my spark, my light fading. And when it’s gone…”

“So, okay, tell us how to fix it,” Dean said.

“Well, you can’t.” Chuck closed his eyes.

“You’ve got to be joking,” a distinctive rough Scottish voice said. Crowley and Rowena descended the stairs, the Bunker door slamming behind them, both looking tired. The both collapsed into chairs. Crowley kept going. “Well… that was a complete and utter dog’s breakfast, wasn’t it?”

Cas frowned. “I didn’t know dogs had breakfast.”

The mood lightened and everyone smiled a little.

“Oh, yeah. Cas is back,” Sam said. He handed Bruce the open granola bar. “Anyway. Continuing the status report. Vision?”

“I’m fine,” the android said. “I’ll need to rest eventually, but am unharmed.”

“Thor?”

“I ache,” Thor admitted, taking the apple Rhodey tossed him. “But I am merely bruised, not broken.”

“Wanda?”

“I’m not—” Wanda shook her head. “I’m not sure what she did to me. It’s like, like she pulled all the power out. It’s not… gone. But it’s like I’ve been using it all day, and I’m exhausted.”

“Steve?”

Steve waved from across the room, his mouth full of protein bar. He swallowed, wincing. “Bruised ribs. Hit my head pretty hard. It’ll heal up, but I’d prefer to give it a few hours at least before we go dashing off to fight anyone.”

“Bruce?”

“I don’t—” Bruce rubbed his face with his hand. “I’m so tired, it’s like she took all the energy Hulk uses and just drained it out of me, like I wanted to be Hulk but I just couldn’t. It hurt.”

“So, Bruce is out for a while.”

“This is all very nice, but has anyone bothered to look outside?” Rowena asked scathingly.

Everyone rolled their eyes. “Yes, Rowena. We saw it,” Charlie said. “Kinda hard to miss-- the sun is friking huge and red and it looks the like whole sky is on fire and the Sun is dying.”
“Just wondering?” Sam Wilson raised his hand. “I’m a little out of the loop, but why would Amara do that?”

“Well,” Cas said. “The sun is the source of all life on Earth. Without it, everything just… wastes away.”

“Ugh.” Dean let himself collapse into a chair next to Cas. “I want a beer. Actually,” he got back up, walked into the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a pair of six-packs. “Might as well.”

“Really?” Sam asked.

“What?” Dean said. “We hit Amara with everything we got, and she walked it off.”

“So… this is it?” Charlie clarified. “Last call?”

“That’s right.” Dean said. “Look, man. If you’ve got something for me to punch, shoot, or kill, let me know and I’ll do it. I’ll do it till I die. But how are we supposed to fix the friggin’ sun?”

Clint whistled lowly. “Can’t argue with that.” He took a beer of his own and looked over at Natasha. “We should probably call Fury. Let him know what’s going on. And,” he pointed at Sam and Dean, “You should call Pepper.”

“Right,” Sam sighed. “We should get her out here, if she wants. Although, flying is probably not a great idea right now. But if she starts driving, she might make it.”

“Well,” Rowena stood. “If the world’s ending, I’ll put the kettle on. Me mum always said, there’s nothing a wee cup of tea can’t fix. Although I don’t think it ever applied to God dyin’.”

“So we’re just going to do nothing?” Sam slammed his hands on the table, making Bruce jump behind him.

“What are you going to do, Moose?” Crowley asked, leaning back in his chair and taking one of Dean’s beers.

“Something. Anything, anything’s better than this.”

“Sam,” Chuck reached out and touched Sam’s arm. “I get it. Even if we could lock Amara away, it wouldn’t do any good now.” He shook his head. “I’m dying. And when I’m gone, a cosmic balance between light and dark—it’s over.”

“Fine,” Sam said, but he didn’t deflate. “All right. So if we can’t cage her, we have to kill her.”

Crowley pointed his beer bottle at Sam. “Bingo.”

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Dean reentered the room, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Pepper’s on the way. She’s bringing that kid with her, what’s his name… Parker, so they can trade off driving. Is he even old enough to drive?”

“Yes,” Natasha said, “Although I don’t think he’s had much practice. He is from Queens, after all.”

“Well, they should be here in about 22 hours.” Dean turned to Sam and his unofficial team. Bruce, still wearing torn sweats and a blanket, was deep in a stack of books, but looked pleased. Clint and Sam Wilson were starting to reshelving the pile and Sam held only one book in his hands. “Are you sure you’re cool with killing the Darkness? Cause earlier you argued not to, and--”
“Look, Chuck’s dying—” Sam sent Chuck an apologetic look. “Uh, no offense, God.”

“Yeah, no, I’m dying,” Chuck shrugged and reached up to rub his face with a shaky hand. “So, we don’t really have a choice. I mean, look. Y-You’ve got darkness and light. You take one side away and—”

Cas nodded. “It upsets the scales—the whole balance of the universe.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “But you take both away, and now both sides of the scale are empty, so…”

“Okay. Okay. Right, look.” Dean took a seat, glancing at the book Sam was holding. “How exactly are we gonna do this? I mean, Lucifer hit her with a Hand of God, that knife, and, well, we saw how that turned out.”

“She does seem impossible to destroy,” Thor said from the end of the table.

“Is she, Chuck?” Natasha asked.

Chuck didn’t answer.

“Chuck?” Steve asked from the couch.

“Charles?” Rowena asked from the doorway, cup of tea in each hand. She crossed to slide the other in front of Bruce, who nodded gratefully.

“All right. Fine.” Chuck shrugged. “The Darkness might—might have a weakness—” He walked over to Crowley, who had procured a bottle of whiskey from somewhere, and stole the bottle. “Light.”

“He tells us now,” Crowley said sarcastically.

“We didn’t want to kill her before,” Chuck said.

“Okay,” Sam said, snapping his book closed. “How much light are we talking about?”

“A lot. I don’t know. 10,000 suns set to supernova.”

Everyone looked a little taken aback at that. Bruce half raised a hand, using the other to keep his blanket from falling off his shoulders. “Yeah, um. That might not be my type of physics, but I’m pretty sure that’s gonna be hard to do.”

“Well,” Clint said, looking pointedly at Chuck. “You’re God. So… just God them up.”

Natasha smacked him on the arm.

“Look at me,” Chuck said. “I’m not in the best shape right now.”

“We just need some other ideas,” Sam said. “Rowena?”

She scoffed. “This is beyond even the Book of the Damned.”

“Crowley?”

“Oh, I got nothing.”

Cas spoke up. “What about souls? They fuel your demon deals. Souls are living batteries, full of
energy. They're full of light. Each one is as powerful as...100 suns?"

Rowena raised her eyebrows and nodded. “H-He's not wrong.”

Dean nodded. “Okay, so if we got this kind of juice, then what?”

“You get me enough souls...I can build a bomb,” Rowena said.

Steve looked at Chuck. “Would that do the trick?”

“Uh… maybe?”

“Okay, it’s what we’ve got. Plan B,” Sam said. “How many souls are we talking here?”

“The more, the better,” Rowena said.

“Even if you could get that kind of firepower, do you think it would work?” Crowley asked doubtfully.

“I can ask the angels. Heaven is full of souls,” Cas volunteered.

“What else we got?” Sam asked.

“Ghosts,” Dean added. “They’re just souls with baggage, right?”

“Yeah, but we would need a whole lot of them,” Sam said.

Dean actually smiled. “Waverly Hills.”


“Tons of ghosts,” Sam confirmed.

Crowley stole the bottle back from Chuck. “This is desperate… and stupid.”

“Well,” Bruce said. “Desperate and stupid is where we’re at.”

“Fine,” Crowley set the bottle down with a thunk. “I’ll go raid Hell, see what’s left.”

Sam clapped once. “Let’s get to work.”

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Dean craned his neck back to look up at the Waverly Hills Sanatorium. “You really think this is going to work?”

“Well, Rowena said it would,” Sam replied, checking his pockets for weapons.

“Oh yeah,” Dean said. He put on his most ridiculous Scottish accent. “It’s a Book of the Damned spell, boyos. I’ll stay here, keep an eye on your recovering Avengers. Take this week crystal, it’ll suck up all the blimey ghosts. Just say the magic word.”

Sam grinned and they moved in, pulling open the heavy front door, EMF detectors in hand. They silently walked down several halls, wind gusting through empty windows and blowing around papers on the floor. At the end of the hall, a door creaked open, a ghost materializing in the distance and then disappearing into the wall.
“Place really lives up to the hype,” Sam said, EMF chirping loudly.

“Yeah, it does.” Dean gestured Sam through a doorway. “In here.” It was a large dayroom with lots of windows.

Dean set down the bag of gear and started pulling out salt and shotguns. “Right, let’s start with the magic word, because we’re six years old and trying a spell from a witch. Time to bust some ghosts.”

Sam laid some salt around the edges of the room. Nothing happened.

“Where the hell are they?”

“Beats me,” Sam said.

Dean gestured wildly with the shotgun and yelled into the hall. “Get your Casper asses out here!”

“You know what? Why don’t you finish up—” Sam handed Dean the salt. “And I’ll go piss them off.”

Dean laid down more salt. Behind him, a young woman appeared, hair flowing, face emaciated and curled in a half-corporeal snarl. Dean turned and threw a handful of salt at her without missing a beat. A shotgun blast echoed from down the hall and Sam reentered the room, walking backwards, leading a large party of ghosts into the room. As more and more ghosts appeared, Sam shot more, and even more arrived. “Okay, I think it worked!”

“Ha ha!” Dean laughed triumphantly, scything through a ghost with an iron poker. “Woah!” He dodged another ghost, bring the shotgun around to bear, but he was now too far from the gear bag to get Rowena’s crystal. He lunged, but a ghost was in the way and he only managed to kick the bag, sending the crystal skittering away. Sam wasn’t doing much better; they were vastly outnumbered and the ghost of a large man had gotten under his guard, grabbing him by the neck and choking him.

“Dean!” Sam struggled. “Say the magic word!”

“Ahh!” Dean ducked and wove, finally diving to grab the crystal and toss it into the air. “HAGGIS!” he roared. Sam fell to the floor as the ghosts turned into streams of silver light being sucked into the bomb. The crystal dropped to the floor, glowing brightly as all the ghosts were absorbed.

“Wow,” Sam said. “Go magic word.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Not bad”

Sam and Dean returned to the bunker to find everyone else had had much worse success than them. Only about three quarters of the team was present—Steve, Thor, Bruce, Chuck, and Vision had gone to get some rest.

Cas was frowning so hard his forehead might permanently crease. “The angels are—Heaven won’t help.”

Dean set the crystal carefully on the table. “They know that this is the end, right? Of everything.”

“Yes.”

“And… they don’t care?” Sam asked.
“No,” Cas said. “It’s...They know—They know God is dying and they don't think we can win this. Souls or no souls. They’re sealing Heaven, and they're "dying with dignity".”

“Well,” Dean said sarcastically. “That’s just... awesome. What about you, Crowley?”

“I had all the souls we needed.”

“What do you mean, had,” Rhodey asked.

“While I was indisposed, a few of my demonic pals decided to raid my stash.”

Cas was frowning hard again. “What we have— it's not enough.”

Suddenly, the electricity hummed loudly and the map room, visibly through the library doors, lit up with alarms.

“Well, that could be nothing but good news,” Charlie said sarcastically. Everyone stood, turning to aim various weapons at the entrance to the bunker. The door swung open and Billie the reaper walked in like she owned the place.

“Nice digs,” she said dryly.

“Billie?” Sam asked.

“Who’s this?” Natasha asked.

“Reaper. Wants us dead. Tons of fun,” Dean replied succinctly.

“Hold up,” Sam said as Billie walked past him. “How did you-- what are you doing here?:

“I saw you boys at Waverly Hills, and call me a curious kitten, but with, you know, credits about to roll, I gotta ask—why you boys busting ghosts?” Billie took a look at the crystal on the table.

“Why do you care?” Dean asked.

Billie fixed him with an unwavering look. “Dead folks-- kind of my thing. So spill.”

Sam shrugged. “We're collecting souls to build a bomb.”

“To blow the Darkness to hell,” Dean added.

Billie looked at each of them, then again at the glowing crystal bomb. “Okay.”

“Um, okay?” Clint asked.

“What does that mean, okay?” Crowley elaborated.

“Means way things are going, I'm about an hour away from reaping God himself.”

“You’re here to help?” Cas asked.

“Little tip? You want souls, call a reaper.”

Amara, still in her long gown, sat genteely on a low wall. An old woman came slowly by, feeding pigeons gathering around her feet. The woman took a long look at Amara and came to sit next to her.
“Hiya.”

Amara blinked. “Hello,” she said neutrally.

“I like your dress,” the woman said scattering more birdfeed. “It’s fancy for the park, but at least you made an effort.” She offered Amara the bag. “You want to feed them?”

“I shouldn’t,” Amara said. *If I touch, they might die. That’s what happens when I touch,* she thought but didn’t add.

The woman shrugged and kept chatting. “I’ve been feeding these birds going on 20 years now. They’re practically family. And I know that makes me sound like a crazy old bat, but…heck. My husband died a couple of years ago, and my son keeps slipping me these brochures for retirement communities—a.k.a. where they send old folks to die, but not to make a fuss about it.”

Amara frowned. “So you hate him.”

“Well,” the old woman shrugged. “A little bit. Sometimes. But you know family. Even when you hate them, you still love them.”

The air was filled with the sound of rushing wind and everyone ducked as souls started streaming into the room from seemingly nowhere, funneling into the bomb which Billie was holding outstretched. It was glowing brighter every passing second, almost painful to look at. Finally, the stopped.

“How many are in there?” Cas asked.

“A couple hundred… thousand.” Billie drew in her hand, looking into the depths of the crystal. “I raided the Veil. Like I said. Dead folks? Kind of my thing.” She looked to Rowena. “We good?”

“Very.” Rowena held out her hand and Billie carefully passed over the bomb.

“Super.”

“Billie.” Dean called after her. “See you around.”

“Yeah, you will.” Billie turned to look back. “Just hope it’s not today.”

The door closed behind her.

Clint shook his head. “You guys know a lot of weird people.”

“Now what?” Dean said. “I guess we have the bomb now, so we need to find Amara.”

Chuck staggered into the room, looking more grey than he had earlier.

“I can track her,” Chuck volunteered. “She’s not warded anymore, since she won.”

“Okay!” Dean said. “Great.”

“We need somebody to get close to her, someone with a personal connection,” Rowena said delicately. Everyone looked at Dean, who nodded.

“Right, right. Well, what are we waiting for? How do I smuggle this thing?”
Crowley smirked. “We could always shove it up your--”

“Nope!” Dean interrupted. “Not gonna happen.”

“About that, Dean.” Rowena moved in. “You won't carry the bomb. You'll be the bomb. I'm gonna take what's in there...and put it in here.” She reached out and touched Dean’s chest. “Once you get close to her, you press your fingers together like so— boom.”

“Hold up--”

“No way--”

“Wait a second--”

A babble of voice broke through the room as everyone present reacted.

Sam didn’t move, but one hand was so tight around the back of a chair his knuckles were white. His eyes met Dean’s

Dean raised a hand and silence fell. “Okay,” he said.

Rowena didn’t waste time. She began to chant, holding the crystal bomb tightly in her outstretched hand. She stepped even closer to Dean, finishing the phrases and pushing her other hand towards the bomb and Dean. A stream of bright light, dazzling white, surged forward, hitting Dean in the chest for a long few seconds. Dean cried out and doubled over.

Everything stopped and Dean carefully straightened up, wincing.

“Are you okay? How do you feel?” Cas asked.

“Like my insides just got flame-broiled.” He looked askance at Rowena. “Is that normal?”

“Sweetie, we're so far past normal. You've got about an hour, maybe a wee bit more, then you're literally a walking ticking time bomb.”

“Right,” Sam said, his face a mask. “Get the others. Let’s move.”

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Car doors slammed and the New Avengers, Sam and Dean Winchester, Castiel, Crowley, Rowena, and Chuck stood outside the gates of a neat cemetery. The Winchesters moved together, preceding everyone into the cemetery with practiced steps. The Avengers watched as they crossed the cemetery behind the boys, the duo stopping at a grave in the middle of a clearing, shoulder to shoulder. Through some unspoken accord, the Avengers, Charlie, and Castiel shuffled sideways until they all could see the front of the grave and the name it bore: Mary Winchester.

Sam’s head tipped towards sideways and his lips moved; only Steve, Thor, and Vision could hear, with their advanced hearing, although Natasha, Clint, and Sam, who were all skilled at lip reading, also had a good read on the conversation.

“Dean, you know, you don't have to do this.”

Dean hardly hesitated. “Course I do. I just have to get close.” He looked at Sam. “I can do that, okay? I can do that.”

Both brothers looked away from each other and down at the grave. Sam spoke again. “You know, if
“I know.” Dean turned, clapping his brother on the shoulder as he headed back towards the Avengers. Charlie’s eyes lingering on Sam for a long moment as the tall man brushed his fingers across his lips and down to rest lightly on the top of his mother’s tombstone, lingering behind to let Dean talk.

Dean himself headed for Chuck, who was leaning heavily on the Impala and on Rowena for support. “You cool with this?”

God shrugged. “No. I-- even after everything she’s done, Amara’s still my sister. She’s my family, I can’t.” He gestured hopelessly. “I don’t want to see her dead, but...Yeah? I’m not cool. But… I understand.”

He turned away from Chuck to survey the group. There was a long pause before Charlie flung herself forward and into Dean’s arms. Everyone turned away in various stages of awkwardness to give them a moment, Dean burying his face in Charlie’s hair. After a long moment, she stepped back, her eyes wet but gleaming fiercely. “Don’t forget. I love you.”

Dean’s lips twitched in the smallest smile. “I know.”

There was another long moment, but then Steve stepped up, his hand out to pull Dean into a half hug. “Good luck, Dean.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Dean said, a moment before he was overwhelmed with Avengers lining up to shake hands and give hugs. It might have been funny, had it not been so morbid, like the receiving line at a funeral where the corpse was still alive. They came through, Natasha, Clint, and Bruce giving hugs of varying intensity, Wanda kissing his cheek, the others shaking his hand, Thor giving Dean one of the double forearm clasps and a half bow he was so fond of.

Finally, Cas approached. He exchanged a long look with Dean, then gave him a hug, which Dean accepted with a good natured but sad smile. “Okay, okay, All right,” he said, as the hug went on.

“I could go with you,” Cas offered, stepping back.

“No, no. No.” Dean shook his head. “I got to do this alone. Listen,” he turned to all of them. “If-- when-- this works, Sam-- he’s gonna be a mess. He’s gonna need some time, but he’s also going to need someone to look out for him. Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid. Maybe--” Dean hesitated, glancing behind quickly to make sure Sam was still a distance away. “Maybe give him some time. A day. By himself, or just with Cas, but mostly alone. To, you know. Process. But then--”

“We understand, Dean,” Wanda said.

“We’ll head off Pepper and Peter and explain what happened,” Steve said. “We’ll need to fill in the rest of SHIELD anyway. And then we’ll head back to the bunker to keep an eye on him for a while.”

“Good. Um.” Dean scuffed a shoe on the ground. “Thanks.”

Sam had made his way back to the group and Dean turned to his brother. “Okay, look. I want a big funeral. I’m talking epic. Open bar, gospel choir, Sabbath cover band, and Gary Busey reading the eulogy.”

Sam rolled his eyes and half smiled. “Done.”
Dean’s own smile faded. “And for my ashes, I like it here.” He glanced around, coming back to Mary Winchester’s grave. “Yeah. As far as eternal resting places go, it’s not bad.” He reached out and gripped Sam’s shoulder. “Look, these guys will be on it, but once you see her in a day or two, tell Pepper… tell her I love her, and that I’m sorry, okay?”

Sam nodded. Dean reached into his pocket and took out the keys to the Impala, weighing them in his hand. Everyone watched as he held them out. Sam shook his head, his eyes bright with tears. Dean forced another smile, but it was clear it hurt, and after a moment, he let it drop. “Come on. You know the drill. No chick flick moments.”

Sam hesitated, then reached out to take the keys. “You love chick flicks.”

Dean laughed, short and low. “Yeah, you’re right. I do. Come here,” he demanded, already pulling Sam into a hug.

There were sniffs all around as both brothers closed their eyes tight, gripping each other close.

Sam pulled away. Dean cleared his throat. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Chuck raised his hand and snapped his fingers. Dean vanished. Sam crossed his arms and went to lean against a tree near Mary’s grave.

Silence descended. Above them all, the sun burned red and huge. No birds sang. And they waited.

Nearly a half hour later, they were still there. Everyone had drifted apart; Sam was still standing like a sentinel by Mary’s grave, Natasha and Rhodey were wandering through the tombstones, Wanda, Steve, and Bruce were sitting and leaning against the Impala, eyes on the sky, Vision and Sam Wilson standing nearby. Charlie was sitting on the ground close to where Sam stood. Thor and Cas were pulling weeds growing up around some of the tombs and neatly stacking them in a pile. Chuck was paler than ever, his face taking on a grey tinge, and was lying across the front seats of the Impala, the radio on loud enough for all of them to hear.

“Pitiful-- they’ve given up,” Crowley said mockingly from where he sat with Rowena in the Impala’s backseat.

The announcer’s voice echoed loudly across the cemetery. “And while law enforcement is telling people not to panic, residents are being advised to stay in their homes as authorities are baffled by this st—” Rowena leaned forward and snapped off the radio.

“When will we know if this works?” Wanda asked quietly, speaking to no one in particular.

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Many miles away, Dean stood in a garden. There were dead flowers before him, and birds, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen.

“Hello, Dean,” Amara appeared on the other end of the small flower bed separating them. “How did you find me?”

“Does it matter?” Dean asked. “I’m here to give you what you want. Me.”
Amara raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrows. “That’s a change.”

Dean began a slow walk towards her. “Well, I can’t just stand by and watch the world, my friends, and my family die. So if becoming a part of you takes me away from that, then I’m in.”

“You...and that bomb in your chest?” Dean stopped walking. “Do you think I can’t taste the power coming off of you? Please. The problem is you’ve never been able to hurt me. So what makes this time any different?”

Dean kept inching her way. “I don’t have a choice. What you’re doing to the sun—”

“That’s not me. With my brother getting weaker, the scales are tipping away from light.”

Dean looked incredulous. “And into darkness.”

“Into nothing,” Amara corrected. “When God’s gone, the universe—everything will cease to exist. Including me.”

She looked away, eyes trailing over the dead flowers to land on the dying sun. “My brother betrayed me. He locked me away for billions of years. He sent you to execute me.”

“No,” Dean cut her off. “No, no. He zapped me here, yes, but he didn’t want this. This was not his idea. You’re family, he doesn’t want you dead; he doesn’t want any of this.” Dean gestured around them. “Is this what you wanted?”

The wind picked up, blowing hot around them. “No! I just wanted to hurt him. I wanted to make him pay.”

“Yeah, that’s revenge,” Dean said. “It’ll get you out of bed in the morning, and when you get it, it feels great... for about five minutes. I’ve been there. Me and Sam—we have had our fair share of fights—more than our share—but no matter how bad it got, we always made it right because we’re family. I need him.” His breath caught for a moment. “He needs me. And when everything goes to crap, that’s all you’ve got—family. Now you might be a—an all-powerful being...but I think you’re human where it counts. You simply need your brother.”

Amara scoffed at him. “Just stop.”

Dean didn’t. “You don’t want to be alone. Not really. I mean, hell. Maybe that’s why you wanted me. But deep down, you didn’t really want me... ’cause I’m not him. So maybe I can kill you. Or maybe I can’t. Maybe if I pull this trigger, we all live happily ever after, or maybe we die bloody, or maybe it doesn’t matter, because maybe there’s a different way.” He was within a distance to strike, to trigger the bomb, but he didn’t. Not yet. “So I’m gonna ask you again. Put aside the rage. Put aside the hate. And you tell me...what do you want?”

The tense silence was broken by Rhodey’s startled “Chuck?”

Everyone looked over to find the passenger seat of the car was empty. Chuck was gone.

“Chuck?” Sam called. “CHUCK?”

Chuck looked around at the garden, the sun, and his sister, standing a few feet from Dean
Winchester. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Brother, I…”

Dean took a few steps away. Chuck moved in, closer to his sister, who seemed to shrink.

“In the beginning it was just you and me, and we were family. I loved you, and I thought—I knew...that you loved me.”


Amara’s voice cracked. “But then you went and you made all these other things. I hated them. I hated you for needing something else, something that wasn't me. And then you locked me away, and all I could think about was making you suffer.”

“You had your reasons.”

“I did. And I thought revenge would make me happy. But I was wrong. What you've made...it's beautiful.”She reached out and made to touch Chuck’s arm, but aborted the motion at the last moment, crossing her arms instead. “It took me a long time to see that. I know that we can't go back to the way things were. I don't want to, but I wish...I wish that we could just be family again.”

Chuck smiled. “I do too.” He extended his own hand and Amara took it. The place where their hands touched glowed red and in the short blink of an eye, the sun began to glow again, the red haze of the dying star returning to it’s proper color.

In the cemetery, Sam’s legs buckled and he locked his knees as the sun blinked back to normal. He let his eyes close for a long moment and then forced himself to move, back to the Impala, without making eye contact with anyone.

“He did it,” Crowley said.

“He bloody did it,” Rowena added.

Sam slammed the passenger side door to the car as he went by, walking around the long hood of the car to slide into the rarely frequented drivers side. He glanced in the rearview mirror, back at the demon and witch in the backseat. “Out.”

“Been nice spending time with you,” Crowley said. “Mother, shall we?”

“Hmm, I think so,” Rowena nodded at them all, winked at Charlie, and laid a hand on Crowley’s arm. The duo blinked out of existence.

Sam didn’t argue when Castiel got into the passenger seat of the Impala. Nobody else tried to get in the car, for which he was grateful. Steve, though, leaned down to look in the window. “We’ve got to debrief, send some reports. We’ll head to the nearest base, a few hours from here, do that, and then come back to the bunker, okay? And,” he added, before Sam could protest that he was fine and didn’t need them around. “We’ll catch Pepper and Peter, then bring them with us. It’s what Dean asked.”

Sam’s jaw worked for a moment, apparently torn between telling them all to just leave him alone and a desire to see Pepper and comply with Dean’s wishes. “Fine,” he finally said. “Door’ll be unlocked when you get there.”
He started the car, rolling up the window before Steve could say anything else, and drove off.

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It was dark by the time they got back to the bunker and Castiel hadn’t said a word the entire drive.

He broke his silence when they were halfway down the stairs into the dim bunker. “Sam, I’m… so sorry.” He hesitated. “If you want to talk… I’m here if you need anything.”

Sam paused before his next step but any response was was cut off by a voice.

A new one, one they hadn’t heard before, and one that certainly didn’t belong in their top secret bunker. “Hello, hello.” A woman stepped forward out of the shadows and pressed her bloody hand against the wall behind her, a sigil flashing red. Sam turned in time to see Cas vanish, banished from the bunker.

“Cas!” Sam angled forward to face the threat, hands flying to weapons and eyes taking in every detail— it was a slightly different symbol, with a few markings that Sam could only guess the meaning of. The woman was tall, her face angular and her jaw square, her blonde-brown hair pulled tightly back, her perfectly manicured hands holding a pistol trained square at his face.


Sam raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, you won’t have heard of us,” she said, answering the unasked question. “We’re very traditional, keep out of the way, keep to our studies.”

“You, uh… um. What?” Sam asked eloquently.

“They sent me to take you in.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot higher. “To take me in?”

“Assuming the world didn't end, and— Yay.”

That hit a nerve. “Look, lady--”

“We've been watching you, Sam.” Her icy voice didn’t waver. ”What you've done, the damage you've caused—archangels, Leviathans, the Darkness, and now, well— the old men have decided enough's enough. I mean, let's face it, Sam. You're just a jumped-up hunter playing with things you don't understand and doing more harm than good.” Sam squared his shoulders against her accusations, but her next question slammed into him with the force of a sledgehammer. “Now, where's Dean?”

“He’s dead,” Sam said harshly. “Listen, lady. I don’t know who the hell you are or what the hell you want—”

He started to walk forward and Toni jerked the pistol a fraction higher. “Stop.”

Sam kept moving. “Put the gun down.”

“I said stop.”

“You and I both know you’re not gonna pull the trigger.”
Sam took another step. The gunshot echoed loudly through the room, the sound of the shell casing clattering to the floor almost drowned out by the residual sound.

Fifteen minutes later, the bunker was silent once again. Only a drying sigil on the wall, a pool of blood on the floor, and the smeary lines of a body being pulled away indicated anyone had been there at all.

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Amara held her hand out over Chuck’s heart, energy flowing between the two beings and healing Chuck.

Chuck, looking much better, looked at Dean. “I think we’re just gonna go away for a while.”

“Hey, yeah, I get it. Family meeting.” Dean grinned, bright and boyish.

“But first…” Chuck crossed over to where the hunter was standing, placing a hand in the center of Dean’s chest. Dean winced as souls flowed from his body, the bomb leaving him. “Better?”

Dean nodded, then asked: “Wait, what about us? What about Earth?”

Chuck smiled benevolently. “Earth will be fine. It’s got you… and Sam. The Avengers, Charlie. Castiel.”

“Dean,” Amara said. “You gave me what I needed most.” She smiled at her brother. “I want to do the same for you.”

“Okay?” Dean asked. Chuck and Amara reached out and took hands, disintegrating into swirls of dark smoke and ribbons of light. They spiraled upwards, disappearing into the sky.

Dean took a few steps forward, disoriented by the sudden darkness and by the lack of any gift after Amara’s dramatic announcement. “Ow!” Dean grimaced as his shoulder clipped the trunk of the tree. “Where the hell am I?”

He pulled out his phone and waved it around, to no avail. The time was still blinking bright; 2:14 am, but no signal.

A branch popped behind Dean in the dark woods he whirled, hand flying for weapons that he didn’t have; he had gone to his confrontation with Amara unarmed. Quickly, he scuffled around in the dim moonlight for a large stick, the best weapon available. “Who’s there?” he called out, taking a few steps forward and raising the branch to level it at the emerging shape of a slight figure in the clearing he had just walked into.

“Um, a little help? Where am I?” the figure--person-- called back and Dean had to bite back a gasp because that was a voice he hadn’t heard in a long time.

He squinted, hoping to get a better view through the shadows, years of hunter training screaming at him sight his target. The person stepped forwards and Dean, trained hunter, a man who had been handling weapons since he was a young boy, almost dropped his tree branch.
Because there, standing in front of him in a neat grey suit and red tie, was Tony Stark.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! As you can probably see, this fic is looking like it will go on for another two chapters or so. I don't have a timeline for it, though, because we're approaching finals, and then Christmas. So as always, keep your eyes open and drop me a line to let me know what you think! Thank you all for reading!
Dean shoved his phone in his pocket and took an abortive half step towards Tony. His cousin. Who was alive and standing in a clearing. A dozen feet away, wearing the dark grey suit and red tie he had been wearing the day he had been shot, the day he had died under Dean’s hands. Alive and well, although his hair was mussed and his face was a riot of emotions.

“Tony? I, uh… are you? Uh. Really… real?”

Dean took a breath and moved forwards towards Tony, who stepped back, looking around the clearing and at Dean and up at the dark, cloudy sky.

“Dean?” Tony’s voice was just as Dean remembered it and the hunter moved forwards again, slowly raising his hands like he was talking to an easily spooked animal. “Where the hell are we?” Tony asked. “This isn’t-- where are we? How’d you get here? We were at the Compound…”

“Yeah,” Dean said. He swallowed hard, reaching out to finally close the gap and drop a hand on his shorter cousin’s shoulder. “We were when you died.”

Tony reared back and Dean could almost see the memories flashing over his face. He winced internally-- he also remembered that day vividly and it sure wasn’t a walk in the park; the sniper in the trees, the presence of Bucky Barnes, who had killed Tony’s parents, Tony lunging forwards and taking the bullets, Tony struggling to breathe on the ground, the arc reactor which kept his heart steady blinking out and the blood coating Sam, Dean, and Rhodey’s hands…

“Dean.” Tony repeated, this time his voice steady and sure. He reached out, pulling Dean into a short, firm hug. Both of them frowned-- something was different. Both of them stepped back, looking down at there their chests had connected.

Tony reached up with trembling hands and felt across his chest, hands shaking harder as he found… nothing.

“Is it…?” Dean asked, voice hardly a whisper.
Tony nodded, undoing buttons as fast as he could but leaving his tie fastened, pulling his shirt open to reveal… nothing. Smooth skin covering muscle and bone, with no arc reactor to be seen.

“Wow,” Dean said.

“Wow,” Tony agreed and took a slow, deep, painless breath, the first he had truly taken in nearly a decade.

He closed his eyes for a moment and let the tremors run out of his hands before he began buttoning his shirt up. Tony Stark turned and looked at Dean, letting a smile spread across his face.

Dean couldn’t help but grin back.

“Where are we? Where’s Sam?” Tony finally asked.

Dean’s smile dropped as the events of the last few hours reared their heads: Sam thought he was dead. “Shit.”

It had been almost six hours since Dean had arrived back in the park and Tony had appeared and they had finally almost made it back to the bunker-- there hadn’t even been any cars in the area for them to hotwire, so they had to walk, once Dean had figured out where they were. Fortunately, they were only two dozen miles from the Bunker. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much between the park and Bunker itself, so it was walking or nothing.

Dean took the moment to catch Tony up on everything that had happened since Tony’s death-- Barnes’ gradual rehabilitation in Wakanda, his and Sam’s problems with the Darkness, how the Avengers had shown up to help, and then every crazy thing that had happened since then, how they had tried to destroy her, how she had tried to kill God, and how Dean had gone to his probable death to kill her. How he hadn’t-- they had made up and Amara had decided to reward him, apparently, with Tony’s life.

“Wow,” Tony said. “That’s a lot.”
“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Remember any of it?”

Tony took a moment-- they were making their final approach to the bunker, picking their way around puddles and mud on the old service road, and Tony focused on the path.

“No,” he finally said. “A good feeling, a sort of-- warm. But not anything specific.”

Dean nodded. “About as good as you could hope for, I think.”

Tony hesitated a second. “How’s Pepper?”

Dean stopped in his tracks; he hadn’t even thought. “Shit.”

“What? What!” Tony surged forward and grabbed his arm, panic written across his face. “Did something happen?”

“No, but she’s probably with the Avengers-- her and that kid, Peter Parker, who you had hired as the intern before… and they were coming out here when it all was going down but they didn’t make it before we had to leave-- she’s going to show up and I’m going to be alive! You’re going to be alive!”

“Yeah… what if, I don’t know… I could call her from the bunker--”

“She’s not going to believe it’s you, Bobby hung up on me twice after I got back--”

“If she’s with the Avengers--”
“They’ll be here sooner than later, I made them promise to check back with Sam within twenty four hours of me, you know. Dying.” Dean grinned and reached out to smack Tony lightly on the shoulder. “You’ll see her soon.”

Tony hummed in agreement but the frown turned into a true smile as they rounded the last corner and saw the impala sitting outside the stairs down to the bunker door.

“Man, I love this place.” Tony followed Dean down the stairs and through the door into the dimly lit map room. He preceded Dean further down into the bunker and Dean had a short moment to think how well matched Tony looked-- like Henry Winchester and his suit, Tony looked like a proper Man of Letters, back in the bunker. His stomach growled and he frowned; there was probably next to no food in the bunker, unless Sam had gone shopping in the ten or so hours since Dean had been presumed dead, which he was guessing not.

A second later, Dean had bigger problems than food. Tony stopped abruptly and as Dean rounded the table, so did he as several large splatters of blood on the floor came into view. There was a sigil on the wall, the familiar markings the same dark color as the dried blood on the floor and a handprint laid over them. The blood on the floor was smeared down the short hall towards the garage and Dean frowned-- that was someone being dragged, someone tall and unconscious.

“That’s a lot of blood,” Tony said.

“Sammy!” Dean called down the hall, moving towards the library doors and pulling out the pistol from under the map table. “Sam! Cas!”

He found another of their many weapons and handed the gun to Tony. “Take this. Check the bedrooms. Sam’s is still second on the left.”

Tony nodded and headed that way. “Sam!”

“Sam!” Dean followed the blood down towards the garage, but there wasn’t much there to see. No new cars, no signs anyone had been there at all, except that the blood trail stopped without much warning, where Sam must have been loaded into a car.

He rendezvoused with Tony back in the war room, where Tony was crouching and looking at the sigil and the handprint. Dean looked around-- the impala keys were on the table, where Sam must have set them. There were a few untidy piles of books they had all left from their desperate search to
get rid of Amara. There was a small stack of rags and tools in the corner that Natasha and Clint had been using to polish weapons the previous day. And not many other clues. Dean went to kneel by Tony, poking at the bloody sigil.

“That’s an angel banishing sigil,” Dean said. “With some modifications. My guess is that Cas can’t get back here with his angel mojo or he’d be here by now.”

“I was looking more at a handprint,” Tony said. “I’m no expert by any means, but I would say woman? And my guess is with a little hacking we could get a read on the fingerprint.”

“Right,” Dean said. “You get on that, see if we can find out who was here. I’m gonna check the cameras, see if I can catch anyone on the cameras near here-- assuming they didn’t get back here until close to one thirty or two in the morning, since the actual cemetery is pretty far away, there might be something around then.”

They set up quickly at the table, Tony using Sam’s laptop. Fortunately, their initial answers came fast.

“An SUV ran a read light a few blocks from here at 2:21 am, heading away. And there wasn’t another car before or after for nearly half an hour on both sides.”

“You think it’s them?” Tony asked.

“Worth a shot.” Dean leaned over to look at Tony’s screen.

“The name with the prints matches from a British Government employment report. Name, Antonia Bevell. Goes by “Toni”. But everything else in here is probably fake; it says she works for a small finance department auditing books and nothing else. Very… Mycroftian.”

“Right,” Dean said, flipping his laptop closed. “That’s enough to be going on. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Tony stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “We need fifteen minutes. I need to change clothing, we both need to eat, quickly, and we should get rid of that sigil.”

Dean frowned and was ready to argue, but there was no denying the truth of Tony’s words. “Fine, fifteen minutes. I think some of Clint’s stuff’s around, you’re about his size, or you can try some of
my crap. I’ll get rid of the sigil and make some sandwiches or something.”

“Right.”

Thirteen minutes later, there was a stack of hasty sandwiches, a damp spot on the wall was the only indication of the sigil, and Tony was standing at the bottom of the stairs, wearing a pair of Clint’s jeans and a graphic t-shirt with a purple dog on it along with a pair of Dean’s boots and one of his leather jackets.

Three hours later, they were at a car rental place.

Dean leaned casually against the counter. “Jamie Ross?”

The stocky man on the other side grunted. “Who’s asking?”

“The blonde woman you drove yesterday, what was her name?”

“Blonde? Doesn’t ring-- hey, aren’t you Tony Stark?” The man’s face went from bored to confused in a few seconds.

Tony shrugged innocently. “People tell me that all the time. But, you know, Tony Stark’s been dead for, like, a year and half,” Tony added, with the air of someone explaining something to a three year old. “I recommend you answer my friend’s question.”

Ross sneered. “Sorry mate, you got the wrong--” Tony’s fist connected with the man’s jaw with enough force his head snapped back and his teeth clacked together. The sound of bone hitting bone in his mouth almost-- almost-- masked the sound of Dean’s pistol cocking.


“I-I-I don’t know her name!” Ross stammered, hands half raised.

“What do you know?” Tony asked.
Dean set a cup of coffee in front of Tony, who was clicking away on Dean’s laptop and frowning.

“Find anything?”

“Yeah, I ran the, uh, tail number that knock-off Lannister gave us. The plane that the chick flew in on has diplomatic registry.” Tony closed the laptop and picked up the coffee.

“Which means?”

“Which means its flight plans are sealed unless you want me to hack the State Department.”

Dean hesitated. “Can you?”

“Course I can,” Tony scoffed. “But it’ll take a little time and--” He set the coffee down so quickly that some of the drink splashed out of the travel lid. “Dean, look--”

Outside, a large white van with a logo for Gregory Marion’s Veterinary Clinic was pulling around the corner and down the street. Tony and Dean exchanged a quick look-- if Sam had been hurt, and hurt badly and the kidnappers wanted to keep him alive… a hospital wouldn’t be an option, but a vet…

Tony and Dean repeated their act from the rental car place except this time they started with the gun out. It expedited the process dramatically.

“So you dug the bullet out of his leg, no questions asked?” Dean growled at the man sitting in front of his own desk.

The vet ran a shaky hand through his hair. “She offered me a hundred grand!”
“And you took it?” Tony asked, disgusted.

“Student loans were a bitch, okay?”

Dean’s pistol lifted slightly and Tony had to wave him down. “No, no, Dean. Don’t hurt him. Yet.”

“All right, look,” Gregory eyed the pistol. “She didn’t give me her name. When we were done the driver bailed, I got paid, and then some other chick shows up and they all drove away.”

Tony leaned close. “And that’s… all you know?”

“Yeah… totally.” Gregory’s eyes shifted off to the side and Tony stepped back again.

“Dean. Hurt him.”

Dean eyed the man for a long moment until the vet was squirming, clearly ready to bolt but unsure if he could make the door in time. Dean slowly lifted the pistol again, letting the barrel drift until it landed, aimed square at the man’s crotch, cocking the weapon.

“Oh, oh, ahh!” Gregory was suddenly much more eager to offer information. “I have her phone number! Look, look, look, look, I don’t know where they went but she called me a few hours ago-- a couple hours, asking about the sedative I gave the guy so I’ve got her phone number!”

Dean lowered the pistol and slid it into his waistband. He stepped forward and Gregory flinched as Dean reached out to pat his cheek condescendingly. “That wasn’t so hard. Can we get that number? Now.”

“Actually,” Tony said. “I’d like you to make a call for me.”

Dean shot him a look, but Tony clearly knew what he was doing and a moment later Dean understood as well.

The two cousins and their hostage stood awkwardly as Gregory picked up his phone and dialed. The
line rang twice and then a woman answered.

“Dr Marion,” the smooth voice said.

“Yeah, I’m just calling, you know, to, uh, check on the patient.”

Dean mentally rolled his eyes at how awkward it sounded. Tony didn’t bother with the mental bit and his eyes where Gregory could see.

“Is everything all right, Doctor?” the woman asked, the longer sentence bringing with it a British accent: the woman wasn’t an American, or at least she didn’t live there and hadn’t for a while.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Definitely,” Gregory stammered.

“I’m hanging up now.”

Dean reached forward and snatched the phone from Gregory’s hand. “Listen to me, bitch. I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what you want. You have my brother.”

“Dean Winchester. I heard you were dead?” The woman, despite her words, didn’t miss a beat.

“Well, you heard wrong. Now, I’m going to give you a chance -- just one-- to hand back Sam.”

“Sorry,” she said, voice slipping from smooth to oily. “Not possible.”

Dean’s voice grew deeper, anger thrumming through each word. “You think you can run from me? Try it. Because when I find you -- and I will find you-- if he is not in one piece, I will take you apart. You understand me?”

The woman didn’t answer. The line clicked and the call ended. And Dean Winchester snapped Gregory’s phone in half.
Faced with the sight of an angry man who had just doubled over a smartphone with his bare hands, Gregory didn’t complain about his ruined cell.

Dean turned to Tony. “We got her number. Can you put a trace on it from here, with the laptop?”

“Probably, but we should head towards the bunker. If I can’t, we can use what’s there to put us through.”

“It’s been at least eighteen hours,” Dean said.

“I know,” Tony snapped, then took a deep breath. “Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

They got back in the car, Dean driving in silence as Tony typed away. They had only been on the road for an hour when a large van flew out of a stand of trees along the road, smashing into the car and shattering the passenger window. Dean slammed on the breaks and twisted the wheel, turning the hit into a sideways skid and glancing over at Tony, who had been shoved over almost into him and looked dazed; he had hit his head on the door before being knocked the other way.

Tony nodded at him anyway— he was at least conscious— and dropped to the floor, hoping the other driver hadn’t seen him.

Dean got out of the car, frowning; there was no way it was an accidental hit, but for the moment he was going to pretend it was. Buy some time— as much as they could.

He walked around and glared at the dent in the passenger door and the missing window. A voice from behind, just as accented as the woman on the phone’s had been but more rough. “Dean Winchester, I presume.”

Dean turned around and the woman’s posture matched her voice— she was standing casually with her hands behind her back, but her shoulders and knees screamed that she was ready to fight— this was the enforcer.

She walked towards Dean as if she were merely coming to inspect the damages on the car. “You should be more careful about the location services on your phone,” she casually observed.
“You one of them?” Dean asked, any patience he might have had for banter long depleted.

“I’m one of them,” she agreed, stopping.

Dean closed the gap and grabbed her by the collar. “You tell me where my brother is and I might take it easy on you.”

“Oh, please don’t,” she replied and swung, a pair of brass knuckles glinting harshly in the light.

They exchanged punches but Dean, running on no sleep for the past week and dealing with the near death and subsequent healing of God, the reconciling of the deity with his sister, and the resurrection of his dead cousin all before the kidnapping of his brother, couldn’t keep up with the woman. She was fast, strong, and had clearly been trained, and trained well.

A final, strong hit sent Dean staggering and he reached back for his gun, only to find it wasn’t there.

“Looking for this?” she asked, dangling it in front of him before throwing it away towards the car. “So, round two?”

She advanced and Dean scuttled back, regaining his feet in time to be struck so hard he crashed into the side of the Impala. Scooping up the gun she had tossed away only a moment before, she smiled at him, eyes bright but cold, pointed the pistol, and cocked it, finger caressing the trigger. “You know, I would have thought… a strapping lad like you, you would have lasted a tad longer. But hey, you know what they say, good things come to those--”

A gunshot echoed out and she fell back. Two more shots, as the woman reflexively pulled the trigger twice, Dean dropping low as one bullet hit the car just above the tire and the other passed over the car altogether.

“Thanks, Tony,” Dean said, out of breath. He rolled sideways and glanced up to see Tony peering out of the shattered window, the gun Dean had handed him hours ago in the Bunker gripped firmly in his hand.

“Sorry it wasn’t sooner-- I didn’t want to miss,” Tony said, popping the safety on and opening the car door gingerly, avoiding the broken glass as Dean pulled himself cautiously to his feet.
“I’ll take bruises over bullet holes anyday,” Dean agreed.

Tony looked down at the woman on the ground, a mixture of emotions playing over his face—anger, regret, resignation.

“Hey,” Dean said. “You had to.”

“Yeah,” Tony said grimly. “And now we have to deal with it.”

They spent nearly three quarters of an hour tidying up—sliding the woman into her car with as much grace as they could, pushing the car back into the small service road in the trees it had come from to hit them initially. Dean tossed Tony the cell phone he found in the front seat of the van, slid the wicked effective brass knuckles in his pocket, and headed back to the impala, carefully sweeping the broken glass out onto the ground.

“The last call’s from Aldrich, Missouri. I’m guessing Sam’s probably around there,” Tony called, jogging over.

“Good. Let’s go.”

The Avengers once again crammed themselves onto the small cement landing outside the primary Bunker door. The quinjet was just barely visible through some trees and the sunrise light, Natasha having put it down in their customary place just a few hundred yards away. Clint extricated an arm from the mass of superhero muscles and pounded on the door a few times. They could hear the sound echo but there was no answer.

Clint knocked again before shoving open the door. “Hello?” he called down into the hall. They piled through the doors, pairs of sharp eyes raking over the dimly lit map room and the open doors to the library one after another.

The blood had dried a dark, flaking brownish red, the smears running down the hall to the garage still visible despite the color. Papers were strewn about the room. Steve made it to the bottom of the stairs first and ran his hand under the edge of the bottom of the table. “The pistol’s gone!”
Natasha, Clint, and Bruce were inspecting the blood. “It’s old,” Natasha said. “At least a day, maybe a little more.”

“It stops in the garage,” Bruce called from down the hall. “No other unique marks.”

“Something’s been cleaned off here, though,” Clint said. “I think, at least.” He pointed to where the sigil had been.

“Fan out,” Steve commanded. “Check all the room’s we’ve been in for both Sam and Cas.”

He watched as everyone left and then pulled out his phone, hitting a name in his contacts and waiting for the phone to stop ringing. “Pepper! Thank god. Where are you?”

Charlie’s head popped back into the room at the sound of Pepper’s name. Steve gave her a thumbs up but stayed focused on the conversation. “Pepper, we’ve got a problem. Sam’s not here and it looks like Cas is gone too. There’s also, um. Quite a bit of blood. But!” he hurried to reassure her. “It leads to the garage and vanishes. We’re starting a search now, but I just wanted to let you know what was happening. See you soon. Be careful.”

Fifteen minutes later everyone was back in the map room.

“Anyone?” Steve asked.

“I’m not actually one hundred percent sure,” Clint awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “Since I packed pretty fast and it’s been a crazy few days but I’m pretty sure both a pair of pants and one of my t-shirts are gone.”

“The second hidden pistol from the library is gone,” Bruce said.

“I’m doing some looking around at the security cameras,” Charlie was clicking away at her laptop. “It’s been slow going, but my best guess right now is this one. Just found it,” she said. She swiveled around her laptop to show them the same footage of the black car running the intersection that Tony and Dean had watched almost 28 hours earlier. “I’ll start tracing the plates.”
“Right,” Steve said. His game face was on and everyone’s shoulders went back. “Let’s go find him.”

Tony yawned and sat up, his hair mussed from leaning against the window as Dean drove.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“About half an hour from Aldrich, Missouri. Time to start finding something a little more concrete.”

Tony knew better than ask Dean if he was going to sleep before they got there-- he knew Dean just as well as he knew himself and there was no possible way he was going to convince Dean to do anything besides search until Sam was actually in the car with them. “Right then,” he said. “I’ll start with… what, realtors? They’re a slick group, they’ve probably had a house purchased for a while.”

“Do it,” Dean agreed.

They drove on in intense silence, Tony tapping away as Dean glared out the front windshield as if that might get them there more quickly.

“It’s a pretty rural area,” Tony commented.

“They probably won’t be in a hotel or a warehouse, they’ve got money behind them.”

Tony nodded in agreement and kept working. “Got something,” he finally announced. “Turn left in twenty eight miles and there’s a real estate office after a second left. They’ve got a farmhouse in Aldrich that they rented out two weeks ago.”

An hour later, Tony was leaving a real estate office, a piece of paper in his hand. He met up with Dean at the Impala, trading the paper for a cup of bad coffee. “Got it,” he said, pointing at the paper and taking a sip of coffee. “It is the farm house; rented two weeks ago to a blonde woman with a British accent.”
Dean crumpled the paper. “Gotcha.”

Charlie was simultaneously downing her own cup of coffee. She was almost alone in the bunker; just her, Bruce, and Rhodey. Sam Wilson, Steve, Natasha, Clint, Wanda, and Thor had gone to hunt down the licence plate renters. She had just put down the phone with Steve-- apparently they had hit a dead end and were going to intimidate a veterinarian-- when the phone rang again. She frowned and flipped it over, her heart dropping as she saw the name: Castiel.

“Cas! Where are you!? What happened? Where’s Sam?” She was talking before she even actually answered the phone.

“Hello, Charlie,” Castiel interrupted. “Are you at the bunker.”

“Yeah! We got back and you were gone and Sam was gone and there was blood all over the floor and--”

“There was a woman,” Cas interrupted. “I got in with Sam and there was a sigil on the wall. She sent me away and… drained me, I suppose. I just woke up in Florida and I--. Well. I may have stolen a car.”

“Be careful, Cas, but get back here as soon as you can. We need the help.”

Charlie ended the call and immediately called Steve back. “Steve, I’ve just heard from Cas. He’s on his way, but he’s powered down. Apparently there’s a woman.”

“Right,” Steve said. “We just talked to a vet who dug a bullet out of Sam’s leg. There’s the woman and also two men. The woman’s got a British accent, the men are about six feet and five foot eight, sandy and brown haired respectively. That’s who we’re looking for.”

“Two men and a woman. Got it, I’ll start searching on our end.”
“Goddamn that’s a lot of warding.” Dean spat at the ground contemplatively, looking at the lone farmhouse, pre-dawn light starting to filter around them. It was nearly twenty eight hours since Sam had been taken.

“Uh… I don’t see anything.”

“It’s not visible, most of it, at least. You can just sort of feel it, see it at the corner of your eyes.”

Tony tried it and realized he could; it was as if there was a faint almost too-perfect brightness at the edges of his vision, something not quite right.

“Probably a good thing Cas isn’t here. Who knows what they would do to him?”

“Question…” Tony half raised a hand. “What are they going to do to us?”

“Nothing. I think,” Dean said, not very reassuringly. “But they’ll know we’re here the moment we get any closer so as soon as we move in we’re going to have to go fast. You ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

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Steve jogged out of the police station, Wanda at his heels.

“That was fast,” Sam Wilson commented. “Especially considering the time.”

“He just batted his eyes and gave them the ‘are you sure you want to disappoint Captain America?’ look and they caved right in,” Wanda said.

Steve rolled his eyes but didn’t deny it. “We’ve got a report of a woman, dead, in a van on the side of the road. Blonde, carrying weapons, and without ID. We’re guessing it’s her and by the placement
of the van and the woman, there had to be at least one, if not two, strong people with her.”

“So the two men killed the british woman who sent Castiel to who-knows-where with the sigil and then they took off with Sam,” Clint guessed.

“Sounds like a likely scenario. Back to the bunker?” Natasha asked.

“Yes,” Steve said. “We’ll check in with Charlie and the tech end of things and hopefully Pepper and Peter should be there so we can keep them under lock and key, just in case everything goes sideways.”

Dean and Tony burst through the front door of the house only to find the british duo already waiting for them in the dingy front kitchen. The man was tall and had neatly styled brown hair and a neat suit. He was standing next to a similarly tall woman, blonde hair neatly pulled into a bun. The set of her shoulders made Dean snarl and she didn’t have to speak for them to know: this was the woman they’d talked to on the phone, who had shot Sam in the bunker, and who had dragged him across the country.

However, there wasn’t exactly a great deal of time to look at their opponents before battle was joined. Dean lunged towards the woman, pistol out, but she was already moving and he couldn’t get a good bead on her so he swung, the brass knuckles he had taken from her dead henchwoman on his other hand missing her face by only an inch as she ducked and his punch went by-- his reaction times, sped up by adrenaline, were still dragged down by the events of the last forty eight hours and how little sleep he had gotten. Dean ducked a return hit but missed the follow up, the british woman’s fist connecting with his jaw with such force he fell backwards, smashing his head on the table and making the world go black in a burst of sparks, a hand on his ankle already dragging him as gunshots rang out--

Tony had squeezed off a shot before getting in too close but it had only grazed the man’s side and he must have had on a bulletproof vest of the caliber Tony had never seen because it didn’t even stop the man from swinging a trained palm towards him in an open handed slap intended to strike Tony’s ear as his momentum carried him forwards. Tony ducked and ended up just barreling straight into the man, setting his shoulder into the guy’s chest and hearing the air rush out of his lungs in a satisfying whoosh, taking them both back onto the floor of the kitchen. Peripherally, he could hear Dean struggling and then the sound of movement, but before he could turn his opponent drove an elbow into his chest. Tony grunted and shoved forwards, bringing a closed fist into the man’s face and feeling the snap as he broke his nose. The stranger didn’t even wince and managed to get to his feet faster than Tony would have thought possible, landing a painful kick on Tony’s ribs once, twice, until Tony could roll behind a stray chair and gain his own feet, watching as the man seemingly lost his patience and moved forwards to strike again and Tony took his shot, stepping in and hitting him
hard, elbow and then closed fist on the backstroke. The man swayed, then crumpled to the floor.

Tony took a half step towards the semi-open door to the basement where the woman and Dean must have gone, but thought better of it, quickly rummaging around until he found, of all things, a pair of handcuffs. Not quite the zip ties he had been looking for, but it worked. He flipped the man onto his stomach and cuffed his hands behind him, resisting the urge to give him one last kick as he left him on the floor and headed for the stairs.

Just in time, too.

Tony quietly opened the door at the top of the stairs just slightly more and slid through, taking in the scene below: the blonde woman had managed to drag Dean down the stairs and chain him up, hands above his head, right next to…

“Sam…” Tony breathed, and began making his way silently down the stairs. Sam was a mess, tied to a chair, covered in blood, his shirt soaked in blood and water and covered in holes that did nothing to disguise the wounds underneath. His hair was also wet and his face and arms were littered with cuts, burns, and other injuries. The woman stepped left, blocking Tony’s view for a moment, which was probably good because if he got any more angry, he would probably have charged down the stairs and lost the element of surprise. Dean was now fully visible, awake and pissed off.

“...I know, Sam. I’m really alive. I’ll tell you everything, okay? First off, though, who’s Angry Spice?”

The woman seemed amused, rather than angry, heading to a small table near-- Tony’s stomach lurched-- a drain in the floor. It was covered in tools of torture and she seemed willing to let Sam and Dean chat for a moment as she picked through them. Tony didn’t mind-- it gave him more time to creep down the very open, visible, potentially creaky stairs.


Tony winced at Sam’s voice; it was cracked and strained.

“Is that a thing?” Dean asked. “What the hell? Aren’t we supposed to be on the same team?”

Bevell turned, apparently finished choosing her weapon of choice: a thin tipped knife with a mid-
“Right, what a waste,” Dean snarked back.

“Hmmm. It seems…” Bevell began, reaching back down to straighten an already perfectly aligned weapon, “It seems you apes have never read a single book. The Men of Letters has a long tradition of intellectual excellence. In London, we’ve undertaken exhaustive studies of even the most arcane topics.” She hefted what looked like a small ice pick. “For example. Parts of the body most sensitive to intense pain.”

Bevell reached up and grabbed Dean’s face. Tony swore mentally and dropped his focus on Bevell for a moment to instead silently navigate the last few stairs before creeping forward.

“The ear drum,” Bevell continued. “Decaying tooth. Below the belt—” Dean’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second “— and my favorite. Under the eyelid.” She let the sharp point of the pick settle gently on Dean’s cheekbone, fractions of an inch away from the delicate meat of his eye.

Next to Dean, Sam, who had seemingly been gathering strength for the last few moments, struggled to pull free from the chair. Toni Bevell didn’t even glance his way.

“Did you know it’s possible to die from pain?” she asked, and Sam struggled harder. Dean didn’t even move.

“What do you even want?” he asked.


“Hmmm,” Dean said mockingly. “How about… no.”

Tony decided enough was enough and stepped forwards swiftly, cocking the pistol loudly just inches from Bevell’s head.

“Get away from my family.”
“Tony?” Sam’s voice broke, but Tony didn’t look his way, eyes laser focused on the woman in front of him and her sharp tool.

“Yeah,” Dean answered for him.

Tony reached sideways with one hand, picking up the set of keys from the small table without removing the pistol from its current target. He looked at Toni. “Drop it. Ground. Now.” The woman didn’t move. Tony stepped forward and hit her hard and she dropped. “That’s the ground.” He pressed the keys in to Dean’s hands and then took a step back as Toni Bevell reached up towards him and the gun, knocking it away even as Tony fired. She regained her feet, forcing Tony to take a step back as she lashed out more quickly than he could counter, striking him in the throat and stomach. Dean yanked his hands out of the now-unlocked shackles as the fighting continued.

The hunter stumbled forwards, finding his own pistol on the floor and firing a shot in the air even as Tony rushed forward and Bevell picked up a piece of glass. Dean turned even as she slashed upon her hand.

“Xi!” she called and Tony immediately gasped; there was no air and a tight hand seemed to have closed around his throat, cutting off all hope of oxygen. He struggled, but there was nothing to grab, to pull away, only magic, slowly strangling him.

Dean slowly walked towards Bevell, gun held high in both hands. “Kill the spell now. I’m not kidding.”

Toni sneered. “Shoot me and your friend… whoever he is… has no chance.”

Tony almost missed the quick look Dean threw his way and didn’t have enough time or oxygen to interpret it.

“The gun,” she said.

Dean frowned-- then fired.

“Dean!” Sam said, panicking. “Tony!”
But Tony hadn’t fallen to his knees out of pain or near death-- the flow of oxygen to his starved brain was almost intoxicating.

“I’m okay,” he choked out, and Sam relaxed a little.

“It’s okay,” Dean confirmed. “It’s a Chinese mind-control technique. Hard to do when you’re dead. Turns out this ape did read a book or two.”

Dean’s hand landed on Tony’s shoulder. Tony reached up and grabbed it, pulling himself to his feet. They turned together to Sam, who looked worse and worse the closer Tony got and the more he looked.

From this angle, it was clear they were going to have an almost impossible task on their hands getting Sam home. Dean carefully cut the ties holding Sam’s wrists with a knife but then gasped when he got to Sam’s feet. A huge, deep burn tore into the whole length of his right foot. Higher, the poorly treated bullet wound-- the one they had spoken to the vet about-- had clearly not been looked at since Sam had arrived many hours before. Sam’s hands, as Sam groaned and brought his bound shoulders from their locked position, were missing several fingernails.

Dean met Tony’s eyes and they winced; their meagre first aid kit wasn’t going to even put a dent in this for the three hour drive back to the bunker.

“Okay, Sammy, up you get,” Dean carefully half knelt, pushing one of his shoulders under Sam’s less damaged arm and slowly standing, taking as much of Sam’s weight as he could. “This would be easier if you weren’t such a giant, you know.”

Sam’s breathing was ragged by the time he was fully standing but he managed to quip back all the same. “Not my fault… you decided to stop growing,” he huffed.

Tony shook his head. He’d been poking around in some corners but it hadn’t been very productive; there were no medical supplies to be seen. “Sorry to say it, but I think we’re going to have to go up the stairs as is,” he announced and Sam nodded, thin lipped. “Here we go.”

Tony wanted to get under Sam’s other arm and take the rest of his weight off the damaged foot and leg, but there simply wasn’t room on the narrow staircase. He contented himself with carefully putting a hand on Sam’s back, helping the other two men balance as they slowly maneuvered up the stairs without putting too much pressure on Sam’s wounds.
It was taking them much longer than was probably good for Sam or for Dean’s head wound, most likely, although moving faster couldn’t have been any better for them. Still, it took several minutes to get into the kitchen, where Sam and Dean stopped dead.

“Uhhh… Tony?” Dean asked and Tony scooted around them to see the brown haired man standing and leaning against the counter, as casually as a handcuffed man with a broken nose and a swollen jaw could. Despite his mussed hair, the blood on his face, and the metal around his wrists, he wouldn’t have looked too out of place in a Bond film.

“Right.” Tony didn’t take his eyes off the man. “Dean, can you get Sam to the car? I’ll just be a minute.”

“Yeah. I can do that.” Dean carefully nudged Sam towards the door.

Tony waited, silent and staring, until they were out of earshot. To his credit, the man didn’t quail under his glare. Once the boys were gone, Tony crossed and casually pulled himself up to sit on the counter, invading the man’s personal space. “So. You’re with the… hmm. Men of Letters.”

The man turned but didn’t take a step back. “Yes. British Chapter. My name is Mick Davies. I’d shake your hand, but…”

Tony didn’t laugh. “Why did you take Sam.” It wasn’t a question, but a demand for answers.

“What Sam-- and what you-- might have picked up is basically true. We were keen on knowing about the two of them, seeing as they seem to be partially carrying on the Men of Letters’ work here, now that the American chapter is defunct. Although,” his eyes raked Tony over coals, taking in his jeans, the boots, the borrowed jacket. “I wasn’t aware they were recruiting. I’ve given you my name…” he trailed off, voice expectant.

“If all you wanted was information, why the kidnapping? The torture?” Tony didn’t share his own name, and his casual tone hardened.

Mick didn’t respond in kind. “Well, part of our group suspected there would be some resistance amongst you American hunters. No argument-- I agree, Lady Bevell went too far. I deeply apologize. She’ll face consequences in London.”
“Too late for that,” Tony said, ignoring the pang of guilt-- Dean had to do it, to save Tony.

Finally, a reaction from Mick. A flash of fear crossed his face, followed by anger and then resignation. “A pity.”

“Hm.” Tony shook his head. “Generally, I’d regret it. But not after what you did to Sam.”

“Well.” Mick started to move his arm forward, like he was going to run his hand through his hair but stopped, the handcuffs halting the movement. “That puts a bit of a damper on the olive branch I want to offer. We want to work with you.”

Tony couldn’t help it. He laughed, incredulous. “Why would I believe that?”

“If I wasn’t sincere, if we really meant you harm, we could have easily taken all of you prisoner. We could have killed Sam hours ago.”

“Is that supposed to make us want to work with you? ‘Cause it’s really not working.”

“My business card’s on the table. Think it over. And what have you got to lose? If you’re recruiting, the American Men of Letters might need some help, especially if this is all you’ve got.” He looked Tony up and down again, this time disparagingly.

“Let me tell you a thing, Mick.” Tony took a step in so he was just inches from Mick’s face. “We don’t need you. The Men of Letters don’t need you. The hunters don’t need you. And we’re doing just fine. If you ever, ever, step foot on American soil again, I will know. And I will make sure you are ruined. I won’t touch you. But you’ll wish I had.” Mick looked politely disbelieving. Tony backed up a little, so Mick could get a good look at him. “You asked who I am. Maybe you don’t recognize me because you’re British. You’re not in the tech business. It’s been a while since you’ve seen me because I’ve been presumed dead for a little more than a year.”

He could see the coin dropping. “You’re…”

“I’m Tony fucking Stark. So when I say we’ll ruin you, that I’ll ruin you? I mean it.” He turned and picked up the business card and ripped it in half. “Get out of here. Don’t come back.”
Tony turned, tossing the pieces of business card over his shoulder.

“Aren’t you going to uncuff me?” Mick called belatedly.

“No.” Tony answered. “I’m sure the key’s around somewhere. Do it yourself.”

He turned on his heel and walked out to the car. Dean and Sam were waiting, Sam laying across the back seats, his uninjured leg in the footwell to keep him from tipping over, the other foot resting gingerly on the leather. Dean tossed Tony the keys. “You kill him?” he asked bluntly.

“No,” Tony said. “Just put the fear of god. Or the fear of me. You’re letting me drive?”

“Only if you can get us back in two hours.” Dean smiled faintly. “Plus I want to keep an eye on him,” he jerked a thumb at Sam.

“Right,” Tony said. “Let’s get him home.”

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“Pepper, can you get ahold of the Compound? Ask them to start a face trace on the woman from the police report.”

Pepper nodded and Steve turned back around, absently accepting a cup of coffee from Peter Parker who, at a loss for what to do since he didn’t have the faintest idea where the were, who they were looking for, or why they were important enough that all the Avengers and Pepper Potts-Stark were on the hunt, had taken it upon himself to keep them fed, hydrated, and caffeinated.

Natasha had just picked up her phone as well, tossing Clint the file she had been reading. “I’m going to call SHIELD. We’re going to need all the help we can get to find these guys.”

Charlie emerged from the library. “Castiel says he’s only about eight hours away. It was a guess, though, so who knows?”
“Right,” Steve said. “How’s the--”

But he was cut off right there, the words dying on his lips because right then the door to the Bunker slowly scraped open, allowing several quiet male voices to filter in and suddenly Steve wasn’t sure he wasn’t dreaming.

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“Come on Sammy, you can do it, just a little farther and then--”

“The steps inside,” Sam grated out between clenched teeth.

His shirt was soaked with sweat around the neck and the lines around his eyes were tight with pain and Dean had to stop himself from swearing because of course, why hadn’t he realized, once they got inside the Bunker there was that damn flight of stairs down to the actual room.

“One thing at a time,” Tony said. He was in front this time, making sure they weren’t all about to tumble down the half flight of cement stairs and onto the landing. They got to the bottom and he shoved open the door. “Just a few more steps, Sam, you can do it…”

Tony didn’t even notice the lights were on, so focused was he; Sam and Dean had overbalanced on the last step and had almost fallen into the wall on Sam’s bad side. He and Dean had, in fact, turned the lights down to their usual dim setting before leaving, not that it had been something highly on their mind at the time.

It wasn’t until they were actually inside the room, door swinging closed behind them, Sam with his head down, shaking hard and breathing rough, Tony and Dean supporting him from both sides, that Tony and Dean realized they weren’t alone,

Tony’s head popped up sharply as something below them shattered.

Fifteen feet below, in the map room proper, a shattered coffee mug was on the ground at Charlie’s feet.
Above them, two dead men and one who, until seconds ago had been missing in action, stood together.

Dean raised his free hand and gave a half wave. “Uh… hi.”

Only Peter waved back.

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“Tony… what?” Pepper’s voice cracked. “Oh, my god.”

“Hey, Pep.” Tony’s voice was shaking and when he lifted a hand in an aborted gesture, his fingers were as well. “Sorry about… all this.”

“Tony.” A moment later, she was rushing towards the stairs, weaving through shocked avengers, piles of files, over computer cords and bags of weapons, and up the steps.

Tony quickly unentangled himself from Sam as carefully as he could and when Pepper arrived he was ready, wrapping his arms around her as she reached him. “Hey, hi.”

Pepper’s rush up the stairs seemed to have triggered a wave of movement from below. Rhodey was right behind Pepper and Wanda, Steve, and Bruce hurried towards the stairs after them. Clint and Natasha moving the other way, going to fetch bottles of water. Thor began shoving things out of the way with Vision’s help. Charlie disappeared and reappeared moments later with their first aid kit, starting to lay it out on the table next to the library sofa.

Dean reluctantly relinquished his grip on his brother as Tony, Pepper, and Rhodey got out of the way and the three avengers reached the top of the stairs. Steve guided as Wanda carefully extended a tendril of red magic out, cradling under Sam’s legs and up around his back. She let out a slow breath— it was merely days before Amara had drained the power from her body and it was good to use it again, albeit with caution. Bruce gripped Dean’s arm; the moment he had let Sam go he seemed to have gone a bit wobbly as well, days of stress and no sleep and bad coffee and relief all catching up at once.
It took some time, but finally, everyone was slowly settling again. Sam had been deposited on the sofa, Dean had been convinced to sit nearby in an armchair after Charlie had hugged him so tightly Thor practically had to pry her off. Bruce had commandeered the first aid kit and was cutting Sam’s ruined shirt and pants -- leaving him in his boxers, not that it was anything anyone hadn’t seen before-- off so that he didn’t have to lift his arms or move his bad leg. Vision had procured a bowl of hot water and a pile of bandages.

Everyone hissed as Bruce finished; Sam was a mess. Dean swore profusely as Sam’s full injuries were finally revealed. The stab wounds were coated in dirt and congealed blood. Bruises littered his torso and shoulders and his thigh was swollen and red around the veterinarian’s hasty stitches. The four missing fingernails were replaced with grime. Sam’s hair was greasy and a jagged cut ran above one ear for almost two inches.

Slowly, Bruce worked on patching Sam up, starting with some painkillers. The world around Sam seemed to have faded into a sort of haze, injuries slowly hurting less and less. In the background, people were chattering loudly; Peter was talking to Tony at about a hundred miles an hour, Dean was explaining something to Steve, Natasha, and Charlie, and Bruce, Sam Wilson, and Clint were talking quietly as they passed each other bandages and bottles.

“Sam? Sam.” Sam faded back in as someone called his name. Wanda was holding out a bottle of water and he took it carefully, taking several sips. Dean had done his best to force Sam to drink some water in the car on the way home, but he had been in so much pain it hadn’t been very successful. This time was better and Sam began tracking a little more, keeping an eye on Bruce as the physicist kept cleaning and bandaging.

“Thanks, Wanda,” Sam said rustily.

She nodded and smiled.

“Hey, Sam,” Bruce said. “Couple questions, okay? If you can answer them?”

Sam nodded and took another sip of water.

“The gunshot, how did they treat it?”

“Veterinarian. I think,” Sam let his head loll to lock onto his brother and Tony, “Tony and Dean found him?” Dean nodded. “He got the bullet out and stitched it up, gave me some sort of numbing
shot before hand. After, they mostly left it alone.”

“Mostly?”

“She hit it. A few times,” Sam shrugged.

Everyone who was paying attention tensed. “Who?” Dean demanded.

“The blonde woman. Not Bevell.”

“She’s dead,” Dean said. “She came after us when we were trying to find you.”

“She was the… torturer. The main one.” Sam grimaced as he pulled himself towards a half-sitting position, despite Bruce’s restraining hand. Thor helped pull Sam’s leg around onto the sofa even as Sam sat so they could keep working on his leg.

“Careful, Sam,” Bruce cautioned, prodding at the bullet injury. He had removed the stitches which were pulling on Sam’s swollen skin and was working on carefully cleaning it up.

“She also did. Um. The foot.” A shudder ran involuntarily through Sam’s body and he bit his lower lip in an effort to keep from crying out. “Well. Bevell told her to, but she was the one who actually held the blowtorch.”

“Blowtorch.” Dean’s voice had the icy edge it always had when he had gone beyond anger. His hand twitched towards a gun Steve had confiscated, citing the head wound and sleep deprivation. “That bitch is lucky she’s already dead and that it was fast or…” he made a compulsive squeezing motion.

Sam flinched as Sam Wilson started carefully cleaning around the burn. “Sorry,” he murmured.

Wilson threw him a look Sam associated with his father, one that said “don’t be an idiot.”

“Sam?” Bruce drew his attention back.
“Yeah?” Sam answered. Things were starting to get fuzzy again.

“What about these?” Bruce carefully ran a finger over Sam’s arm and the hunter looked down to see a small cluster of needle tracks.

“She-- Toni-- gave me a halu--” Sam’s head jerked up suddenly and his eyes ran over all of them as if looking for something, for someone. He blinked once hard and then brought his hands together, squeezing his left with the right and digging the nails tightly into the skin.

Dean stood, crossing the few feet of space between them. At this point, everyone was watching, Peter having trailed off into silence and all sets of eyes were fixed on the brothers as an expression crossed Dean’s face, one that wasn’t often there: panic.

“Sammy?” Dean knelt next to the couch and reached out to grab Sam’s hand.

Sam slowly focused on him, eyes still wildly darting around the room.

“Sammy? What did she give you?”

Sam closed his eyes and took a slow breath before letting his hands drop and giving Dean a weak smile. “A hallucinogenic.”

“That fucking…” Dean proceeded to swear for several sentences, standing up and kicking the leg of his armchair furiously before collapsing back into it. “Is… you know. He here?”

Sam did one more slow sweep of the room. “No.”

Everyone who knew what they were talking about-- everyone except Peter, really-- relaxed.

“I just… was worried, for a sec.” Sam forced his shoulders to relax as Bruce and Sam Wilson finished wrapping up the rest of his injuries.
“Well. You’re back here now, Sam.” Pepper smiled at him from where she sat next to Tony as Bruce helped Sam stand up. Dean began to stand also, to help, but Thor’s hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“Worry not, Dean. We will help Sam.”

Dean relaxed marginally and watched as Pepper stood, crossing to wrap Sam in a careful hug.

“Hey, Pepper,” Sam said, voice muffled by Pepper’s hair. “Good to see you.” His voice was suspiciously choked and when Pepper laughed slightly it was shaky.

“Good to see you too, Sam.” She let him go and both of them (and several others) wiped their eyes. “Now go to bed.”

“Sorry, you can’t shower yet,” Bruce said. “But tomorrow we’ll wrap everything again and make it waterproof.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, voice rough.

“Come on, you should sleep.” Bruce took Sam’s arm and with Sam Wilson acting as spotter, they slowly made their way out of the room.

With Sam gone and all medical crisis averted, all eyes turned to Dean and Tony.

“Now.” Steve took a drink of his beer and then pointed the mouth of the bottle at Dean and then Tony. “You two. Talk; what exactly happened the last two days?”

“Well,” Dean said, looking longingly at the beer; Wilson had given him some pain meds, diagnosed a slight concussion from Toni Bevell’s whack on the head, and told him no when he asked for a beer. “That’s a long story.”

“I, um… have a question before that,” the kid-- Dean still wasn’t a hundred percent sure who he was, but apparently Pepper had brought him, so that was good enough for him-- sort of raised his hand. “Who the heck are you guys?”
Everyone laughed and Dean smiled at the kid. “That’s a long story too.”

Sam Winchester walked into the Bunker kitchen without limping. It had been two weeks since they had arrived back at the Bunker-- Sam un-kidnapped, Dean not killed by the Darkness, and Tony miraculously alive. Most of the Avengers had returned to the Compound-- Sam Wilson, Steve, Bruce, Thor, Vision, Clint, Wanda, and Natasha. Peter had returned to Queens-- he apparently had school and wouldn’t stop repeating “Ned is never going to believe this”. Tony, Pepper, and Charlie had remained behind, plotting how to reintroduce Tony to the land of the living.

Castiel had arrived only ten hours after Sam, Dean, and Tony. He was exhausted and only, as Dean put it, on two percent battery life. But he had taken a nap at Charlie’s insistence and a day later was able to begin slowly healing Sam’s injuries.

This was going to be the last day before everything went crazy again; the moment it was announced that Tony was not, in fact, dead, it was bound to spark a period of temporary insanity.

They had a plan, though; Pepper would announce that Tony had been found on a tiny island, where he had been surviving. Without even the smallest bit of technology and only the barest amount of survival equipment, Tony had managed to keep himself alive for a year but had been unable to create a viable escape plan or way to signal rescue. The sole survivor of the plane crash, Stark Industries search teams who had never stopped quietly looking for their supposedly dead owner had located him a month and a half previous. Since then Mr Stark had been recovering in the privacy of his own home, where he had regained weight he had lost and was now in excellent health.

What a media nightmare it was going to be.

They were ready for it, though, ready for that and for other things.

None of them knew it, but the future would continue to bring surprises and changes, big and small to all of them.

Bucky Barnes will return from Wakanda, having lost of his HYDRA programming but retaining his ability to walk silently into the kitchen at two in the morning, invariably scaring the shit out of whoever happened to be there.
Peter Parker will take a second year of internship with Stark Industries but also begin applying to colleges. He will continue his extracurriculars and regularly trained with the Avengers, despite not actually fighting with them.

The Accords may still be the law of the land, but the framework Tony, T’Challa, and the rest of the Avengers had worked so hard to implement will hold up, allowing them to maintain their freedom and fight for those who needed it.

Charlie Bradbury continues her liaison position before taking over as SHIELD head of Cyber Security. She will also participate in several months of escalating flirtation before officially asking Maria Hill on their first date.

Tony Stark will suit up, taking out the Iron Man armour which had been in storage since his death, flying out with the Avengers. No longer limited by a large piece of metal and shrapnel in his chest, he becomes the fastest man in the sky, much to the chagrin of Colonel Rhodes.

Castiel will keep hunting with the Winchesters, spending the majority of his time at the Bunker. He and the boys take down Lucifer, a process hardly easier than the first time they had done it, years before, but possible through magic, trickery, and a good amount of blackmail. Dean will swear he’s going retire afterwards. White picket fence, the works-- he’ll even allow Sam to get a dog. But after Lucifer is locked away, they begin another hunt. Dean doesn’t retire. They do get a dog, although Sam is not allowed to take it anywhere near the Impala.

But that is all in the more distant future, things yet to come.

However, in a time more close at hand, Sam and Dean Winchester, their cousin Tony, his wife and CEO Pepper Potts-Stark, the angel Castiel, Charlie Queen of Moons, high school intern Peter Parker, and the entire organization known as the Avengers with all past and present members will gather in Stark Tower. It will be in mid-May, not long after Sam’s birthday, with Tony’s birthday only a week away. They would eat a variety of cakes and pies, play a number of cheesy party games which involve a good deal more alcohol than the typical game, and exchange a few small gifts. They will take pictures and play cards and try to outdo each other with the wildest mission story, a contest Dean and Sam almost always win, unless Castiel or Thor is playing.

At the end of the evening, each person will have looked around and smiled; their lives are crazy and broken and haphazardly mended and dangerous and unusual, but here they are.

Somewhere, a million miles away and yet right there, Chuck Shirley smiles.
Hello. First, thank you all. This fic is the longest thing I’ve ever written and it’s been a labor of love for almost exactly two years. You all have sent me the most amazing comments and reviews during that time and I will be forever grateful for your words. Thank you.

Second, if you want to talk to me about this fic, ideas for what else could have happened, or anything else at all, you can find me on tumblr @dare-to-do-our-duty (take note that on ao3 those marks between words are underscores but on tumblr they’re dashes!)

And lastly, there WILL be a companion fic that goes with this one! It will be stories that didn’t fit in here, mostly because I thought of them too late in the timeline and I couldn’t go back and change things. They’ll include Jody Mills! The Hulk! Several different endings for this fic ranging from depressing to fluffy! If you have ideas you want to see, let me know. When the story is up I’ll make an announcement here and on tumblr.

Again, thank you all.

-H

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!