Blood Will Out

by Z_Publicizes

Summary

Post-10x14 "The Executioner's Song." The brothers Winchester find a job in Appalachian mining country and get lost as the case slides out of control and takes their unsteady foundations with it. A casefile with noirish elements, an exploration of Dean's psyche under the Mark of Cain, and of the knife-edge of Winchester devotion.
Chapter 1
She pulled into the motel lot at fifteen till the hour when the mark’s preferred watering hole had its
It was one of those noir nights, calling out for a Robert Montgomery voice-over, the razor-edged shadow and ice-slick moonshine like the chiaroscuro landscapes she remembered from her first time at the movies, hugging her knees in the bed of a loading truck at the drive-in, the night onscreen blacker than the night outside, and realer too, swarming with hints, possibilities, threats. Each new frame meant something changed: character propelling plot, action-to-reaction-to-reaction, like the pistons of the freight train that ran on the tracks bordering her family's farm. A window cracked ajar in her dusty little world for the first time.

Now she's in the driver's seat of a 67 white Mustang but parked, car overshadowed by a copse of pines and the un-moonlit wing of the motel. Rearview mirror tilted to watch the motel parking lot over her right shoulder. This Appalachian backwater, only a roadhouse across the street and spruce and pine woods all around. Little voice in her head whispering that this wasn't what she'd had in mind when she'd imagined herself in the role of Gene Tierney or Mary Astor, one of those ravenous-eyed, ice-bitch-fatales. Stupid thing to bother over, when it was her own idea she be here in the shadows, running surveillance, but she'd never been good at waiting. Spent the first twenty-six years waiting for life to happen to her until she got sick to death of it. Literally.

She touched up her Chanel rouge lipstick before lighting a Marlboro because even if she wasn't to be seen tonight it never hurt to dress your part. Rolled the window down and exhaled a thin white plume out through the crack.

Maybe fifteen minutes passed, and the grind of snow tires on black ice startled her so that she whipped her head around, saw that it was the 80-something blue Ford she'd been waiting on. She returned her gaze to the rearview. Dragged nicotine hard into her lungs, got only a shade of the hit she wanted.

Here came the noir hero, silhouette backlit by stuttering red neon motel sign. Broad suede shoulders and brimmed hat. If this was a noir it'd have to be that subgenre where the man runs to the crack of nowhere hicktown, escaping from big city crooked police department or the mafia or family troubles, only to find that Faulkner was right about the past. Here came the dame-in-trouble, crossing the mostly deserted highway at a reckless run while the hero was looking for something in the glove compartment. The girl's long legs in black nylons stumbling coltishly around the ice slicks in the parking lot, slipping behind a big rig and then coming into his range of sight just as he straightened up. Catching movement out the corner of his eye, his hand went to the concealed carry in the small of his back. Stayed there, even as he saw that this was just something in the shape of a girl with a white stricken face and raccoon-ish mascara, bleached hair teased and tucked into a band like retro '92 was in fashion, shiny black overcoat flapping a peak at a tube mini dress, perfect slasher flick titillation wear, slutty foil to Jamie Lee's final girl.

She'd done that costumery herself. It had been the only fun part of adopting the role of baby sitter. The girl had been pathetically grateful at first, leaned into the brush even as the bristles snagged, smiled as she smacked her cherry lip gloss. For a disconcerting half hour it had almost been like having a sister again. That was the first night. This was the fifth. Tonight the little bitch had squirmed, scratched at where the tube dress squeezed, rubbed the mascara out of its artfully drawn tear-tracks, whined, "I hate the way they look at me when I'm like this, and they're always thinking they can put their hands on me, and why can't I dress up like the girl I was before?"

"Sweetie," she said, "there is no girl you were before. Just the clothes and eye-liner and push up cups and what they want you to be."

She'd given the girl the shiner on her cheekbone. Not in anger; it was as artful as anything else she'd
done. It was the ripening purple-eggplant on her face that made the hero of the night give her more than a cautious once-over. The bruise and the tear-tracks and the unsteady click-clack of her heels. Girl in trouble, on the run.

He caught up to her before she made it into the motel lobby, and she, watching their silhouettes, played out the script in her head. "Ma'am, you in trouble?" he'd ask, Midwestern courtesy, carefully keeping his eyes to her face while he pulled his badge out with his gun hand, like that was what he'd meant to do all along. She'd quiver her lips, say,"I need to use the phone, I dropped mine." And when he gently but surely pressed her, his badge lit up by the neon motel sign- "I don't know, it happened so fast. I was at this party and I got out of the house and I was waiting on my ride when, I think, I think, uh, someone jumped me, or shoved me. I hit the wall and blacked out for a second and woke up and there was this blood." Hand clutched to the side of her neck, tucked under her coat collar. He'd ask, "May I have a look at that ma'am?"- and when she curled her fingers back just enough that he could see the blood trickle down to her collarbone, from a set of puncture wounds that'd just missed her carotid- "I think he might have, uh, have bitten me"-he went for his first aid kit.

Patched her neck with gauze and tape and while he did so, surreptitiously did other things to ascertain that she was just a girl. He asked for the address where the party was. Escorted her into the hotel lobby and called her parents, slipped the manager a fifty to let her stay indoors until someone came to pick her up. Professional. He didn't lay an inordinate finger on her. Marched back out to the cab of his truck like a good little soldier. The girl could play victim to the hilt, she'd give her that. She stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray, pulled out her phone and tapped speed-dial. "Twenty down Route 9 and you'll be having company," she said. Gave it five after the truck cleared the first highway hairpin before she put her weight on the pedal, flicked her cigarette out the window, long arc of cinder sparking against ink blot shadow. She drove.

The snow stopped one mile out from the Tennessee border. After that, Dean drove under a sky the grey of wet newsprint so near the shade he remembered from Purgatory, blue mountain skyline, stark white hoarfrost on the pines. Prairie on the highway sides, grasses brown and sere, nothing for miles but the occasional rest stop and taillights in the rearview. Sam slept in the passenger seat, had drifted off to Seeger some four hours ago, slept like he hadn't for days, which maybe he hadn't, not like Dean would know, this past week he'd spent four days out of five shut up in his room, passed out, drinking.

Once Voodoo Chile' played out in the tape deck he flicked the dial to radio, the local weathercast, saying it'd be more of the same: gritty snow-slush or ice-prickling rain, either way, the risk of mudslides.

It wasn't till he'd passed the coalmine - mountainside reduced to pock-scarred slopes like lunar terrain, greenery sheered from stone, black veins laid bare, low billows of muddy grey dust, new hills made out of deposits of stripped rock and soil, machinery crawling on it like maggots on a corpse, mining trucks hauling a hundred tons of fresh unwashed coal along a myriad of switchbacks - that he heard Sam's breath catch, sounding like some half-strangled word. Dean looked sidelong at him as Sam opened his mouth and frowned, reached down for the binder that had slid off his lap, flapped open facedown in the footwell. Sam retrieved it with care, smoothed the pages without letting it fall open enough that Dean could look inside. Rubbed the back of his neck and said, "I miss anything?"

"Mountains, mostly. Your cue to go off on, like, the desecration of our global habitat and environmental hazards, or whatever."

"So we're in county lines and nothing, then." Sam reached for his thermos and took a sip, grimaced
at half-a-day-old coffee.
"Yeah, seems like."

Another fifteen before NOW ENTERING old pinewood sign coming on the road's right shoulder, in peeling red lettering: Burnside, population 3,093. It was the kind of podunk mining town that made him wish he could wear the hat he'd got for his trip to the old west, y'know, like Tim Olyphant in Justified, without having to shut Sam's trap about it every five minutes. On the first corner an auto-body shop and a cast-iron monument to what looked like coal miners circa the depression. A combination diner and grocers and gas station on the other corner, and that was where Dean pulled off. Trudging through gritty slush in the lot, tracking it onto the cafe's grimy linoleum. High brittle jingle as he pushed through the door, chimes crusted in frost. They took their seats at a counter lined with other men in flannel. Ordered coffee, sandwiches.

He was halfway through his smoked ham on rye before he made himself sidle his eyes to Sam, say, "Any luck?"

Sam's eyebrows hunched "Seeing as we got here, just, fifteen minutes ago--"

"Hey, y'know that's not what I meant." Right elbow resting on the counter, he curled his fingers in, clenched the flexors of his forearm. The Mark burned. Sam swallowed.

"Thought you said I should let it alone while we're on the job."

"Yeah, but you obviously haven't been. So. Whadya got?"

"Bunch of ancient sources on curses from West Africa and the Sumerian basin, either of which likely could've been Cain's point of origin, and I've been compiling a database of lore from our library, because even if one source doesn't have the answer, I can cross reference them against each other, make connections..."

Meaning he had no leads and was trying to dress straw-clutching up as strategy.

"Just so long as you're not letting it take your mind off what we're really here for."

"Fine, you got anything new? Since you're back to running into the ground again."

"While I was driving your comatose ass for the past eight hours you mean?" He tried to remember the salient facts of the case from when he had skimmed the headlines on the county paper's website: town lowlifes disappearing and then returning in pieces, faces flayed off, guts torn out, shit they could almost pin on the local wildlife, and then his vision ran red and he felt like he was going to claw out of his skin, or claw open someone else's if he let his mind go to that place a second longer. "I'm thinkin' werewolf or wendigo, open and shut."

"Since when is a werewolf open and shut? And anyway, no missing heart which is the kind of thrilling color that somebody usually leaks to the press." Sam tapped his fingers on the Formica. He downed the rest of his coffee, half a cup in two gulps. "Wendigo, maybe."

"Or a hillbilly ax murderer. You'd like that, wouldn't you."

"What?"

"Y'know, for your serial-killer fetish. Whadya call it, 'true crime, this could be another hall of fame-er, you could get his autograph."
"C'mon man, you know it's not like that."

"So what's it about? No, I'm being serious here, what got you into that stuff?"

Sam's eyes were skittish. "Thought it might help on the job, y'know, psychological profiling. If I could get in the head of a human killer, I could get in the heads of the things we hunt. And I never told you because I knew what you'd say, monsters do what they do because it's in their nature, black and white, we don't have to explain it, that's what's great about this job..."

"Monsters I get, people are crazy." He felt an achy twinge that might've been nostalgia. But it was still god's truth (or whatever) wasn't it? He understood the blood-hunger roaring in his stomach-heart-nerves better than what went on in his own head most days. "So. Did it ever come in useful?"

"Sure, sometimes. With vengeful spirits, or shifters, or...And even if it didn't come into the job, so what, can't I have a hobby?"

"Sure, but why not collecting dolls or those midget mummy heads or something less-"

Cut off, by their waitress saying something like "Top you off?" leaning in, and he slanted a look at her full breasts pressed against her starched yellow uniform, her name tag reading Mary, and the thick rivulet of blood dark syrupy running down her shirtfront, oozing from the gash across her jugular, drip drip drip on the Formica, and his hand went to the small of his back, gun tucked in his waistband. Waitress Mary's eyes rounded, blinked, her mouth parted, and she bled and bled but didn't die and he didn't draw, and it must've been the look on his face, his sudden movement, readying for imminent violence, that was leeching the blood from her apple cheeks, because this wasn't really happening, and he forced a smile, said, "Thanks darlin'," laying it on thick. Felt Sam's eyes on him, hot, wary. On him, not on the woman bleeding out, soaking his crumpled napkin, because that wasn't actually happening. There were so many fucking bodies in this place, suddenly. But if he let himself flip out every time he got that feeling-

"I'm gonna hit the head," he said, making like he'd been reaching for his wallet and slapping down what he hoped was a twenty on a spot of Formica where the blood hadn't pooled. "Then top off the tank. You wanna get us some groceries, do it in the next fifteen. We got us an appointment at the coroners."

He didn't look back as he went.

They checked into a rental cabin, donned their fed suits, brushed their teeth. Drove another twenty five minutes to St. Barbara hospital (St. Barbara, the patron saint of miners, Sam said, because that was the kind of thing Sam had to share with the class), the morgue in the basement, autopsy room not much bigger than the cabin, lighting no better than the sickly pallor of rest stop bathrooms. Body of the latest vic on the slab: ribs pried open, skin split apart in long ragged slices, organs and muscles shredded, guts unspooled, and all of his blood in a white commode by the steel table, next to a pair of pruning shears. "We're strapped for funds," the coroner said, off Sam looking askance at the pruning shears. "And it's not like they mind."

Vic was thirty-two but the beard straggling below his collarbone was streaked with cobweb grey. Teeth almost a methhead's yellow. Had a Desert Eagle on his right bicep. He'd been staying with his sister since he got back from Afghanistan. She reported him missing two weeks ago. Three days since, was when the coroner had ruled time of death. Two days since he'd been found in the foothills by the hunters who'd been prowling the mountainside since the disappearances started, thinking they were going to bag the agro black bear or pack of coyotes or hillbilly serial killer what done this.
Not enough flesh torn off for a wendigo. They'd strip to the bone and suck the marrow. One eye plucked from the socket, but a buzzard could've done that.

Sam was asking those official sort of queries about the diameter of the incisions and the force required to snap both femurs and shatter the hypoid and what could do this.

"The crack through his sternum, that's concentrated blunt force, like from a hammer," the coroner said.

Dean looked at Sam, his skin washed out in that morgue light, drawn too tight over his bones. His bones, that Dean connected to the thought of a hammer, what could be done with a hammer, why he'd picked it out, blunt little instrument: could nail Sam's hands and feet to that goddamnfucking chair and see how he liked it, could shatter every remaining unbroken bone in his arms, his fingers, his kneecaps, shins, toes. He could draw it out for hours, days. Finish with the flame thrower, inch the open flame closer and closer to his brother's body and watch his skin redden, blister, crack, peel. It would've been symmetry or irony - my mother would still be alive if it wasn't for you - or some other literary conceit. He appreciated good literature, despite what Sam might think.

The man on the slab, he forced himself to consider, his wounds were not random, he'd had bones broken that would be extraneous to break in a fight, whatever had done this had had fun, maybe had disemboweled him while he was alive; whatever had done this had tooth and claw and a mind capable of understanding and savoring human suffering, and he looked at the corpse of Robert Hudson and could viscerally imagine himself doing these things to him. He looked away.

The trash bin was stuffed with bloodied latex gloves. He tasted copper in his mouth.

He made some transparent excuse, had to recharge his cell in the car so he could call his supervisor in DC, and walked out.

The hospital parking lot was empty for visiting hours, closest person a panhandler at the bus stop. Nothing louder than the sirens coming in off the highway. Frozen grey cloud cover had thawed a basketball sized patch of pale pale blue, black wings flickering across it. The Impala was in guest parking, other side of the lot. Standing in the shadow of the brick arch over the doorway, he pulled his lighter out. Held his palm over the flame, watched his skin redden, blister.

He crossed the lot, got in the Impala. Felt a little better, turning the keys in the ignition, hearing the engine turn over. He drove around to the morgue's backdoor, sat idling with the engine on. Flicked his lighter open, shut, open, shut. He was fine, he was fine, he was fine.

A doctor came out a different door, made his way round to the morgue's trash bins, head down, paced back and forth, pulled a pack of smokes out of the flannel jacket he wore over his scrubs. He had a matchbook, but his first match struck out. So'd the second. Dean cracked the car door, leaned out, meaning to offer the man a light. Didn't get the words out before the doctor turned eyes rimmed in bluish shadow and a forbidding scowl up to him, said-

"Doesn't look like you got a permit for that space, Agent."

"I'm a fed, pal. I had this deal with an autopsy-"

"So? Guest parking's that side. And if you're finished with the coroner's, what're you doing loitering?"

"Not that you're privileged to that info, but I'm waiting on my partn -"

"So? He can walk, can't he? Somebody might have a real need to park there."
"So your somebody can use one of these other spots-" He was out of the car, which, he didn't need to be, wasn't like he was looking to get physical, but the doctor had moved in on the Impala, and there was the slim possibility he might try something, so Dean had to put himself between the doctor and the car. Right.

"I swear, you people. Think you're entitled to walk over everyone, every inch of this town, you and those ATF sonsofbitches, swan in like you're god's gift, now we've got trouble salacious enough to splash on the ten p.m news-tear the place apart, rooting through people's lives like yesterday's garbage, and in a few months you'll be out of here, leave us to mop up the mess- what gives you the goddamn right-"

"The badge and the gun," he said, gave him a peak at the holster of the latter. "Mostly the gun. 70/40."

"That's the most asinine punchline I've ever heard. Congratulations. Almost as asinine as that goddamn penis substitute"- (jabbing a finger at the Impala) - "what, do our tax dollars pay for that-"

Dean wanted to kill the guy. Not in the figurative sense, but in the sense that he wanted to pull his Glock out and put a 9mm through his skull.

Then Sam came out the door.

"Like I said, I'm just picking up my partner." Dean cut his eyes past the doctor, gave Sam a tight everything-under-control-here nod.

The doctor closed his mouth, almost gulped, like this second witness had thrown an ice bucket on him. His face got that the-fuck-did-I-just-do look. Probably he was just a tightass who'd had a really stressful day, lost a patient on the table, whatever.

For whatever reason, he didn't give them anymore shit about parking. He went back to fumbling with his matches. Dean saw him strike a light in the rearview.

He colored in the confrontation for Sam, on the highway back to the cabin, acid anger sizzling in his stomach, clouds tinted rust red where the sunset bled through. His epithets for the doctor escalated from tightass to douchebag to cocksucker, at which last Sam looked askance at him, like he was offended or something, but he hadn't been talking literal cocksucking, Jesus Christ.

He hits the ground running, familiar terrain unfurling under his boots. This is how the good dreams start. He's setting an energy conserving pace, measured and deliberate, his eyes nose ears mind responsive and focused, his body a blade, cutting through the wood like cutting through the tenderest flesh. He's hunting.

The sky is wrong. Should be that watery ink grey, the light that bleeds down but never dies, the goddamn endless interim light, never night never day never changing.

This forest is black. Bible black, waking in your coffin black. Can't tell up from down, right from left black. But he never stumbles. His feet find the right level of ground, dry, stone-less, like he's using senses he's not supposed to have. The senses that feel his prey all the way down to the roots of him. Like lungs starved for nicotine, a stomach starved for food. That black hole inside he can cover over in a thousand ways but will never be rid of.

He runs for a timeless time through the wood until he senses something that can fill him up. Hears him, the breath wheezing in his tired lungs and the rich meat of his heart pumping and the long
stumble of his legs snapping and crackling branches and brush. Smells his fear-sweat and his sweet necessary blood. He only has to slow to a silent stalk, knowing mound and gully and web of roots and moss slick as if he were the one who'd laid the terrain. He circles round and gets ahead of his prey's blind flight, and in the alley mouth between two oaks he crouches in wait.

His vision sharpens, peels away the blackness until his prey is the only visible thing in the wood. The skin of his face and throat and hands white, gleaming like bone. His prey's eyes watching out the corners, fox-like slanting eyes. But he walks straight between the oaks, a cow down the lane of the slaughterhouse, and it's that easy, to get an arm around his neck and pull him close, cut off his breath, and his prey's weak hands scrabble against him for purchase, so it almost feels like a mutual embrace.

It's blameless instinct, sinking teeth into his prey's throat. Arterial blood hits the roof of his mouth, hot, hot, swimming in his mouth, swallowing so the blood takes root inside him, prey-brother's blood, alien and familiar, the blood that's always been between them one way or another, takes root in the black pit, and the feel of his prey (brother) dying in his arm is sense-memory too, but a distant echo that can't hurt anymore not even when he-

Woke on a foldout sofa bed in the cabin, cramped shoulder and numb arm on the side he'd been laying on because his body had accommodated too much to the memory foam back at the bunker, one unlaced boot still dangling off his heel and the taste of copper still in his mouth. He rolled off the bed, hit his knees on the pinewood. He coughed, retched. Blood dribbled from his lips, splashed on the floor. He flipped on the lamp, dim glow of which couldn't chase the muddy dark from the corners, saw that Sam was out, and oh yeah, recalled he'd gone to interview the family of one of the missing. He got a roll of paper towels and a bottle of Lysol from under the sink, scrubbed up the blood he'd spilled. Checked his watch and it was 6:22; he pulled back a threadbare red curtain and saw slate clouds spitting sleet against the glass. He thought about Sam on the road for god knows how long, the mudslide warning on the radio. He paced back and forth, got a beer out of the mini-fridge, tuned the TV to WWE, watched a glossy spandex counterfeit of violence.

Maybe twenty five minutes until Sam got back, long fed coat and hair shedding sleet, and still wearing that expression of disinterested sympathy he used on witnesses.

"Where've you been?" Dean said, thinking he had to head Sam off before he could bring up before at the morgue.

"One of the guys who's still missing, Jeremiah Holts, he has a girl on a farmhouse twenty miles outside town limits. I got out of her that her man's in the meth business-"

"What just like that? One hour with you and your puppy dog eyes and she's snitching that her man's gone Heisenberg?"

Sam shrugged in all false modesty.

"She didn't seem ashamed of it really, just scared that we'd be back to search the house, maybe confiscate her property. Said a lot of guys in this county are involved in meth, because there are only so many jobs outside the mines. Said she'd rather have that than him going overseas and coming back a wreck, like a lot of boys around here did. She thinks he was taken out by someone else in the business, a new rival or his old boss, and y'know, she could be right. Not every disappearance has to have the same explanation."

A pause - Sam was taking a breath that threatened a new tack in the conversation.

"You got our dinner stuffed away under there?" Dean gestured at the flaps of Sam's wool coat. "I'm starving, why didn't you pick up-Never mind, night on the town, my treat." Stomping his feet into his
boots and pulling the laces circulation cutting tight, had to move fast or Sam's dangerous dewy eyes might pin him down. He grabbed his flannel-lined winter jacket on the way to the door, then had to stand around on the front step while Sam changed back into civilian wear.

He and Sam went to the bar on Front Street, biggest bar in town, meaning it housed maybe forty bodies on this a Friday night, but they had luck sufficient to grab a table near the stage where a blues band was covering Zeppelin: *In the days of my youth I was told what it means to be a man.* Sam set up his laptop, said he couldn't get decent WiFi at the cabin, nibbled on a baked potato with collared greens while Dean stuffed down nachos dripping baked beans and bacon bits and sour cream. They talked shop.

"Has to be the wampus beast," Dean said. "Sounds right. Wampus beast."

"But get this, the taillypo-"

"Is pissed off that some old lady found his toe lying around, cooked it and ate it, which, maybe if it was deep fried- but that's still the lamest motivation ever. Also doesn't exactly fit the victim profile here."

"The lore differs," Sam said. "Some accounts have it as a hunter that mutilated the taillypo, and maybe it doesn't know who to blame and the victim's are chosen as, essentially, crimes of opportunity."

"Okay, but how many taillypos are out there? If it's all the same taillypo why didn't the disappearances start decades ago? If there's more than one taillypo why the fuck do they keep taking their toes off in the woods, you'd think they'd have learned by now. Then there's the name. Tai-ly-po. You think a name like that could drop seventeen bodies? Wampus beast, on the other hand, now those are some badass..."

"Maybe," Sam said, still rolling baked potato around on his tongue, like he was too distracted to swallow. Eyes angled to his laptop screen, but they were thousand-yard eyes.

Dean swallowed the last dregs of his beer and shoved back from the table, said, "I'm getting somethin' stronger."

Only three bartenders on duty; while Dean was waiting he got a look at two-seats-over's askew black straps over lithely muscled brown shoulders, got something going between her smoky slanted eyes and his, and then some dude wedged in wearing exactly the kind of old west hat Dean had at the bottom of his duffle. Way the girl reacted he was probably her boyfriend, but still. You don't cut in on somebody's eye game. Asshole.

When he ordered a bourbon the bartender, fifty-ish woman whose over the shoulder braid was still mostly nut brown, with a face densely freckled for the far side of winter, said, "15% off as thanks for your service." Gave him a smile that got an answering smile out of him.

"I'm uh, actually not," he said. "Don't suppose you'd want to offer your compliments to a g-man?"

She said, "Oh, I coulda sworn-we get so many military boys in here, I thought I could pick the look out at thirty feet in a crowd."

"My dad was in the marines," he said. "Somethin' must've rubbed off."

"One in the family," she said. "Well, that also puts a load on."

She pointed over her shoulder at a graduation photo of a girl with her freckles pinned to the cork-
board. "My daughter's a medic in Afghanistan. Was supposed to be doing her residency in a clinic round here, but so many of the friends she grew up with had gone overseas...But I can't say she'd be any safer in her hometown anymore, now can I?"

She'd put his bourbon down. Other people along the bar were signalling to get served, but off some gut-feeling Dean said-

"About that, gotta ask, if you've picked up any chatter..."

She sucked in one cheek, said, "Probably won't be news to you, but-"

"Shoot," he said.

"But the first week of January there was a marshal that came round here, name of Ray Cohen, said he was workin' the missing persons same as you, and then there was his buddy, think his name was Walter Kubrick. Didn't see much of the buddy, but he'd be in here most nights, until the night he didn't show up but his buddy did. He was asking those questions, y'know, who had talked to Marshal Cohen last and did anyone see him go out, and did he have somebody tailing him. And after that night, I don't see either of them again and neither does anyone else who comes in here, which, as you can see, is a hefty slice of the town. And for some days I figure now two marshals are gone, that'll bring a regiment of feds crawling all over us, but then no-one comes round asking about them again, not even a deputy marshal. Not until those ATF agents and now you." She left him, got cowboy hat and smoky eyes shots, came back with a rag in hand. Wiping the bar in front of him clean of stickiness and peanut shells so she wouldn't look like an idle chatterer. "And I was thinkin', Cohen and Kubrick, names like that could happen coincidentally, but maybe they coulda been not who they said they were?"

He bolted the bourbon, said, "Maybe. Wish I could give you more, ma'am but y'know how it is." He gave a sidelong flap of his hand meant to indicate the federal statute of classified shit, or whatever.

"Names Susanna," she said. "Susanna Clark. And we are grateful that you're on the job. Local cops are doing what best they can but they're underfunded and stretched thin even at the best of times. It's been hard, watchin' faces vanish from the crowd and asking who's next...Look, I know those gone ain't the cream of society, but. Most of 'em, even the ones with broke bad on their records, they deserve a second chance, they've been through bad times with the recession and so many having gone overseas and come back, and all that state community development money really just goes into the mines. I hope that it won't make a difference.."

"Trust me," he said. "I know I'm in no position to pass judgment on people."

He cased the pool table: two men in ripped denim and grey flannel, one had on a Virginia Tech cap, and they weren't laying down cash, just playing for who'd buy the next round. Winded his way back to his and Sam's table, the bar doing an original, *fire in the hole* the brassy refrain, and Sam still at the laptop. He slipped behind a knot of people, only a couple feet away when he stepped into Sam's peripheral vision, and Sam clicked over to a different webpage. Dean dropped back in his chair, said, "Whadya got there?"

"Forum for my 'serial killer fetish'." Sam didn't look up, hair boxing his face in half-shadow. "I'm looking at the more notorious cases in this region."

"Yeah, and?"

"Aside from, you know, the Greenbrier ghost, Omie Wise, and John Hardy-there's Randall Lee Smith, killer who stalked the Appalachian trail. Murdered two social workers in '81. Could be
because he'd retreated into a world of fantasy to escape a hard childhood and lashed out at anyone who tried to draw him out of it, could be resentment for the intimacy women hadn't given him-

"People'd be slaughtered in the streets every day if all it took was broken homes and blue balls."

"People are slaughtered every day," Sam said. "Though I'm not saying those're reasons. No-one's ever come up with a satisfying profile for this guy."

Dean hunched forward, elbows on knees. "Murder groupies ever talk about us?"

Sam smiled thin, twisted. "Oh yeah, we've got websites, youtube channels, scholars write their dissertations on us right along with Bundy and Dahmer and the James Younger gang."

Dean sat back some. "So you're saying it's too bad Brad Pitt's too old to play me in the movie."

"Think we're gonna be the next season of Serial."

"Three dozen murders over ten years, all that Satanist ritual shit, two times falsely presumed dead, and all we get is some freakin' NPR podcast, man."

"You know about Serial?" Sam's eyebrows twitched up.

"Dude, I get culture - I - what you're saying is in addition to the high-school-musical-the-even-shittier-sequel crowd we've got this whole other club..."

"Oh, it overlaps with the book fandom-the increased notoriety of the Winchester murders really drew attention to the books. There's a lot of theories that we were forcing Chuck to write this stuff, that he was either our accomplice or that he was the man behind the curtain getting us to carry out his own psychotic fantasies. Either we killed him or he went into wit-sec, and he's been sending out encrypted messages on the web tipping people off about our future crimes. People are almost as fascinated by him as they are us."

"And let me guess-" He picked with his fingernail at the corn chip crumbs stuck between the strip of metal that ran around the table and the Formica-"it's all Daddy beat us with coat-hangers and touched us in the bad place and that's why we're the sick fuckers we are today."

"The incest does get a lot of attention. But there's a lot of stuff about Dad's PTSD from 'Nam and how the military-industrial complex bears responsibility, and the post cold-war nostalgia for a time when it was true blue American masculinity against the Red Menace, and how that fed into Dad's paranoid psychosis- the fugitive mentality, the intoxicating sense of 'us against them.' As for you and me, a war against Authority displaced from our tyrannical father onto society, and maybe a variant of Bonnie and Clyde syndrome."

Dean forced a teeth-baring grin. "But you're Bonnie, right?"

"Means we get off on killing for each other."

"Literally get off? The fuck is wrong with people?" Sam lightly lifted his shoulders, oh so nonchalant about this except for the brittle quality to his smile. As if it was small change, them having lived most of their lives by the first rule of fight club, all they'd sacrificed to keep the things they did on the down-low, just for criminal pathologists to pick over their lives and high-schoolers to post smut about them on the internet.

Dean shoved back from the table, cut his eyes around for a distraction. "C'mon, play one round at least. Remember what clean wholesome fun's like."
"Have to take the laptop to the car," Sam said.

He ordered another bourbon when Sam went. Joined the pool game where the man in the Virginia Tech cap was telling the other, a passing trucker, which hometown girls were game for anything, and then they got onto speculating about the disappearances, and the bodies, seventeen disappeared and nine bodies come back with no particular chronological congruence. (Dean knew that was important, the chronology in which the bodies came back, and he'd figure out how but not tonight). Truck said it was a meth kingpin who took small time crooks and made them an offer, work for him or be game for his bloodhounds, and it all went down at a hunting lodge in the mountains.

Dean said, "Nyah, I'm a fed, man-(they didn't exactly buy that; he was broadcasting the wrong image tonight)-and I've seen bodies and it wasn't no brute animal that done this." Looked at the burnt red back of the trucker's neck as he bent and lined up his next shot. Imagined gnawing that neck open, his teeth tearing through skin and chewing muscle and sucking from the jugular.

He cleared out after that round with fifty in his pocket and Sam still not come back.

In the parking lot he had to look around the lot for a little while because the thick splashing sleet and the grey mist smeared the black night across the streetlights, the Impala's black indistinguishable from shadow and asphalt until he was only a few feet away. There he saw the flashlight glow through the Impala's passenger window, Sam with a book propped against the dashboard. He rapped on the glass and Sam startled. Slipped the book away in his duffle in the footwell by the time Dean got in driver's side. All so familiar - Sam with his half-furtive research binges just after Dean gave it to him clear that that wasn't what he wanted. He gave Dean a pinched sidelong glance while Dean said-

"My company wearin' on you Sammy?"

"Just tired," Sam said. "I'd've only cramped your game. You good to drive?"

"Don't give me that passive - You mean gimme the keys, say gimme the keys. Or don't, cause I feel totally cool."

"Really? Cause you're kinda starting to sound like Dad on a bad night."

"The hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I just -"

"Sure, whatever, not like you usually mean the things you say." He turned the key in ignition. He wasn't mad at Sam really. Sam just had the misfortune to be in the car with him and this razor-edged thing threatening to tear out from under his skin.

Sam's eyes hooded. He swallowed with that particular clench of jaw that said he was biting words back, too tired to fight. His fingernails scratched at the denim over his thighs. He said nothing more. Dean drove.
Chapter 2

Under the hot red bar lights the spilled blood has a burnish like new pennies. Where there'd been people earlier in the night there are corpses, in various states of disassemble, so many ways to take the interlocking mechanisms of the human body apart. The bartender's braid is soaking up the bourbon from the glass smashed under her cheek, her head dangling on the bar by her neck's cracked vertebrae. Her eyes still look afraid in death, and she reminds him of Ellen. His slick hands are so familiar he barely notices them, and the horror-shock-guilt echoing in the back of his head doesn't take him to his knees.

The band's bass guitar and saxophone and trombone are playing -

*One pill makes you larger*

*And one pill makes you small*

*And the ones that mother gives you*

*Don't do anything at all*

which is funny since all the band members are dead. Two little girls in crisp, clean white dresses are sitting at his and Sam's table by the stage, drinking ruby red out of porcelain cups so fine they're almost translucent.

Where am I? he says.

One girl replies, needle teeth peeking through her pink bow mouth - You're in Wonderland Alice and all you have to do to get here with us is smash your looking glass.

No. The other smiles like a razor. You're not Alice, you're the Queen of Hearts, singing off, off, off with their heads.

I never even read this fairy-tale crap.

No, angel, I did.

He turns and there's his mother, backlit by the icy blue of a Kingdom beer logo in the window, her nightdress just as immaculately white. -I read you those illustrated classics comics, remember? The same kind you read to Sammy, about King Arthur and his just and faithful knights of God.

Sammy, he says. The name is a knife in his gut and he doesn't remember why. Oh god, Sammy.

He's not here, she says. Not God either.

She is standing so close. Her hand is cupping his cheek. Her mouth downturns slightly, sadly.

My angel, she says. I always believed you were capable of anything.

Tell me to stop, Mom. His voice cracks, spills raw and sticky as the blood on his chin. He wipes at it with the back of his hand. Please.

Why would I do that? Her eyes shine like two stars, impossibly remote. The only time I was truly happy was when I died.
The girls clap and it sounds like bells. The band plays on-

_Tell them a hookah-smoking caterpillar_

_Has given you the call_

_Call Alice when she was just small_

_When the men on the chess board_

_Get up and tell you where to go_

Dean gave due consideration, driving through the town's whitewashed single level and trailer park outskirts that morning, to telling Sam that there was something going on with him. He gave due consideration to the possibility that it had some connection to this hunt, though he doubted it. Due consideration to Sam needing to be warned if he was doing worse. He snuck glances at Sam, shades on because the sun had seared through the clouds, the shimmer on frost and asphalt frying his eyeballs, but he never caught Sam looking back.

On the other hand, what could Sam do about it if he knew? What could he do, other than nag and fret and and get his head taken out of the game even worse than it already was?

He considered, revolved the same rationales in his mind fifty times, and hadn't put the issue to bed by the time he and Sam had pulled into the gravel drive of Robert Hudson's sister's house.

Sam did most of the questioning. Dean had his back to the kitchen, standing before the sliding glass door. The sister had wildflowers in her backyard, withered under the frost. Barbecue grill and a few plastic lawn chairs, paint flaking off a tricycle lying on its side. Some clothes lines, dangling from the roof edge. A fallow dirt patch that might've been a bed for vegetables.

Her brother had been getting help, she said, over the rattle of the dishes she was unloading. He'd been going to meetings in the basement of their church three times a week. She hadn't caught him with a bottle in that time. But there were still days when she barely recognized him.

He went hiking, sometimes. But he always warned her on the days he planned to go, pinned a note on the fridge at least. He didn't want her to worry. He'd said nothing the day he disappeared, the day he hadn't made it to one of the meetings. His sponsor had called her late that night and that was how she found out.

Baby in a highchair with them in the kitchen started crying. Dean watched her reflection in the glass as she left off unloading her dishwasher to pick up her kid, cradle his skull against her shoulder with a dishcloth draped over it, thump his back for burping.

She worked at a daycare. Her husband was a crane operator working on the mines. It had been hard, stretching their means to support her brother. Having him around the kids, even though he'd never got violent, but he'd been drunk and sad a lot and kids shouldn't have to see that.

Dean wondered if she was already feeling that her brother's death had come as a relief.

Red smudge reflected in the glass, and he did a cautiously paced half-turn and saw only: the red face of the squalling infant, the red hairclip holding the straggly coil of hair off the woman's skinny neck, the wicker basket of waxy red apples on the kitchen table, next to a stack of bills, some of which had dates due scribbled in red ink. Dean took his hands out of his pockets, tried rolling his shoulders to
relax, cracked his neck, and wished he could still have shades on, the kitchen light overbright. He probably just needed more coffee—she had put a pot on then forgot to pour them mugs when she started unloading the dishwasher. Dean looked at the mugs on the dish rack, made a move to grab one when Sam sidled a look his way with one brow subtly raised, his eyes shading from one question to another as a chiming came from the front door.

"That'll be them," Hudson's sister said, like they should know about them. Let in a man and a woman in their long agent coats. ATF, Dean's memory jogged. Those ATF sons-of-bitches, the doctor had said. ATF lady was a blunt cut blonde and her partner was sandy brown and stubbly, both of them whitebread good looking enough for a network procedural.

"I thought all y'all would've come together," the sister said. "So I wouldn't have to go over this again."

"With them?" ATF lady said, arched a brow so pale it was hard to be sure it existed. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've been-"

Dean and Sam showed their badges. Gave their aliases, Spungen and Ritchie.

"Why didn't we rendezvous at the station when you got here?" ATF lady's eyes performed the slow sweep you do when you're looking for discrepancies, for tells.

"Because our supervisor said he'd write us up if we didn't report in with our own legwork, but just cribbed off yours." Dean grinned and it felt like he put in too much teeth. "He's a little sore about not having his people on the ground first."

ATF lady shared the kind of lingering look with her partner that could make a person think they were screwing.

"Could I get your supervisor's number?" ATF man said. "Like to hear what he has to say about this. If, of course, it won't cause you hassle."

"Of course," Sam said. Gave him Garth's. Garth, who for all they knew was making it with his werewolf honey right this minute. Dean missed Bobby in the utilitarian way he sometimes missed Bobby, not quite distinct from the gut shot kind of missing that bled and bled on everything.

"Look here now," Hudson's sister said. "My shift starts at ten, and I can't have somebody cover for me another morning."

"Understood, ma'am, we'll only be a few minutes of your time, I only wanted to go over a few items in your brother's record." ATF lady sat down with the sister at the table. The baby was still crying.

ATF man's eyebrows arched and his mouth compressed in what could be confusion or distaste, listening to Garth. Dean hoped he was having trouble to hear him over the baby's howling. When he got off the phone he smiled the deliberately slack-lipped smile that could be used in so many social situations, from 'gee, aren't interdepartmental politics awkward' to 'these are the most-wanteds we're about to bag,' and said, "We'll be in touch."

Here's the thing about professionals: it's hard to know if you've bullshitted them or they're bullshitting you, and they're gonna call for back up the second you're out the door, and you'll be driving down the highway into the open arms of state police barricades and snipers in the trees and that goddamn Bolivian army ending Dean used to think was the worst he had coming for him.

Driving with one hand on the wheel, refusing the urge to white-knuckle it when Sam turned to him, said, "I don't know that we should stay on this. This case. That was some rank bullshit, even for us,
and even if they bought it, we couldn't snow them at every turn. Not if the real FBI could be getting here any time, or if anyone in the agency has seen our faces in a database."

"Right," Dean said. "Except it wouldn't be the first time we've seen through a job that got this hairy, hell, we've done the job in supermax-"

"-With a man on the inside."

"Seventeen people ain't worth the risk to you? Because they're headcases or addicts or bottom feeding scum, or what?"

"Oh yeah, because I would really consider us in a position to judge there."

"And it sure seems convenient, you coming up with all these excuses to walk out on a job that you didn't want on in the first place."

"Those aren't excuse that just walked in our door. What the hell are you talking about?"

"You telling me you wouldn't rather be holed up with decent WiFi and your other research right now?"

"That's got nothing to do with how dangerous this is. Look, we can call in another hunter, one with a lower profile who won't be impersonating a federal agent. Then we can find something else to kill."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I just said?"

"You said *kill*, find something else to kill."

"Yeah, because that's what we do."

"Nyah man, you mean because that's what I do. Just looking for something, hell, anything, to take the edge off."

Sam snorted soft, derisive. "Think I haven't noticed what's been going on with you? We've barely been here twenty-four hours and this whole thing's spinning out of control, and no, I'm not just talking about the ATF."

"You don't know a goddamn thing, Sam. So. Leave it." His voice was halting, brittle. Sam pressed his eyes shut, gave a small jerk of his head that could've been either a nod or a denial.

He drove past a clapboard church, whitewash flaking, a trailer park, a strip mall, and he was in town again, only had to take three rights and he was at city hall, next door the deep red brick of the police station.

"Really," Sam said.

"Yeah, Sam, I really am doing our fucking job."

Sam followed him out, car door slammed so loud Dean almost threatened to break Sam's hand over it, bit the words back for fear that he just might mean it.

The station had the same grey-ish wash of lighting as the morgue, jailhouse gloom (a relief to his eyes), and big box computers that weren't even current to this decade. Everyone in the station on the phone or booking perps, and even when he took his badge out, showed it around, no-one jumped up
to escort him anywhere. He walked through to the Chief's office, pushed through the door without
knocking, badge held out front like a gun. Patti Smith on the radio: *Jesus died for somebody's sins
but not mine.* Chief was a woman pushing sixty, short curls dyed ruddy brown, suede jacket slung
over the back of her chair. Plump cheeks and pale lipstick, but there was something leathery about
her face, the mean eat- your-veggies granny type, or the compensatory toughness of a woman in a
town where certain work was still men's work.

"Howdy boys," she said. "Heard you were in town but you don't call, you don't write."

"Sorry we couldn't make it sooner," Dean said. Barreled on but still attuned to the sound of Sam's
hands straining in his suit pockets, sulking at Dean's back. "Bureau's gonna need access to your case-
files on all missing persons for the past five months. And whatever records those missing persons
might've had."

Sharp squint to her eyes, she said, "Course you do. I already gave all that and more to the ATF, don't
you folks liaise anymore?"

He got closer to her desk, leaned in-her tilted, cool-cat glance said she wasn't the kind to be
impressed by any man's greater height over her. He dropped his voice, confiding,"This is mostly
classified, but. We're with internal affairs, and we're running our own independent investigation into
how the ATF handles this case."

"You DC folk, so quick to turn on each other. Don't see why that should stop you from asking to
review *their* files. But alright. Give me time, and take a sucker"- she pointed to a jar of sour apple
candies on her desk. "I'll get you boys whatever you need to know."

She picked her phone up, sent an order over the intercom. Patti Smith belted: *Here she comes walkin'
down the street. Here she comes walkin' through the door. Here she comes*  

"Appreciate it, ma'am." He dropped into the chair. Took a candy, the astringent flavor took the
coppery taste out of the back of his mouth. Sam hung back.

"What're you doing skulking back there big guy?"

"Him?" He spoke over Sam's stumbling excuse. "Oh, he's more the muscle of the operation."

"Bet a face like that gets you a lot farther than muscle." She looked at them like a curiosity the
salesman had dragged in and was trying to pawn off on her.

Talking on the phone, she answered questions and gave orders in a voice either honeyed or with a
brusque, blunt edge, she could do a smooth switch from one to the other. She cracked one of the sour
candies with one clench of her broad jaw. "You two been together long?" was one of the few things
she said to them. Insinuation in how she said it, but he couldn't tell if it was *that* kind of insinuation.

"Long," Sam said. Cleared his throat. "I think we're past, uh, ten years now. Ma'am. Off and on."

"That right," she said. The files came in two cardboard boxes and she handed them over with a flinty
dry, "I am so glad y'all are on the case, Agents."

For no reason other than a general impression of shrewdness and gut instinct, she concerned him
more than the ATF. He almost said so to Sam over the roof of the Impala before Sam said,

"If you're set on seeing this through then you know I am too. I'm with you, man, all the way."

Sam's pacifying pep talks grated on him as much as anything did these days, derisive laughter
threatening to spill from his lips - what is this, a lifetime movie? you and your puppy dog eyes?

"Thanks for that," he said.


He poured the last fifth of Jim Beam into his coffee, drank it, shoved aside some of the files he’d tossed on the sofa bed, had flipped through while daytime TV was on in the background - Alejandro had stolen Maria's grandmother’s heirlooms to finance his drug smuggling operation, but she still wouldn’t leave the sonofabitch for Ferdinand, who had recently come back from supposedly crashing his plane over the Pacific. Credits rolled, and he flipped the TV off. Eyes on the cabin wall, a generic print of a beach, butter yellow sand and crisp white capped waves, like an El Sol ad: go someplace better. Right. He wanted to. He wanted to go on vacation, him and Sam and Cas, maybe, if he could get Cas to take some time off from whatever angel business Cas was doing this year, and Charlie, if she ever came back from trekking across the Russian steppes or wherever the hell she was. He wanted his people around him and he wanted a beach that wasn’t the coast of Maine or the Puget Sound or friggin lake Michigan; he wanted generic beach print sunshine and safety, and if he had to board an airplane to get there, so be it.

But he wouldn’t, not after he finished this job, or the next job, or the the job after that. He wouldn’t be safe. There’d be no-one to kill on that clean deserted beach, and with no-one to kill this hunger would devour him inside-out, he would die choking on his own blood and be reborn, in the most painless way imaginable, blissfully unburdened.

That last should be the main deterrent.

He went outside, shades on, walked the few yards on mossy turf to a swimming pool covered in a tarp for winter. Sam sat in a plastic chair poolside, on the other poolside some bad bleach-job middle aged lady in a red raincoat reading through a stack of Home and Garden magazines.

Sam had his cell pressed to his ear, speaking lowly. Dean's tread on the moss was even softer. He caught the words "him" and "yeah" and "running out of time" and "but he's always kinda been this way."

Waited until Sam said, "Check back with you soon," before he ground his heel on the poolside pavement, got Sam slow-blinking up at him, not jumpy, not happy to see him either.

"That Cas?"

Sam nodded.

"He ain't still livin' it up on the Mississippi is he?"

"What? No, he cleared out 5k in Atlantic city."

"You're shitting me."

"No'm not." Corner of Sam's mouth ticked up, hard to read from this angle. "He told me blackjack involves some of the most beautiful mathematical laws in the universe."

"Y'know, I thought about takin' him to Vegas, getting him to do the Rainman thing once, but for some reason I thought he'd be hard to corrupt."

He let the conversation lull, almost easy between them. Tipped his head back, seeing above the pine tops the milky grey sky, now shot through with blue, and the mountains seagreen under their white
caps, before he said, "That all you talked about?"

"Not really, I told him how we've been doing. Because that's, uh," he swallowed, "what friends do."

Looking down now at Sam's hair, curling over his collar like a sitcom mom's. Would be so easy to make a fist in that hair, use it as a handle to crack Sam's skull open on the pool's curb, whatever revelations he would find in the spill of brain matter over cement, maybe he could read Sam better if he read him like witches read a swallow's entrails.

Intrusive thought, those Seven Steps To A Better You audiobooks would call it. Intruding from where?

Dean walked back to the cabin, feeling Sam's eyes on his back. He got in the shower, where the water took a moment or two to come on, and another moment to put out heat, prickles of cold and hot, of relief and discomfort. It touched something deep inside, tiny shudders of weakness and vertigo marching up the ladder of his spine to rattle around in his skull. He touched his teeth, a red smear came away on his fingertip. He spat, his blood swizzled down the drain. He looked at his palm, the one he'd held over his lighter the other day. His skin gun-callused, otherwise unscarred. He wanted to punch the shower wall out but didn't dare. He'd leave a hole through plastic tile, crack the pinewood and Sam would know, Sam would look at him with fear more apparent in his eyes for his attempt to shutter it. Sam would plead with him to go away from here and find something else to kill. Or go back to the bunker and lock him down. There was no telling with Sam these days. Hunt, don't hunt. The answer is in you, the answer lies with Cain, the answer is written in a fucking library book. Maybe he just should've let Cain do it.

He got out, pulled the same three-day-stink clothes on, walked over to the spread of files on the sofa bed. Picked one up, unfamiliar name under a grainy mugshot from a drunk and disorderly, dropped it when his brain refused to process any information from the print. Sam was at the kitchenette table with his own spread of case-files, a highlighter, a notepad. Idle hands drew Dean's attention to the drawer in the bedside nightstand, considering cleaning the guns; he'd done the trunk's arsenal this past week but not the handguns they usually carried on them. He pulled out the drawer, and there was Sam's binder, staring up at him like a warning sign except for how maybe that was just in his head. He let it fall open in his hand where it may, some passages in Aramaic or cuneiform, but Sam had translated the bulk of the text and it only took him a second to light on what he was looking for, which was the word blood underlined and in a sentence with curse and removal and equivalent exchange (scribbled in the margins, Sam's hand), and price.

"What is this shit?" he said. He could swear he didn't mean his voice to have that bite, overcompensating for any unsteadiness, his shaking fingers clawing against the vinyl cover.

"I told you," Sam's head cocked to him, wide-eyed incomprehension or a decent impression of it. "Stuff from the Men of Letters, mostly."

"Looks like witchcraft, lot of blood magic shit, what I told you to back off from-"

"It's curse breaking Dean, of course there's gonna be magic involved, what'd you expect-"

"This, this is what I expected, which is why I told you not to go there, not again, with the blood and the sacrificing and this fucking merry-go-round of knives - "

"You barely even looked through - I haven't done a thing you - "

"Not yet." He took two steps towards Sam, threw the binder down on the table before him, grimoire
illustrations glaring in red and black, knives and hooks and viscera. "Based off your stellar track record-"

Sam's mouth flinched but his eyes held steady. "So we're back to that, you dragging up the past for any pretext not to let me-"

"I wish I could trust you." The words were a blunt instrument as precisely chosen as, say, a hammer from his arsenal, but what else but weapons had he ever had to keep them safe? "But I'm responsible for this, not you. I was the one who took this thing on," left hand clasped briefly over his right forearm, "and I can't let you dig us into a deeper hole."

"Right. Because that's what I do, right? Or maybe it's you. You that can't handle not being in the driver's seat for goddamn once-"

"Sammy, c'mon."

"But no, you wish you could trust me, you might even try if I just didn't make it so damn hard on you."

"Sammy, this isn't about you, okay?"

"You are my family." The words were an ice pick to chip away at Dean's icily lined up blocks of reason, and how long had it been since they'd been said between them any other way?

"Like you weren't the one up in my grill when I tried that - "

"What the hell do you want from me?" Sam's eyes were liquid, near begging behind the anger. He'd gotten to his feet but not to use his height, shoulders slumped and that damned tucked-chin little-boy look. "Is that really what we're back to, you telling me to let you go? The last time, if I'd have taken you up on that you'd still be kicking around on a sociopathic joyride with Crowley and I'd be...Is that what you want? Do you even want that thing off?"

Dean turned his head aside a moment to dress his face in stone, let his eyes light on the dregs of Jim Bean. He wrapped his hand round the bottleneck, turned. Sam flinched back a half-step. Dean set the bottle back on the counter.

"I know you do," Sam said. "I know what you're like when you're terrified, remember?"

Oh yeah, he remembered: high tight little-boy voice - I just wish you'd drop the show and be my brother again. Such a simple thing to ask: just play your goddamn part.

"Sammy," he said. "I'm...If you don't think I'm holding on as hard as I -"

"One month ago you were for trying anything, holding out for a cure, I just don't understand what -"

"If there's one thing in this life I'm fucking sick of it's us giving everything for false hope."

"That's what this is about? About what happened the last time I tried to -"

"Last time you said you were gonna save me, what happened was, I went to Hell." The words did what always happened when unspeakable words were spoken: rip another chunk out of the atmosphere between them, sucking heat and oxygen into the fissure, all crushing gravity and self-contained destruction, and that devastation in Sam's eyes he hadn't seen since the last time he'd died.

"No, I don't - Sam, this isn't on you." Sam's bowed head and eyes pressed shut and goddamn
ridiculous hair all in his face, and Dean yearned for a pair of clippers to shear the whole fucking mess off him. "Look, whatever I've said or done to make you think you have something to prove I'm sorry, you're in the black here."

"No, no you don't. We don't get clean slates in this family and we don't get to walk away. You taught me that. You don't get to lecture me now on not repeating your mistakes. You'd do it again: those were your exact words, in fact." He'd hitched up his shoulders, flung his arms out, that old defiant posturing Dean hadn't seen from him in years. But his breath shuddered, his mouth twisted, as he struggled not to cry. Part of Dean wanted to enfold him in his arms; part of Dean wanted to wrap hands around his throat. This was not a new feeling.

He took a moment, considering what next to say. It was as hard as that time he'd used the pliers in the Impala's maintenance kit to extract a cracked tooth from an abscessed gum, with only cheap malt for anesthetic.

"I need space." That had Sam's nostrils flaring in a huff, but Dean was pretty sure "I need some space" was in the playbook of people with functional relationships, so what the hell would Sam know.

He knew it'd be safer if Sam wasn't around him right now. Sam, with his unshakable delusion that Dean hanging on too hard to those last shards of control (glass fragile and sharp, cutting his fingers to ribbons) was the problem here, like the last time Dean had lost control Sam hadn't nearly taken a hammer to the head.

"You mean you're gonna go get smashed and stumble back in at five a.m and make like this never happened." Sam was crowding out the careful distance he'd maintained for the duration of this fight. Putting himself in a violent arm's reach, like he'd rather Dean took a swing than walked out the door. And Dean would've obliged him if only he trusted himself to stop at one punch, or two, or three, or-

"Congratulations, you got one fucking thing right."

He had to get his boots on before the stomping out could happen, awkward to be doing something so mundane when the storm hadn't even subsided into sullen silence, and it's better for your circulation not to tie your bootlaces with all that suppressed violence in your hands. His tongue was armed to get the last word in if Sam tried to get off a parting shot, but Sam had retreated to his case-files and was putting on an air of oh, I won't let this hassle you started distract me from my very important work. The binder was lying open to an illustration of ritual self-disembowelment by his pen-tapping hand.

He had a knife-edge second when he considered getting in the car and driving away from this case and this town and from Sam, a silver shining second such as when he'd risen all black-eyed and washed clean of care, and made the simple decision that he and Sam would be better going splitsville, your existence has sucked the life out of my life long enough, and he'd be finally free of this psychological three-ring circus going by the moniker family, and it'd be for Sammy's own good so what right did he have to complain-he could go to college meet a nice girl hit a dog whatever, it didn't matter and so nothing did and nothing had ever made more sense to him.

But he could only kid himself now for the duration of that second that he was capable of even wanting to walk away.

He left the Impala so Sam wouldn't worry that he'd done what he'd been thinking of doing. He walked around the campground but the woods were carrying him back to his dream of the day before until he could almost taste Sam's blood in his mouth, so then he walked the mile stretch of highway-side into town, long shadows spilled by low afternoon burnt orange sun, and he walked around town, looking into storefronts and diner windows, watching the civilians, storekeepers and
shoppers and diners and loiterers and panhandlers, and he looked for the ones that didn't have the company of friends or family, the ones with ripped flannel and ragged spirits, the ones he'd pick from the herd were he the wolf here.

He waited until crimson sundown to make his way back to the bar. Ordered onion rings and whiskey, neat. By his third whiskey Susanna the bartender had a wary light in her eyes, which was fair he supposed, his drinking habits were not what you wanted from a federal agent who was supposed to be the only thing between you and the wolf at the door. Well, him and those goddamned ATF motherfuckers (who he hated for being the thing that had started him and Sam arguing today).

After that third whiskey some grizzled bear hunter type in a leather vest and camo dropped him a tip about a backroom poker game. Why him? Well, maybe it was because he'd dropped the bartender a Grant and they figured he must be flush with cash and sloppy drunk besides. Once he got to the backroom though and met a bunch of hunters bragging about their rifle makes and talking their theories about the investigation he got the distinct impression they'd caught on he was a fed and figured he was the type who could be plied into spilling his intel on a case while participating in a backroom poker game. Which said interesting things about law enforcement round these parts, or maybe just about his slowly unraveling self-presentation.

Disconcerted him, because he was used to playing his roles distinct from each other - network TV clean officer of the law or hard rolling lowlife - he'd shed one skin before he'd put on the other. But he had to wear so many masks these days he couldn't be surprised if he was getting sloppy.

He obliged them with macabre and gritty hints about the case, most of which were cribbed from cable crime shows and Elmore Leonard novels.

One of the players brought up the wampus beast and a zoological statistic about there being five million undiscovered species in the world, and the other men made dismissive grunts while Dean said, "That right," as cryptic as he could manage. Stared into the long distance, or into the glass eyes of the elk head mounted on the wall.

He won the game, royal flush. It felt good. It felt like a poor man's knock-off of the sweet satisfaction of a hunt, a kill. He looked around at the men, who were hiding their disgruntlement at paying up to an outsider well, and part of him wished one of them would start something. Accuse him of cheating (he hadn't). Part of him. The other part looked at his watch, 11:23, and knew he should get home to Sam. If only he could sever one part from the other, and send the part that wanted to see Sam again for all the right reasons home to make good.

He was going to do the right thing, his feet were carrying him to the door, to the brass legato rhythms of the band playing: begging darling, please, Layla - but it was the right thing too when he stopped because in the far corner from the bar he spotted a man and woman at a table-first arrested by the streak of fire that was the woman's red hair in the back corner shadows, then because everything about the woman's body was signalling that she didn't want that man near her, the shoulder facing him arched to her ear, hand white-knuckled on her bourbon glass, and a full-body flinch when he leaned in, and Dean couldn't ignore that. He sidled his way towards the table, and oh look, it was cowboy hat who'd been here with smoky eyes the night before, making the most of his broad meaty shoulders to box the lady in. Hand cuffing her forearm when she tried to rise, and speaking in a gritted undertone, not sloppy-drunk-belligerent but all cold menace.

Dean didn't bother with the "Hey ma'am, he botherin' you?" preliminaries. He made like he was continuing to the exit, then swerved behind the man's chair and leaned over, slipping a Bowie under the man's arm, pressed the blade's tip gently, gently against the intercostal between the fourth and fifth rib.
"This is the only warning I'm gonna give," he said. "You're gonna take your hands off her and you're gonna clear out of this establishment and you're not comin' back."

"Or what? Think you're gonna fuckin' stick me here?"

"I slip this in under the rib you bleed out slow and nobody notices 'til I'm out that door."

"Howsabout you step out back here and see how you face me without stickin' me in the back like some pussy bitch."

"How about I don't have to spill you on my shoes."

The woman's free hand was clutched to her mouth, her eyes glassy with drink and fear. The guy let go of her arm, started to rise, Dean jabbed the blade in just that fraction inch more, nicking denim and flannel and skin, when he felt him about to try to make a twist, a break; he spun with him and walked, arm around his waist last-friend-sober like, to the exit. Pushed the door open, knife-fist in the small of his back, shoving him out.

"Don't turn around," he said. "Keep walkin'."

He walked, long, easy, sober strides. Back lot had a lot of big rigs and loading trucks and the guy vanished fast.

That was easy. Shockingly clean. He could've done it bare-knuckled, and it'd have been just as easy, cowboy hat looked like the type who'd thought he grokked how to fight from watching Tarantino movies, but sometimes a weapon, the control, the distancing effect of having something in your hands was cleaner, safer.

"He really gone?" The woman, at his back. He turned and between slow eye blinks saw bright new blood sticking her shirt to her breasts, her ribs, splattered across the wide wings of her collarbones and cheekbones; the play of bar lights and shadow and her white white skin made it beautiful. "He's been showing up, these past weeks, wherever I am. I called the police, I tried to make a report but I don't even know his last name. He came to town, I don't know, a few months back. He did some work on our windows, cleaned the gutters. I live on my grandparents farmstead and the place needs a lot of work, sometimes I hire drifters, and I told him I'd let him know if there were any other jobs around town. I thought it was just my luck, at first, that I kept runnin' into him. But he showed up at work today and then he followed me here. I. I know you're FBI. Got a friend, Susanna, who works here. Could you please-

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, there's not much else I can- Hold up, you said he came to town a few months back? You don't remember the date?"

"Last week of November?" she said. "The first killing frost?" This close, he could see the the dark roots to her red hair. Her eyes were shiny and familiar, maybe reminded him just a little of his mother, the dream of her. "You wanna come back to my place, have a look around?"

Strange thing for a woman to ask, from a man she'd just saw threaten another man into compliance, even if he was a fed. Sure, that'd be a turn on for certain women, but she didn't strike him as that kind of woman. She'd just been trying to escape that kind of man.

Her hands were shaking. He thought back to another girl, rescued: whatever's going on with you has nothing to do with my honor. (ungrateful cunt).

"Would be my honor," he said.
Out the exit, he scanned the parking lot, with the moonlight sharply delineating the edges of things and the stark cut of the shadows it wasn't difficult to discern moving bodies but the trucks and trash bins offered vantages from which to mount an ambush and his hand was never more than scant inches from his gun as he walked her to her car. She stuck to his side, brushed up against him once or twice. White mustang. "Sweet," he said. "What vintage."

"67," she said. "Got it a few years back as a starting-over present to myself." She lit a cigarette, standing liminal between streetlight and pure night, her peacoat sashed at a slim waist, the bloody spill of her red-dyed hair over her shoulder, the line of her jaw like a knife, like all those girls in trouble in all those old black and white crime flicks he'd ever seen, like in the Chandler and M. Cain stories he'd read, and there was a time when he'd fantasized about being a private dick with the fedora and the snubnose in a shoulder holster the way he'd once fantasized about being a rockstar. He'd have been good at it until the right dame in trouble walked in the door, fumbling to light her Marlboro with shaking hands, and the lessons of all those old stories took wing out the window, meeting a shiny self-destruct button in lipstick. Like now. "Names Katherine, by the way. Or Kathy, or Kat. I've been a few people, in my time."

"Yeah, I know the look," he said.

He got in the car, her in the driver's seat. He tasted her secondhand smoke, intimately familiar. Her eyes, the cut of her jaw, oh so familiar. He might find his fight at the end of the night after all. His body pressingly aware of every weapon on him, even more aware that he was a weapon, hungry and hollow.

She drove.
Chapter 3

Highway outside town limits, palms itching with the discomfort of being passenger side, he considered giving Sam a call. Let him know - Hey, I'm following up on a possible lead, no back-up and badly under-armed, no idea what I'm walking into but maybe I like it that way, maybe I'm hoping this takes a hairpin down south, crashes and burns, so what.

Johnny Cash covering Old Dixie Down on the radio - and the bells were ringing

He would totally have called Sam were it not that avoiding Sam was a big point of this night, and he was unsure of what else he might say, late night phone calls with this much whiskey in him were not a good notion generally, post-fight phone calls a tricky business even to manage after sober reflection. And Sam might not pick up - wouldn't be the first time. Then he'd get home even madder, spit more unsayable things in Sam's face, damage his brother some more, tear another piece away.

So no, he wouldn't be calling him.

She turned off at the NO TRESPASS sign onto a dirt drive that went on and on through land barren as Mars except for some copes of spruce-fir, tree and fence-post shadows sketching charcoal lines across dusty grey fallow fields, shadows looming from the barn and well-cover to five times their size, and all in the cast of mountains which looked near enough to stroll to, and yet their moonlit glassy blues and whites seemed from another planet. Pulling up to a two story farmhouse that could've dated back to early last century with its gingerbread trim intricate as handmade lace. She parked in a tin roof lean-to round the side of the house, got out. Dean heard the scritch of rodent feet scurrying under the car the second his boots hit the gravel. She said, "He didn't just clean the gutters, they were coming off the roof and he fixed them up right as rain." Her eyes on him saying something different, sharp and assessing and hungry, and he felt an answering hunger but couldn't for sure say what kind.

She showed him through the foyer and into the kitchen's yellowish incandescent glow; her face set against the cherry patterned wallpaper and old crockery and straw baskets lost both the mystery and the familiarity she'd had in the bar and was merely pretty, maybe a little tired around the eyes.

"Not that anyone could take you for the tea drinking type, but for my grandma's memory's sake I gotta ask." She brandished a tin kettle that looked about a hundred and some years old.

"Thank you, ma'am, I couldn't possibly," he said, thickly affecting manners, and she smiled. It was a nice, clean-toothed smile. She put the kettle back then turned her head this way and that, hair falling in her face, by this light an almost natural red, as if trying to recall where she'd left something.

"The stove," she said. "Was belching smoke before he got here. He fixed that too, and he wasn't the first to try. I had a professional out and he said it'd been busted to hell and I shoulda had it hauled to the junkyard. Then he goes in there with what, a crowbar? That was something. He mighta been the best handyman in the county were he not a psycho jackass."

"He tell you anything about himself?"

"He was from west of here, but I got that from the accent, maybe Arkansas. Like I said, we get a lot of drifters through here, and mostly I don't ask questions." She sucked her cheeks in, face skeletal-hollow for a moment. "I've been a drifter myself."

"So what brought you back home?" Not the pertinent question or what he'd intended, but his
attention was caught by her hands toying with the sash of her peacoat, white long fingered hands with cherry nails, twisting one end of her sash around her palm like a bandage.

She shrugged. "Had nothing left for me on the road after my guy got off. I was driving in circles so why the hell not end up where I started? My grandma died in this house, so'd my daddy, after my mom up and left him and after I left him too...He drank. We're one of the last families around here that can afford, just barely, to live on their own damn land. I didn't want to let the place go to auction, get bulldozed for another dime strip mall."

She'd got a jar of mead out of the cupboard and poured some in two crockery mugs. He drank and it was still and sweet. Piled on the whiskey he'd be feeling it in a few hours, and Sam would be all the more with the kicked puppy looks, disappointed after those weeks when Dean had been cutting back while doing the egg-white-kale-protein-shake shit, those nights when he went to bed stone cold sober. Not that it had helped.

Kat or Kathy or Katherine was looking at the Cuckoo clock on the wall. Nearing one a.m. Her coat gaped open, the silk of her shirt sticking to her skin; he was staring at her breasts and remembering (not that it'd really happened) how they'd looked with blood spattered on them.

"Maybe that'd bother some, livin' on the land where their folks died, but I suppose it felt fitting, me ending up here. While I was on the road every damn thing felt random, tossed in the air by God's indifferent hand. Well, everything but the guy I was with. Whatever that was. Goddamned teenage 'us against the world' shit. Right then it felt like fate. But it's over and now this feels like fate, or like I never left. But you didn't come here so I could monologue about my failed-smalltown-runaway cliche. I'm just saying I saw enough of myself in him that I wanted to give him a break. So I picked him up where he'd been hiking along the roadside past my place. He had a heavy pack on and rain clouds were rolling in and first I offered him a ride into town and then he asked me about work. He said his name was Clive and that his daddy'd been a mechanic and fixing things was all he knew what to do. I figured him for a veteran because he had some odd reactions to stuff, like sunlight. Didn't much like being in the broad light of day. He'd been sleeping in my barn. I found that out later, once I thought he'd gone. Oh yeah, and he left--I don't know what, these black marks on the ground like he'd been writing with charcoal under where he'd been bedding down." She tipped back her head, gulped what was left in her mug, long white throat exposed.

The wind had picked up, set the window panes to shivering.

"What sorta marks?" Dean said. "Like symbols, writing?"

"Like symbols, yeah. But since it seems sure he's screwed in the head I don't know what it matters what he wrote out there."

"You'd be surprised what crazy can tell ya." He should call Sam. He didn't want to think about Sam right now, but he ought to call him. "I'm gonna have to head out now, have a look around. You didn't cover them over any?"

"Nyah. I'm not out there much."

"Good, you better lock the doors and I'll--."

"I'll grab flashlights," she said. "If we're gonna go poking around in a place hardly anybody's been for twelve years I'm not passing on the chance to be your Scully." Her bantering tone belied by the clench of her jaw, defiant. Not of him, he thought, she was scared and wanted to fight it, wanted to make a show of how not intimidated she was by this trespass on her property.
"You expectin' the X-Files you're gonna be disappointed."

"Already am. Agent Mulder was much better lookin'."

She went into the pantry and he stared in after her, saw some old hooks for drying meat cast a shadow clawing around her head, and when she turned back the shadow went across her eyes like a blindfold.

They went out, only half a moon but strong, smearing buttery yellow shine on the tree tops and well-cover and the shingled roof of the crib barn. The wind's distant howl, tumbling barrels of black cloud over the mountains, promise of more mud and sleet and some. Going into the barn, met by a stampeding scritch-scratch of rat feet and battery of wings in the rafters and the rasping cry of a barn owl. He swung his flashlight wide, but the beam bored only a weak hole into the mud-dense dark. She told him, "Down thataways under the hayloft."

The air in here smelled moldering damp: straw and spores and rat and bird shit. It was exactly the right consistency of quiet for a long deserted barn and he didn't trust it anyway. Kat/Kathy/Katherine's flashlight beam and footsteps were receding, she was hanging back and after she'd put on such a show of being game, it didn't sit right with him. His hand itched for a weapon again, but he couldn't trust that urge either, could he?

Under the hayloft, he kicked around in the straw and dry dung for a bit before he saw the marks, charcoal thinly scratched in a loopy old hand, and when he pointed the flashlight at them direct the light blotted them out and it took his eyes a moment to adjust, to take in what he was seeing. Letters in plain American English: Do you remember me yet

He heard the creak of weight displacing off the boards of the hayloft a split second before the force of a body came down on his shoulders and he got his knife in hand while a meaty arm slung a chokehold around his neck, and in those crucial seconds before his brain starved of oxygen and his vision greyed out he got a clear fix on the small woman in local police tans peeling out of the dark, and with his Bowie already in hand he could get off a throw that thwacked in about her collarbone. Didn't take her off her feet, but slowed her coming while he ducked his chin towards his attacker's hands, reached back and plucked the guy's arm down as he rolled in with his shoulders to create room to pull his head out, hooked his leg and flipped him ass-over-end, got a fleeting glimpse of Joe-Schmo in a greasy grey sweatshirt. A third slammed into him sidelong, and he tried a left hook and missed in spectacular style as a more wiry body with inhuman fluidity slipped under his arm, then kicked backwards, connecting with the side of his left knee. His leg buckled, and his opponent followed up the hit with a fist come down hard on his back, between his shoulder blades, juddering down his spine. Toe of a boot nestled under his ribs for a kick that sent him against a stall door, wood slats cracking and his shoulder grinding around in his socket but not popped out.

The one he'd flipped was the one to close in on him first, and he lashed out with his right foot, took out his legs and sent him to the floor a second time. Got on his feet, tried to use the body of one of the guys, the third and only one who had the proper look of a bruiser mook who'd set on you in a back alley, or a barn, whatever, to block the other two 'cause this ain't the movies where your opponents will get in fucking line. They had claws, cougar claws, veetala claws, werecat or wampus beast, whatever. Baring needle fangs as they grimaced or snarled, but they weren't going after him sharp implements first, they were trying to take him down without tearing him to pieces, those first few moments. Inhuman strong, but so was he now, by god, so the fuck was he.

Living broke down into its essential components: action and reaction. That didn't cover the purity of what he felt, but was a part of it.

Dodge.
Hit.

Grunt. Recenter.

Hit again.

Back up.


Forearm block. Turn and take it on his shoulder.


After that, he had to dodge their claws, and that was good, meant he had them scared enough that
they'd fight to the death now. Another part of the purity: their fear.

The terrible steel hammer of his heart beating not for this but for what came next. He was holding
them off, stalling while he hoped to stumble on something akin to a weapon, what could be
improvised in a barn, his blood galloping for that moment that came after his heel landed on the
handle of a mattock, kicked it up into his hands and after that it was all over, in the sense that there
was only one way it could end. This was what his heart hammered for: the killing stroke, cracking
open a skull with a great splash of blood and brain and bone fragments, the shuddering lingering
finality of the moment he was making, bringing down the mattock over and over and the skull
bursting over and over, pulping and splintering and running out into the ground, and blood trickling
itchy into his eye and down his shirtfront, sticking warm to his belly.

The shrinking back of the other two, the shift in the center of predatory power to him, and the small
white face of the woman in cop getup looking at him in fear-horror-disbelief and it almost gave him
pause, there was another him that paused outside himself, even while the him in the driver's seat
boxed her in against a stall door and hacked the mattock's blade into her eye socket.

After. He couldn't say that he'd killed them, didn't know what they were and what killed meant for
them, but with their brains leaking in the dust and his blood-nerves-synapses singing sweetly it didn't
matter. He felt full, content - for a moment. Then he felt the slow spurting of blood between his skin
and his shirt, touched his fingers to it, the ragged clefts in his flesh, but not scored deep enough in the
muscle to slow his step much as he searched for an out, and he was barely feeling it. The Mark, of
course. The things it did for him, to him.

To the back of one of the stalls he found a door he could shoulder through. Brandished the mattock
in readiness of another ambush until he'd gotten over the paddock fence. Threw it down as
cumbersome when he took off running across the fields, his boots landing obscenely loud on half-
frozen mud, the crunch-squelch of it, the blood sticking between the folds of his skin and clothes.
Running through the black tunnel of a copse of spruce-firs, carrying him back to his Purgatory
dreams again, and he almost wanted to stay in those oh, so familiar woods, but he went out and over
another fence, this one with a strand of barbed wire between the rails snagging skin on his palms and
knees and inner left thigh, and out onto the highway. The wind now full-throated howling had rolled
a cloud in front of the moon and the asphalt was pure black, and he walked along the highway-side
breathing harsh and ragged, the high fizzling, the pain in his side searing with every step, and that
sickening feeling of a part of him draining away warm between his fingers.

He was waiting for a car to come by while thinking no-one would be balls-to-the-wall insane enough
to take on a hitcher with blood on his face, jacket and hands. What could he do?
When it hit him he felt it as physical, believed for a moment a car had blindsided him. His brain bounced off the side of his skull, and he came unstuck in time: in one time he was beside the highway, knees throbbing under him, hunched forward, his forehead touching pavement like he'd been violently sick. He could hear the neurons firing, tiny cells rearranging inside of him to make room for more. goddamn. screaming.

Meanwhile he is in the yawning between mountains and ocean, a dawn of time place, the black hand of night touching something deep inside him, waking him up Lazarus-like, roll a stone away and he is reborn, hungry and hollow as the grave.

He is in Hell, and another layer of skin has been peeled away. New born the way we all are: naked, covered in blood, screaming.

He is in a back alley, his back arched against a dumpster, slick smear across his mouth.

Killing is a matter of balance, the vampire says against his ear canal, if you take away so that you can have, if your own life hangs in the balance, it all comes out in the wash. He does not take his wrist from between Dean's teeth. He murmurs that he will plunder, he will burn and salt the earth but he will find his atonement one day soon. The words drop like coins for Charon over his eyes, meant to blind him. Smear of blood across his lips is gumming his mouth shut. He looks for Sam and sees: wolfish smile, eyes burning like cigarettes, brother alien and familiar, and he is lying between two alley walls, lying between two countries, one for the living and one for the dead, his body gone cold.

Children, the vampire says, oh the children - little girls and little boys, taken in off the streets into my loving arms, all those sad forsaken children come to me in pieces and I stitch them up with bone and viscera, make them whole, make them hunt, kill, kiss the devil, do it for Daddy and it ends where it starts the vampire explains and he thinks again

wake up

but instead, he is walking through Lawrence at high noon, the first place, the logical ending place, it's a snake swallowing its own tail. The change, the sign on the wall of the auto-body shop reads. The oil change costs forty six dollars. John is there, his sleeves pushed up and engine oil blackening his hands from where he's been rooting around in the Impala's guts, and he says, are you ever gonna clean this thing? He hands Dean a socket wrench, and when Dean looks down at his hands he is holding a mattock, blood dripping black as engine oil on his shoes, god the thing is filthy, I wouldn't have given you the damn car if I knew you were gonna ruin it.

John has a gold pocket watch, like a proper man of letters, and when he holds the face of it up to the sun the light reflects into Dean's eye and blinds him.

Are you through? John asks.

Dean says, What do you mean?

You promised, John says, you wouldn't be done unless Sam died, and didn’t you agree? It would not be like Hell.

But, he reminds him, Sam was dying or he was dead. There was no choice.

There are always choices, he says, holding up the watch for Dean to look at. It is thirteen past noon.

Dad, he says.

John blinks.
Dad, I'm--

John slams the hood shut, walks toward him, asks, Are you done yet, son? What am I supposed to tell your mother? You'll break her heart.

What the hell are you talking about?

He puts the watch away, does not answer for a moment. He takes out a rag and rubs his hands on it, cleans them of engine oil. What you want, he says, is some light duty rubbing compound, then clay bar and wax. If not that, polish.

I'm sorry, Dean says to him, I'm sorry sir but I need this part to be over.

Why?

I'm not all here, he says, I'm not strong enough, and he has slipped in between sterile white walls. There is a man shackled naked to a stainless steel table, a line bisecting his belly, the cut you make when you are about to gut someone like a fish. The man's eyes are pale and empty. Dean has a white apron on to keep himself clean. He has a tray of instruments, shining twisted and sharp, and it was like this sometimes in Hell, it was not all red and black and walls of raw flesh, oh no. The spotlight overhead, white antiseptic light, he can see the outline of every rib and muscle and major artery, he could cut and cut, but no no, a fatherly voice advises him, he is not here to take apart down to the nub, he is not here to destroy. He has another cart and when he pulls the white cloth off with master chef panache, he has a new set of parts: he has fangs and claws and eyeballs and tissue samples and blood in plastic bags, and he can make repairs or improvements, he can make--

Creation, this other fatherly voice hums against his ear, is your work now, build a house that my people can live in, build walls that can keep the wolf from the door. Build it so they will come and we can all go home again.

And what about me? he asks, fingering a scalpel. The voice reminds him of John and of Alastair and of what he imagines God would sound like. He would slice its throat if only he could see it.

Wait for me, son, I am coming.

He woke up.

"Jesus, oh shit, you with it?" He was on his back. White, wide-eyed, windbeaten face above him, saying, "Hold on buddy it's okay I'm callin' for help, oh, Jesus Christ."

He rolled to his feet and he realized he had his Glock in his hand from the look on the man's face. Looked like he was regretting every Good Samaritan sermon he'd ever heard. His fingers were paused against those three buttons on his flip phone.

"Give it," Dean said.

"Jesusmotherachrist. I was gonna help you, man." He held the phone out in his open palm. Dean snatched it from him. Made sure he hadn't dialed.

The man had pulled over in a flatbed, the engine still going. "Gonna need you to give me a lift," Dean said. He gave the gun a wag. His blood pattered on the asphalt. He pressed his free hand to the wound, his winter-lined jacket soaked through.

"Shit, shit, just take it. Here--my keys."
"Sorry," Dean said. "Not safe - anybody could be out here."

The man swallowed the most obvious of retorts. Dean let him keep his keys, let him slide over to driver's side. Let his gun rest on his knee. The man's knuckles glaring white as he shifted into gear. The smell of his fear mixed in with the greasy fast food smell from the Biggersuns bag crumpled in the footwell.

"Sorry bout this pal, I just, just need a lift..."

The man's disbelieving eyes skittered between Dean and the windshield. "That much can't all have come out of you," he said. One hand on the wheel, one hand plucking at his straggly little beard.

"Really? Didn't fuckin' notice that," Dean said, slurring. He wanted so badly to close his eyes again and that terrified him more than anything that had happened that night. "Drive."

He drove.
Her first impulse on seeing the blood splattered near to the rafters was to burn the barn down. Try to move the bodies and the blood would soak her boots, smear all over her coat and that was one part of this life she'd always hated, having to scrub blood out of her clothes. Besides she wouldn't need this place any longer - bigger fish and all that. She'd been puffing on another Marlboro while she listened to the slaughter, the lighter was in her pocket.

Then she noticed a hand twitch, flop like a beached fish. One of the men - Larry? Sweatshirt and beefy jowls, he looked like a Larry. Maybe it was pre-programmed nerves, like a chicken with its head cut off. Maybe he retained some consciousness. Jesus fuck. Could he be stitched back together, re-animated, Frankensteinified, or whatever it was they did in those factories? Probably not. His cerebral cortex had been butchered to slop. Besides he'd been made to be the best and the best shouldn't need repairs, wasn't that the point?

She went for an ax, sliced neatly through their necks. After that, she conceded that she'd have to burn them properly, build a pyre and put on a regretful aspect, because, after all, he would know. He'd be inside her head and what he'd expect to see would be her mourning for her fallen brethren.

She called the girl down from the farmhouse room she'd been sleeping in. She came out to the barn, denim jacket on over her long cotton nightdress. Her arms wrapped around her middle, spindly bones rattling in the cutting wind, calf eyes blinking.

She swung the barn door open for the girl like a maitre' d, watched for her to flinch. She didn't.

"Did you do this?" Her eyes skittering over the bodies, cheeks only faintly greening. So she had a cast-iron stomach when it came to blood, more credit where due.

"Don't be stupid." She paused for effect before saying: "Dean Winchester. Remember him?"

"Dean Winchester is here?"

"Don't worry sweetie, he ran away after he slaughtered everyone."

"You lured him here and didn't tell me? I live here too, you know."

"So what, you could hide under the bed?" She went for tarps. Rolled the first out, next to the body of - Lila? Lily? - oh yeah, her - she'd been such a stuck up, squeamish little thing it was a mystery how she'd ever gotten to be a cop, or a monster. "Grab the legs." She hooked her hands under the corpse's armpits. The girl's mouth was a moue of distaste but she did as told. Said, "What now?"

"Make them a pyre, unless you're gonna cut and run to Daddy first."

She picked up Lila or Lily's head by the hair, dropped it on her stomach, and swaddled the tarp around her.

"Will he be mad? That we let Winchester get away, I mean?" We. That was almost touching.

She snorted. "Like Captain Ahab, but he'll be pleased too. No big game hunter wants to tell stories about how his prize went down on the first go-round."

Dry wood in the shed but not enough; they got to chopping at the spruce-firs until dawn, the wind stripping twigs and leaves and snarling them in their hair, scraping their cheeks, necks, arms. Make
allowances for that and the girl's small hands and spindly limbs and she carried her load: chopped and chopped until she was full-body shaking with exhaustion and cold, and she didn't whine once.

She found herself needing to banish the silence.

"When I was your age I was up before dawn, getting wood for the stove, milking the cows, making breakfast. Cleaning Nella's sheets if she'd wet them, like she did until she was seven or so. God, I hated it. We slept in the same bed. I woke up stinking wet and cold before the sun was up and I..." Jesus, what was she saying?..."would've traded anything to get out of there."

"I had a sister too," the girl said. Frowned, mouth parting. Like she was surprised to hear herself say that.

"Why are you here?" She scrubbed a hand down her face, squeezed her eyes shut. She was bone-tired, and she shouldn't be after last night when her bloodiest buried dreams had crawled out of the the grave: she should be set aflame, a roman candle. Winchester. She tried to conjure up what that name had meant once, the singular consuming purpose it had had before she'd traded it away - for what?

"He said you had stuff to teach me. About, you know. What I'd need for the future."

"He said, he said, he said! It means nothing to me what your daddy told you. I'm not your goddamn sister."

"Why are you here then?"

"Murder, mostly." She grinned, razor-toothed, ax balanced blade-out between her palms. The girl still blinked calf eyes at her but her jaw had a new jut to it.

"Did you know him?"

"Winchester? Who doesn't."

"I mean, you ever run into him in person before?"

"Met the whole tribe once. Different life." She shrugged, flipped her hair back from her face, let the ax drop into the mud. "Not much to tell - men never live up to their legends."

Grey dawn licked by black tongues of storm cloud when she lit the pyre. She stood for a few moments, bowing her head before the towering flames and tongues of smoke, giving him memories of mourning to pluck from her head. The girl didn't have to fake looking tired and sad. It took a lot of makeup to make her look otherwise. Or a few gestures of what could be taken for affection, buy her a new dress, tell her she wasn't useless, and she lit up that easy. Had she ever been that easy, malleable, weak? Of course she had; that's why she'd killed that girl.

If only it were as easy to set fire to memories as to people.

Sam read the case-files with their monotonously parallel track records of delinquency, this town's sons (and a few daughters) who'd been laid off as factories or mining operations shut down, who had come back from the wars into the oh, so welcoming arms of VA wait lists. They did meth and/or dealt it. Drunk and disorderlies. Petty theft to armed robbery. Battery, assault, domestic violence. The only stand-out intersection was that six had gone to the same veteran's meetings at the same church.
Sam made a note of the church's address. Considered that the only way these people would've had a shot at life was by getting out of this poisonous town and staying gone.

Meanwhile replaying the fight he'd had with Dean in his head and revising, redlining his words and substituting the things he wished he'd said again and again as if it might make a difference, the past an equation that could still come out right.

He slapped the binder off the table, frustration going off like a time-delay bomb, a number of case-files spilling with it, and after that conceded that he wasn't getting anymore work done tonight.

He ate the veggie tortilla wraps he'd gotten from the diner/grocers, popped the cap off an El Sol and turned on the TV. He got a news report of an oil train derailment up north, seventeen dead, snowy riverfront burning and blackening, monstrous oily smoke coiling from river to sky. He tried to zone out to the patter of the newscasters, but his mind would only drift to images of Dean after killing Cain, his pale bruised face and cracked grin, seeing right through the platitudes Sam had mouthed: *hey you did it this is cause for hope you alone may be sufficient* - then plucking the window glass out of his back and stitching him up, remembering scrubbing and sewing his corpse (which time?) and he should have said: *we were supposed to have faith in ourselves, in each other, and in our own free will until it killed us both. Then it kinda did.*

Early evening blue-grey. He stuffed their laundry into sacks, sorted out the heavy bloodstains that would have to be washed by hand since they might draw attention at the laundromat. He piled the laundry into the Impala and drove into town. Dean was around here, probably. Probably at a bar, the big bar on Front Street or more likely a dive where Sam wouldn't know to look for him.

In the laundromat he had to make change, had to smooth the wrinkles out of his bill five times before the machine would accept it. He sat down on the bench but the woman sitting on the other end was wheezing, coughing, rubbing her dribbling nose, so he relocated to the discomfort of a plastic chair in the corner. Between the sterile lights, the woman's wheezy sniffs and the clanking-whirring of the washer he still couldn't get a moment's rest. He pulled his phone out, scrolled through his contacts, thought about checking in with Cas, he should take advantage of Dean being gone - the deja vu of it hit him then, the time when it had been Ruby on the other end of these furtive phone calls like something out of a melodrama of spy-craft or adultery, and he should feel something with that reminiscence - remorseful - right.

On the subject of remorse: remembering when the summer Dean was gone (again) he and Cas had tracked down one of Crowley's higher-ups to Chicago's southside, lobby of a bullet-ridden condemned motel, interrogating him using tactics that he had learned from his brother, that his brother had learned from Hell, until the demon had dredged up the the consciousness of one Derek or Daren K. 19, former linebacker for St. Christopher High, current Gas n Sip Cashier, future 122nd unsolved Chicago homicide of that year, and he had started wailing at finding himself sliced-up, half-drowned and chained in a condemned building by two random psychopaths - *why are you doing this to me please I didn't do nothing please my brothers will-

Sam locked eyes with Cas as Cas raised his palm and said: "Wait." Cas' eyes were unsettled, by him. Same kind of unsettled as when he'd watched Sam killing Alastair - a memory that still sent a zing of righteous vengeful pleasure through him, no use pretending that it did not.

He'd drawn Cas aside so that they could argue out of range of the boy's blubbering about the ethics of putting him out of his misery now versus taking some time to see if the demon might resurface. *(Why should it make a difference? What do you think happens to every other host? What do you think happened to the one you're wearing?)* Then he'd gone out to the alley to open the trunk of that week's car and get a bottle of Jack from his duffle and one of the bottles of pills Dean would take on
the 'bad days.' (Strange, the compulsion to adopt his brother's habits in his absence).

When he'd gone back in the building the demon had resumed control, had gotten out of the trap, had back-up, had gotten the drop on them because Sam was crawling into a bottle and Cas was distracted by Sam or by ethical quandaries, and Sam let his bones get broken in the first half-a-minute, lost the knife, made Cas take on four solo, burning through his stolen reserves of grace, and when the fight was over Castiel crumpled like a glovebox napkin that'd been used to mop up a Biggersuns quarter-pounder. After, there was a part of Sam that was annoyed as hell that he'd wasted his best lead and that Cas would not be as much use now, another part suffocating in guilt at what he'd done to his friend and about the four or five collateral bodies that would vanish into statistics about Chicago gang violence that summer.

He'd never told Dean the story of how he'd fractured his arm and shoulder in three places, because depending on his mood Dean might take it as evidence that Sam was weak, or as evidence that Sam was a monster, or as just another story of something Sammy did on his summer vacation.

He had promised to call Cas if Dean's situation worsened, but he's mad at me did not constitute worse. He would only be whining, burdening Cas unfairly again.

His phone rang. Jody Mills. His spine bolted upright in an alarmed frisson at the slurring undertone to her voice, and the chair creaked under him.

"Alex, she's gone. No, no, I don't know. I came back from church on Sunday and she was just gone. No sign of struggle, but she didn't take any of her stuff. We've been having some problems and I know that this probably isn't...It's my fault. I've been pushing her too hard, to fit in, be normal. Trying to use her to fix the hole in my -"

"No, don't. She probably just thinks she needs some space, needs to feel like she's capable of walking out. It's stupid, but kids do that."

"I've been checking every traffic cam in the state. Following up on stolen car reports in the area. I just. If she left of her own freewill I know she has to want to come back but it's killing me, just waiting."

"If there's anything," Sam said. Jody had showed up at the bunker right after Dean disappeared (again), had happened to call him right after it happened and he had invited her over because it seemed the sensible thing to do, and he really was trying to be sensible this time around. "You two had been going through a rough spell, right?" she'd said when he'd showed her the note. He'd had to explain the whole situation, how he'd let Dean walk to his death, how he had been metamorphosing and how sickeningly familiar that was, because it had been done (by Dean) to him, how he'd tried to intercede with the King of Hell first but the fucker still wasn't taking his calls, and she'd listened to him with cool, collected acceptance, no horror no pity, and said - "Honey, you gotta let me help."

Still, he'd found he couldn't bear her company and so he had turned his back on her when he went hunting, hadn't even called to let her know when Dean was back, and he had no grand excuse, it was just something that had happened, like how he'd cut out Cas at the first viable pretext, like how he'd turned his back on Bobby while Dean was in Hell, like how he'd cut and run from the life so completely it was like trying to shed his skin while Dean was in Purgatory.

"I know you boys are busy with work and...your own personal crap."

"We're on a job, but y'know, if we can do anything." Maybe Dean was right and he was just looking for an excuse to cut and run from this job, this town, as if their problem was one of proximate circumstance. That sounded like him.
He was on his way out of the laundromat when his phone rang again. Castiel.

"Anything?" Sam said.

"Yes, the necromancer, as you said. He's been enslaving the dead and using them, using enchantments to keep them whole and sane, for so long as he can extort their families for money or services. I put an end to it."

"And?"

"He had an extensive collection of lore but little of relevance to our case."

"Alright, well, little's a step up from the the jack we got now." His arms sagging with laundry bags, his phone precariously cradled between shoulder and ear. He braced his shoulder against the laundromat wall. "Bring what you got by the bunker as soon as you can, okay?"

A pause. "A necromancer such as this would've warded all his possessions. I may have broken the lock, so to speak, with his death but I suspect he laid traps and I'm not at my full - "

"Fine, give it a couple days, hit up a psychic or a witch, whatever. Just. As soon as you can. What is it, three days drive?"

"Four days. More if this vehicle should expire. Why? Has your situation worsened?"

"No, no. We're fine."

"That's not what you said yesterday."

"I don't know what I said. I don't know what I'm doing. I, Cas, I can't sort this out right now." Feeling the bricks abrading his spine, he pushed forward from the wall. "I can't - "

"Sam, you're not alone."

"I know, Cas, I'm sorry. I. Thanks." His tongue thickening in his dry, dry mouth, difficult to talk around. "See you soon."

Driving back, he noted every bar he passed, most of them dive-ish. He should look for Dean. He didn't want to see him, not in the state he was probably in, but he ought to look for him.

He didn't.

He had made it back to the cabin, put away the laundry, lain awake in bed for, oh, three hours when the call crackled over the police scanner. Another body. A note of sickened astonishment in the voice reporting in. Decapitation, he thought he heard. He reached for notepad, pen. He should try to get some sleep - of course, even on the off-chance his mind ever quieted he'd only be woken by Dean stomping back in. Strange, how the waiting and worrying was keeping him awake when it was the most exhausting thing he had to do lately.

He'd lain down in his clothes, had only to lace on his boots. He made a pot of coffee, filled his thermos. He drove to the crime scene, which was a park adjacent to one of the town's nicer neighborhoods, two storied houses with wrap-around porches, and the park had a tennis court. The deputies were still winding yellow tape around the park's borders. No pedestrian onlookers yet, but lights were on in the windows of the nearest houses. Sam parked the Impala a block back, behind the ambulance, four cop cars and the silver Chrysler of the ATF agents. The wind was sharp, whipped hair into his stinging eyes. Woods on the other side of the park, the black tunnels between the pines a
perfect getaway route, but there'd be a trail in the underbrush. They should get dogs here, track it.
Sam frowned.

The body lay in the swing set's bark pit, the head five feet away, the killer must've kicked it aside.
The swings rocked to-and-fro by the wind, chains jingling. The forensic team were searching for
footprints in the muddy grass. The coroner, two cops, the ATF standing around the body. The body
big, stacked, had a biker's leather vest with an ouroborous patch, a snake swallowing its own tail,
inked snakes coiling around his arms.

"We've run into this chapter before, the Cottonmouths, active along the border in Nevada and
Arizona. Cross the Narcos and Coyotes a lot," ATF agent was saying.

"Shit Lenny," one cop was saying, "how much farther up shit's creek can this town get?"

Sam walked alongside the swathe of blood drenched grass to the head, the ATF lady trailing him.
Lying on its waxy cheek, a thicket of greasy black hair and a hideous thick-lipped, yellow-toothed
grimace, eyes wide open and he recalled how they would blink sometimes for several seconds after
you struck the head off.

"You ever seen a decapitation before, Agent?"

"Once," he said, which was off by more than he'd ever bothered to count.

"Shit," she said. Undertone: "Never get used to it." Sam wished he could say the same.

"The body doesn't look otherwise mangled," he said. "Doesn't fit the profile of the recent spree."

"That, and he's not one of our missing persons, not even from this town. Probably this is gang
retribution that followed him here." Pausing, her pale eyes more intent on him than they'd been on
the crime scene. "If you don't mind my asking, where's your home base Agent Ritchie?"

"Right now, no-where. I'm in the middle of a divorce and requested a transfer, after this case."

"Sorry to hear that." Her short hair fanning in the wind, moonlit white, a halo. She reminded him of
an angel with her implacable scrutiny, the sensation like icy fingers plucking at his insides.

"Don't you think they should have the dogs out?"- gesturing towards the woods.

"You think the killer mighta made his getaway on foot?"

"Possibly," Sam said, as another possibility came to mind. Lucking out, right then her partner called
her back over and Sam was left alone with the head. He knelt down, pulled on a pair of gloves and
peeled back the lip, palpitated the gum until a fang protracted. Vamp. Looked like they weren't the
only hunters in town. He beat a retreat before the ATF could talk to him again. He left Dean a
voicemail, just the professional facts of the case, his displeasure reserved for his tone. As if Sam
being put-out and irritated at him would make the slightest difference to Dean right now.

He slammed the Impala's door to further communicate his utterly ineffectual displeasure, took
another gulp of coffee. The howl of the wind further concerned him that Dean was on foot. Dean
might just decide to hotwire a car because god forbid he call a cab. Or no, most likely he'd gone
home with somebody. It was fine. Or he'd started a bar fight, and it wasn't fine. Someone might be
dead. But no, no. What a stupid, disloyal thing to think. He and Sam had had a fight on a familiar
theme (Sam could not be trusted to save his brother, even if Dean wanted to be saved, which as a
general rule, he didn't), and he was blowing it out of proportion because he was so goddamn tired.
Maybe he should've told Dean that - You think you're the only one white-knuckling it? I can't do this
without you.

*Like you can do it with me.* The Dean in his head curled his lip. *With me gone you're just out an excuse for not manning up.*

He wanted to protest that such language was sexist, but quibbling with the vocabulary of one's internal voice was a treacherous road for sanity in his experience.

He couldn't even win the fights in his own head.

He had a tremor in his right hand so he tightened his grip on the wheel until his knuckle-bone jutted so sharp he thought it might tear through his skin. Maybe Dean would be waiting for him when he got back. An ache behind his eyes and the sick churn of his stomach at the thought, dread. That Dean would be there or that he wouldn't? That he would lay into Sam again or that it would be like nothing had happened? Might be bruised knuckles and blood stains on his jacket that Sam would pretend not to notice, telling himself Dean must've had a reason. The thing that bothered him most Dean's empty empty eyes, when his mind went somewhere Sam couldn't follow, not that that was unique to their current situation. It had been that way after Dad died, after Hell, after losing - Christ, so many fucking afters, they'd lived most of their lives in afters.

He pressed his eyes shut, drifted, forgetting for a moment that he was the one driving. He opened his eyes, and he was on a quiet country road, dawning sky grey but storm clouds an oil slick blackening the horizon, black as the murder of crows lining the telephone wire. He was tempted to pull off in the breakdown lane, stretch out on the seats, see if he slept any better in the car, but no, that would only be another way to delay the inevitable.

There was nothing he could do but drive.
Chapter 5

After a few hours sleep of threadbare quality Sam was standing in the kitchenette, drinking tepid coffee, watching out the window: midmorning blacker than the dawn, storm clouds circling the valley like carrion birds over a dying animal, imminent deluge a visceral weight suspended in the air. His verging panic was another pressure building in the air, not yet overtaking him - he had not yet done anything that could constitute panicking. He was heating instant oatmeal on the gas range. He'd left Dean messages on his other cell and his other-other cell. He was probably strung out on caffeine and sleeplessness but he didn't feel it. The only thing his nerves registered clearly right now was the change in the weather.

When his phone rang he fumbled with which hand should reach for it and his mug slipped from his right, ratted on the lip of the sink and tipped over, coffee swirling down the drain. He stared numbly at Dean's name onscreen through another ring, and his "Where the hell are you?" came out strangely muted.

"Look Sammy," Dean said, then came static, a static that felt like it was resonating inside his head. "Long story," he got, garbled "- and you're gonna be pissed so let's not have it out right now. I'm coming back - you - gotta wait on - should know -"

He pressed his aching eyes shut, pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb. "I'm getting pretty damn sick of you deciding what I need to know."

"Don't - time for this - jacked some dude's car - dropped him like - two miles - and I gotta hotwire - meet up I'll lay - all out - okay - okay?"

"If I say no, it's pretty fucking far from okay, would that make a difference?"

"Bitch me - want - later - don't leave cabin - don't trust - what their poison is yet - hacked the shit out of - seems like - you're not strong enough to - "

"Hold up. Were you in a fight? Are you hurt?"

"Fine," Dean said. Then another garbled demand that he sit tight. Another long stretch of maddening static. Then Dean hung up.

Sam gripped the rim of the sink white-knuckle tight, took a slow breath, took another breath. Breathed in the charred stench as the instant oatmeal boiled over, the bottom of the pan burnt black when he scraped what oatmeal could be salvaged into a bowl. Then jackhammering noise, battering the corrugated tin roof, rattling his bones as it reminded him of sheltering behind a wall taking heavy fire, and his stomach lurched even as he recognized it for what it was - the clouds had opened to hail. Hail could potentially be dangerous as a bullet - he'd seen a news report last December about a man who'd suffered permanent brain damage after a golf ball sized stone punched through his skull - it could get up to a hundred miles per hour.

_Sit tight, Dean had told him. I'm coming back._

The burnt oatmeal lodged in Sam's gullet. He swallowed forcibly.

He had a lead he could follow up. The veteran's meetings at the church. He didn't have to do nothing
on Dean's barely decipherable say-so. Or he didn't want to because he was pissed at Dean and wanted to prove an old point about cryptic orders and his non-obligation to follow them. Or he was frightened for Dean's sake and wanted to help him and he couldn't do that waiting obediently here.

He dumped the oatmeal in the trash, drank the last dregs of coffee in the pot to wash the taste from his mouth.

He waited till the hail dissolved into rain to go out, feet nearly skidding out from under him on the ice-graveled front step, jacket soaked through, dampening his skin in the moment it took him to get to the car. He drove through disorienting night-black; he'd gotten only scattered hours of sleep over the past forty-eight hours and his body could not tell night from day without the sun.

The nondescript clapboard church they'd passed the other day on the way to Hudson's sister's house today was the last white-walled outpost against the sheets of rain and storm-cloud shadow smothering everything. The billboard reading: And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free - John 8:32. Inside the church was seemingly deserted, empty lobby and empty hallways, doors ajar to empty staff rooms, and Sam paused at the door to the nave, pushed it creakingly open. The storm's shadow filtered through pale-blue stained glass, midnight-blue luster, the only beautiful thing he'd seen in - how long? - exerting a pull on him. He could go inside, sit on a bench a moment to - to what? To confess? To ask for help?

Through the next door, entering the church library, he found a lady; startled her when she saw him looming in the doorway, shedding rain and mud on the carpet. He folded down his shoulders and put on his best meek churchgoing-citizen expression. He showed her his badge and asked her about the veteran's meetings, and she still looked warily at him but after a few moments of his FBI patter she gave him the address of the social worker, a man by the name of Joe O'Brian, who shepherded the group.

O'Brian lived only ten minute's drive from the church in a cottage of log and stone, nestled in the pines, the pines that looked like black arrows stabbing at the underbelly of the clouds. He looked in his late forties, wiry-lean body in a fuzzy grey sweater-vest, wire-rimmed glasses slipping down a thinly sloping nose. He welcomed Sam in, offered him coffee or tea, and Sam asked for green tea, figuring he was pushing even his caffeine limits. He showed him into a sitting room-cum-library, so bright after the darkly fading world outside, chintz upholstery and a tabby in the window, shelves and tables and armoire stuffed with books of all kinds: hard-backed technical volumes on theology, psychology, home maintenance; and fiction, the James' and Wharton's mingling with Clancy and Ludlum. Framed photos on the walls of himself with other men in uniform, what Sam guessed to be circa Desert Storm, but none of what seemed likely to be relations apart from an elderly couple standing before the wall of this same cottage. He told Sam he'd been an army chaplain, was now a social worker, worked with veterans mostly, sometimes with other members of the community as needed. Too great a demand for one to specialize, in this town. His face was open and kindly, reminding Sam of Pastor Jim.

O'Brian spoke with considerable sadness and some affection about the people who'd been taken, not only the ones who'd come to his group - he seemed to have at least passing familiarity with the others - good men going through hard times, he said more than once, and Sam was tempted to mention that one of them had been cooking meth in the barn on the land where his wife and kids were living, but he had to work O'Brian gently before he'd be forthcoming about his men's problems, and then he'd speak only in general terms so as not to violate confidentiality.

"Some missed the war, at least that's how it's usually put," he said, with his deeply wrinkled brow putting ten years on him. "Or missed a part of themselves that hadn't come back. Not because they
were built for killing, you understand. There's a lot of misconceptions - 

"Oh no, of course not," Sam said. "It's the purity, right? The trivial, day-to-day stuff doesn't matter over there - in combat it just falls away."

O'Brian nodded and Sam looked down at his tea, pond-water green in nearly translucent china that seemed liable to shatter at one slip of his thumb.

"There was a meaning they found in combat and couldn't find here. Here, just holdin' down a job - it's a grind and it doesn't pay off in the big life-or-death ways that anyone can see mean something."

"Right," Sam said. He looked out the window where behind the grey curtain of rain the black shadows of trees wavered in the wind, like shadow puppets. The tabby's tail was twitching irritably, perhaps dreaming.

"It gets too much and they need an outlet - 

"Or maybe it's not enough for them," Sam said. "Their wives, their kids, people who depend on them, whoever - It's not worth holding on for." He looked back, met O'Brian's gently perceptive frown through a long pause.

"My father was a marine," he said, because when at risk of being caught out it is always best to cover with something true, but then "My brother..." slipped from his tongue, and once he'd mentioned him he had to continue - " He's gone away too - uh, overseas - and he's always come back but every time he's been different, like he's left another piece behind, or maybe it's like another layer of skin has been peeled away and he's more the person he really he is. Or maybe I never knew him that well to begin with." He swallowed, bruised silence swelling. "But he's a good person." His throat constricted, the words slightly strangled. "He's always been a good person."

"I'm sure he is," O'Brian said. "I've seen men so changed they're all but unrecognizable on the outside, but there's a bedrock underneath where we all are what we are. But that don't mean that you -"

"I'm sorry," Sam said, sitting back, re-dressing his face in professional composure. "I shouldn't have - this is an investigation, I'm here in a professional - I shouldn't take up anymore of your time, really."

The tabby had woken - while avoiding O'Brian's eyes he noticed its yellow stare appraising him coolly.

O'Brian nodded, conceding, and poured him more tea. "Then I just have this to give you: I could get to telling when one of 'em was a a tipping point where he'd be the next to go. Some of 'em, they talked about seeing things. Feelin' followed. Paranoia, I thought at first. But them disappearing always followed fast on. I tried talking to the police about that, but I don't know that any of 'em were that interested in what I had to say." He shrugged. "Over-worked, I'm sure but what they're doing about this is anyone's bet. Chief used to be my sitter when I was real small, believe it or not-- tough as old grits, that girl, and I'd like to say she's got this but after so many...Well, I'm glad you're here."

"I'll do what I can," Sam said, and after, shedding rainwater all over the Impala's driver's seat again, he thought he should've said it with more assurance. Or that he should've tested the man with silver or iron or salt, somehow, he should not have been so trusting, or given so much away.

Sam drove back to the cabin where he had lunch, wrote down some facts of the case on notecards,
shuffled them around. This provided no insight but calmed his mind some.

He picked up the binder, the offending binder, the reason-Dean-wasn't-here-right-now binder, and flipped through it, landed on a grimoire illustration of a sacrificial heart burning up in a wormwood fire. He returned the binder to his duffle.

He got the Taurus out of the end table drawer, disassembled, cleaned, oiled, and reassembled it, then tucked it into his waistband.

Dean had not come back. The muscles were tensing in his shoulders, the back of his neck, and if nothing changed an ache would be setting in soon.

Sam drove into town again, went to the bar where he found the bartender he remembered from the night before, the middle-aged woman slightly resembling Ellen he remembered seeing Dean talking to - he asked her if she'd talked to a fed lately and she said, warily, yes.

"And did you see the same agent again last night?"

Her brows pinched worriedly. "Yeah, he was in here again, was asked round back to the poker game. Odd, they're a pretty closed club most've the time."

"And you didn't see him leave?"

"No, oh Christ, tell me he's not gone missin' too?"

He shook his head, ducked quickly away from her kindly prying stare. He made his way along the bar and from table to table, asking around until he found one of the poker game regulars: a sinewy old guy in a camo vest with tufts of salt 'n pepper hair scattered across his flaky red scalp. Sam escorted him into the back room, a smoky cramped room even with only two occupants, the mounted elk head's false eyes glaring down on them. He pulled two chairs out from the card table, him and his interview subject sitting across from each other with only a scant foot between their knees, deliberately conscious of how he loomed over the old man, questioning him with a cold edge that went just beyond the professional, on why he and his buddies would cut an outsider - a fed no less - in on their poker game.

"Four of our buddies've gone missing, thought he might know somethin'."

"Did he?"

The man shrugged. "He said some shit, cribbed some of it from TV and stuff I'm sure, I don't know, he was playin' us."

"How'd he leave?"

"With his winnings but no hard feelings, them's the breaks."

"Did you see him leave the bar?"

He shook his head.

"Alright, I'm going to need you to, uh, just go with me on this. This might seem a bit strange but it's a new, um, experimental psych procedure. To tell if you've been lying."
He got out the blades, silver and iron and copper. "I'm just testing your response time." That sounded scientific.

"Sure, boy, whatever you gotta do," he said, looking at Sam like Sam was likely deranged and he might've done the sensible thing and started screaming if only it were manly. Sam pushed the man's shirtsleeve up, pressed the blades to his swollen-veined forearm and sliced, three times drawing a line of human blood, muttering, "Sorry, sorry." He expected what he got, which was nothing, but at least he felt he was doing something, sort of.

Standing again in the rain, shivering, he considered that the smart use of his time probably would've been to wait for Dean at the cabin. He tried to call him again. Nothing.

Perhaps Dean had gotten back to the cabin to find him gone, was pissed again, and was now ignoring his calls to punish him. But no, surely that would go beyond even their threshold for pointless self-absorbed melodrama while on the job.

He had his hand on the door handle when two cars came skidding into the lot, headlights and blinking dashboard lights and flashlights in the hands of the cops piling out of the cars glaring on him, like he'd stepped from a theater's black wings onto a brilliant stage, while overheard the first lightning cracked like a co-conspirator, and for a second it felt apocalyptic, like the ground might open up and swallow him, which should have been the stuff of his nightmares, but right now, when he was so tired, felt like it might come as a relief since then he wouldn't have to deal with this shit anymore.

Hoarse shout muffled by the downpour - "On your knees, hands behind your head." He complied, knelt on the slick, searingly cold asphalt, and the car door was a foot from his face, key in the lock, but he would never make it, would only get Baby shot up and then Dean really might kill him. He had a thought about how he could take out one cop while they were snapping on the cuffs, could use that one's body as a shield while he shot at - but no, no. These were innocent people. Probably.

The rainwater puddled under his kneecaps was sinking into his bones, numbing his lower body, as he was disarmed of his Taurus, cuffed and dragged to his feet, two sets of hands hauling him into the back of a cop car. He had a set of pins in his left boot and if only he could get at them he could pick the cuffs - but not now. He said, "What am I being charged with?" and one cop snorted, derisive. The proverbial alarm sirens were going off in his head but they felt distant, everything felt distant right then, his flesh half-numb half-crawling from the cold and the world smearing darkly grey out the car window.

The walk through the station, feeling the hot pricking of all eyes on him, the noise of keyboards and radios suspended, and thoughts circling the drain in Sam's mind: how did they know, when had they made him -- while he ducked his head, eyes on the the gritty slush he was shedding on the floor.

Four cops escorted him and when he glanced sidelong at their faces he saw nervousness and tight-clenched anger and stone-impassiveness in three, but in one's eyes and the curl of his lip he saw a spark of something hungry, calculating and primal. Like a hunter, closing in on a kill.

In the grey hall to the holding cells he asked for his phone call because why the hell not, and one of them said, "Thought you'd know better how this works than the shit you see on Law and Order."

He asked again what he was being charged with, and the one with the predatory glint in his eye said -
"You're Winchester - that should cover it." He looked like he wanted to say more but for some reason was biting it back. Exchanged a cocked-browed look with another cop, this one so boyishly round-cheeked he did not look credibly out of high school.

They snapped the cuffs off his wrists while he was standing on the holding cell's threshold, small mercies. The cell already had a resident - and that was strange, it was not the only cell and why would they want to lock a monster like him up with just anybody - hunched under a brown canvas windbreaker, wool cap pulled low over his brow, shadow like a muffler over his mouth and jaw. He was on the bench in the corner shadows, the grey shadows nearly indistinguishable from the cell's cement blocks so the way the shadow slanted felt like the walls leaning in, and it took Sam until he stirred and their eyes locked for a solid twenty seconds to recognize him; bleary grey eyes meeting his with wary-sharp recognition, and Sam's brain looping back to their last moment of contact, the painless echo of bullets ripping through his chest, ripping his soul from his body, and his breath snarled in his throat a panicked second, then it passed.

"Roy, right?" he said, thinking how embarrassing it would be if he'd mixed his would-be assassins up.

"You two pals?" said the cop turning the cell lock.

"Oh yeah," Sam said. "We go way back." Which was spite: whatever Roy was in for association with a Winchester could only hurt him.

The cop backed off from the door immediately, but there were still cops standing in the doorway a short stretch away. Sam edged along the wall nearer to Roy, watching sidelong for when the cops were not watching him, lowered himself until he was half-squatting, his head nearly on a level with Roy's, and saw Roy recoil, jaw's meaty muscle jumping, bristling with three day stubble, his half-fisted hands resting on his thighs, fresh scabs strained by bulging knucklebone.

"That decapitation yesterday," Sam said, "that you?"

Roy was silent a moment, his eyes level and cold but not hostile precisely, then, "Yeah."

"Walt's gone too, hasn't he?"

"Bout a month back. That's the fourth vamp I've done for since then and I still can't get a bead on the nest. Your brother?"

"In the wind. But he's coming back."

"Right," Roy said. "Y'know I wasted a lot of time thinkin' that, watching over my shoulder cause Dean Winchester was gunnin' for us...but he never has."

"We've been busy," Sam said.

"Things to save, people to kill, or however the fuck your bumper sticker goes."

Sam raised his eyebrows, braced his back against the wall and shivered, the cold cement echoing and redoubling the cold in his bones.

"Read those books about you," Roy said. "Mostly crap, makes hunting out like it's John Wayne's glory days crossed with those vampire books with the chick in the leather corset on the cover, but I
picked up some stuff."

"So you still think you know me."

"No, and I don't wanna. Don't want to kill you in your sleep neither for all the good that would do, so relax. I'm gonna get out of this cell and I'm gonna get Walt back --beyond that, I don't give a shit anymore."

In a softer undertone Sam said - "We can't trust the cops, some of them could've been turned."

"Uh, fuckin' obvious," Roy said. "Why'dya think I've been flyin' so low under the radar?"

Silent stretch but for the beat of rain, the occasional grumble of thunder, in which Sam contemplated how to go about conspiring to make an escape with someone who had killed you once. About which, he supposed he held some resentment but making out what he was feeling was like trying to make out his face in a warped and grimed mirror; he wouldn't know what it was if he didn't know that it had to be there.

Three more cops marched in, the military rhythm of their footfalls only now striking Sam as odd - three just to escort a skinny, wobbly-kneed girl. They stopped at the cell he and Roy were in and shoved her through the door, the oddness of which confirmed Sam's suspicion while confounding him further still. She stumbled, dark wet sheet of hair spilled across her eyes, a drowned look to her with her strands of hair sticking to her moon white cheek in fishnet pattern, bluish tinge to her lips, but she drew herself up, her chin up, her shoulders back, facing him and Roy, the trembling strength of the gesture striking him as familiar.

After a moment, Sam said, "Alex?"

Blinking bloodshot eyes, brows pinching, she said, "Winchester?"

Roy said, "Friend a yours?"

He braced a hand against the wall, pulled himself to his feet, crossed the cell to her. "How did you get here?" he asked. Alex ducked her head aside again, hunched her shoulders inwards under a jean jacket soaked nearly black. He started to take his jacket off before realizing it would be too sodden to do her much good either.

"Here," Roy said, and Sam turned to see him offering his drier jacket to Alex, but she shook her head, backing up a step so her body was braced against the bars.

"You should stay away from me."

"Alex - "

"Have you talked to Jody? Does she think I'm dead?"

"Why would she?"

"Tell her it's not mine, but I didn't hurt anyone either, and I'm so sorry." The wild, wary way she looked at him, like he might not be really there. He recognized that look from how it had felt from the inside, and because lately he had been seeing it in Dean's eyes.
"What's not yours?"

"The blood." Her teeth snagged her lip. "The mess I - he made. Tell her I'm sorry about all of it. I tried to lead them away from her. I tried - "

"No," Sam said. "I just talked to her and she said you were gone but she didn't - "

She was shaking her head, her mouth was parting, but then one of the cops was at the cell door, he was unlocking it, he was pulling it open, the one with hunter's eyes, his eyes on Sam, and Sam stepped in front of Alex, hearing Roy resettling his weight on the bench, and the cop said, "Winchester. Out here."

He was marched to an interrogation room, which seemed like it might once have been some poor schmuck's dismal office, complete with dusty plastic fern in the corner and mud-brown carpet, single dirty light bulb turning the walls the color of the stains on a smoker's teeth, the table Sam was seated at, one wrist cuffed again to the tabletop, flimsy as a card table, and he stared into the two-way mirror, looking at his own reflection and thinking about what whoever was on the other side of the glass must see when they looked at him. Worn thin and frayed, his skin stretched tight over his bones, his eyes smudged hollow and dark, and yet some people in the building must be afraid of him, must also be fascinated by him, the sinuous lure of something as terrible and perverse as himself, walking among them.

The ATF agent walked in. His name was Bradley, Sam recalled. His features too whitebread good looking for this setting and the grim implacability he was trying to project. His face was dressed in stone: the look you wear confronting an unknown danger, a flicker of horror-struck fascination in his eye. Sam was grateful that it was only this man, not the cold pale woman who had unnerved him the night before.

Sitting across from Sam, Agent Bradley said, "I'm not fucking around with preliminaries: we know who you are, we know what you've done, we've got a backlog of DNA evidence, eyewitness testimony, whatever, you name it."

"But I'm not your jurisdiction," Sam said. "Unless you've got a trafficking charge you can pin on me now. You called in the FBI, right? And that means you're not authorized to make any deals, so why are you here? You've got nothing that could make me flip on my brother, and that's what you want, right?"

"Oh, I'm sure your brother'll be here soon. Think he's gonna bail on you? What's one Winchester brother without the other, right? No. I just wanted to get one crack at you - call it personal satisfaction."

Sam pressed his eyes shut a moment, thinking: the cops wouldn't have to hunt Dean down. Dean would come for him. That sounded like childish bravado: my brother is going to kick your ass, except for how it was likely to be true and the consequences were likely to be terrible; terrible how did not bear thinking about in precise terms, it just meant Sam had to get out of here before that could happen -

"I get it: if Dahmer or Bundy was in the building I'd want a crack at them too." He had a certain sense that he should get Bradley talking, should stall. "What do you want to know? Why our victim criteria ranged so wildly over the years? Why the sudden divergence to publicized mass killings in '11? Why the religious psychosis draws on such esoteric sources? What the hell is with those books? Why we aren't dead?"
"Nyah, I get that this must be hard for somebody with a narcissistic pathology to understand, but I don't give a shit about your life. Just want to be sure that what's gone down in this town really is because of you sick miserable bastards, and only you, because that's my job."

"Well, it's not," Sam said. "It's got nothing to do with you, and if there was anything I could say to you that'd get you the hell out of dodge, I wish I - . How did you make us, anyway?"

The door bounced open, and Sam and Bradley both whipped their heads around. It was the cop with those hunter's eyes, but now there was a grin in his eyes, a jaunt in his step. He was happy and smug. He cocked his head to one side, jabbed a finger at Bradley.

"Sorry hoss, but words come down you're out of the game."

Bradley stood up, said "What?"

The cop sauntered up to him, up in his face, tongue darting out to moisten his lips.

"Yeah, Chief's order just came in. He's tired of dicking around with you sad, stupid little people."

His hand swung up, swiped across the agent's jaw with the thick meaty crack of snapping vertebrae, the agent's head spun impossibly askew, and his body thudding sideways, full lengthwise sprawl on the carpet.

Sam flinched, full-body, as if the sound of a neck cracking, a body dropping, was not a frequent note in his life's ambiance.

He was now, he supposed, panicking, and that was why as the cop - the monster - muttered, "I didn't enlist to be a fuckin' delivery boy," and walked towards him, "But hey, maybe the boss'll let me watch what he does to you," unsnapping the cuffs that chained his wrists to the table, he did what the curve of the thing's lips said he knew Sam was going to do, and wanted.

He slammed an elbow back into the solar plexus, kicked to the knee with his left foot while pivoting on the heel of his right, and the monster buckled slightly, already so much the shorter he now was low enough that Sam's hands could go for the back of his head, intending to crack his skull against his upraised knee. The thing blocked with one forearm, turned it into a grab onto Sam's wrist. Sam's arm was wrenched forward so hard so fast he felt as if his shoulder might dislocate, but he was able to lodge his other shoulder against the thing's ribcage, and there ensued a tight confused grappling.

Sam had got the gun from the side holster by the time he overbalanced and tipped onto his ass, his right elbow screaming from the impact and from bearing his weight while he raised his left with the gun, got one shot off, the crack of it splitting through his already ringing skull, and blood burst on the uniform shirtfront but of course the monster barely flinched, of course it was pointless; all the same, Sam's finger was tightening on the trigger again before his wrist cracked, felt for a moment like it had been snapped off.

A mud encrusted boot swung across his field of vision, then came bearing down on his throat, that oh so familiar and ironically breath-constricting terror of I can't breathe and a glimpse of a boyish face looking down at him with a smugly quizzical smile on his bow-mouth, while the last color in the world drained into the grey
Chapter 6

Sitting with her back to the wall of the holding cell, hugging her knees to try to keep her body from dissolving into the numbing cold, Alex asked herself what she supposed most people in cells must ask themselves: How had she let this happen?

After winter break she had started to make an effort at living this new life that was supposedly hers. She stopped bumming joints off Jay Kensington, and during break she would climb to the top of the bleachers with a book, which was well removed from most people but wasn't technically hiding herself away. She did all the required reading and all the recommended reading, and then some. That was how it had started - the reason why she'd taken the bus to the Sioux Falls Public library, trudged across the parking lot under heavy snow fall, the wide wet flakes fluttering up on little curls of icy wind under her hood, sticking to her scarf and melting, until her neck felt encircled by cold wet fingers.

The library with its central heating and gas fireplaces was overly warm, snowmelt trickling between her collarbones, and her winter coat hung heavy and prickly-hot on her, but if she took it off she'd have to carry it around and couldn't carry her books.

She was in the sf/f section looking for Ray Bradbury's Something Wicked This Way Comes when she found herself standing next to Rachel Holbrook. Rachel lived two blocks from Jody's house, she and Alex shared a bus stop, and perhaps that was where it had really begun, at the bus stop, when Rachel first tried to engage Alex in conversation, to pry into her life, on behalf of the things all the kids who gave even half-a-shit about the new girl wanted to know: Where did you move from, why do you live with the Sheriff, did your parents die, did they abandon you, do you have any foster care horror stories, do you cut yourself, do you drink, do you put out, what are we going to do with you.

Rachel was pretty. Sleek chestnut hair cut to the slant of her jaw, cinnamon leather jacket and four inch heels on her boots; the cool quirky type to a t - everyone in high school seemed to try very hard to act like they had a role in a high school movie. (Alex had watched a lot of high school movies lately, trying to find a role for herself to step into).

Alex was the girl nobody knew, but most kids whispered that she'd probably come from some sort of fundamentalist commune - that explained how little she knew about movies and video games and facebook and makeup (Alex knew plenty about makeup but she wasn't ready yet to go wearing any again, associating it with dive bars and truck stops and filthy eyes on her and so much screaming), or any of the things that mattered, and she would probably flip out in some way by the end of next term, which got her some cred among certain people, notably the Jay she bummed the joints off of, and he didn't even want to feel her up in exchange, no, he wanted to talk. About how nobody understood him, mostly. Alex had to be very stoned to put up with that.

Rachel was the kind of girl who'd talk to anybody, no matter what kind of weirdo-loser-outcast, because she was cool like that. Alex had shrugged her off the first few times, but now Alex was trying to be a different kind of girl, quiet-bookish-boring-girl preferably, and so when Rachel said "hi" she answered with a smile that she hoped would convey shy but not unfriendly.

Rachel's eyes blinked once, twice, then dropped to the book in Alex's hand, and she said, "Hey, I didn't know you were into, like, retro sci-fi, that's so great."

"Yeah," Alex said. Looked down at what book Rachel was holding.
"Yeah, this is like," Rachel held up a thick paperback, the cover a foggy backdrop to a model with a rippling flag of bronze hair, wearing a second skin of leather, holding a sword - katana? - in an improbable pose. "It's a vampire novel -"

A hot tightness started in her chest, right behind her breastbone. "Yeah I'm not that into -"

"Oh yeah, I never got into like, that whole Twilight menace, but these aren't like sparkles and romance, these are Bram Stoker old school. And it's not about some whiny-ass bimbo who needs some guy to pull her ass out of trouble all the time. She's, y'know, like Buffy."

Alex said, "Never read that one either," and it was just a slip of her tongue, one time she'd caught ten minutes on TV of a tiny California blonde poking vampires with sticks and turning them to dust and it had been sickly hilarious, but Rachel got that look, fascinated and pitying, because obviously this was Alex's blinkered cult upbringing showing through. "That TV show," Alex stammered. Rachel's eyes shone with sympathy.

"I've got the DVD box set if you ever wanna -"

Alex felt an impulse zinging through her, like the instinct to recoil from the touch of a live wire. Her hands were on Rachel, her hands were claws on Rachel's damp leather shoulders, reeling her in. Rachel's eyes were round and blue, Rachel's throat was bare and white and waiting for strong jaws and teeth like needles to lock into it and rip - and Alex pushed her back instead, with all the so goddamn wrong strength in her skinny arms, and Rachel tripped over her feet and her book fell down with her, landed tented on her stomach, her book about girls who didn't need to be saved.

Rachel looked up at her, her eyes and mouth perfect 'o's of surprise, everything about her was so fucking perfect, and she had that what did you do, now, what the fuck did you do look Alex had been waiting on, from everyone, since day one in this town.

Alex fled the scene. A librarian tried to stop her as she was striding through the new release aisles, he said, "Excuse me, miss, are you in --" and she broke into a run.

Waiting at the bus stop, the snow came down heavier than ever. While she was riding the bus she thought she saw out of the corner's of her eyes the faces of her brothers in the faces of the other passengers, had to blink and blink it away, but that kind of illusion happened sometimes when she was in a crowd. She'd confessed it to Jody once, one of those nights she'd woken up screaming, and Jody had said it was nothing abnormal. She felt her skin tighten up all over, like it was closing in to keep something out. She had a monogrammed blue rubber band on her wrist; she'd gotten it while she'd been running with the school track team because the school counselor had advised (she never asked, she never ordered, only advised) Alex to take up a sport, and running had seemed the only thing she might be good at. She hooked a finger under the rubber, stretched it out as far as it would go, snapped it against her wrist. The sound it made seemed like it must crack like a gunshot and alarm the other passengers, but no one looked around.

Did Rachel have a car? Might she have gotten home by now and told her mother that Alex Jones, the one from like a cult or whatever, she's a psycho bitch, and then her mother would call the school probably, and Alex imagined the school counselor being rather smug. She'd predicted something like this would occur if Alex didn't follow her advice about 'opening up' and 'learning to trust authority figures.'

Alex would have to come up with a story to rationalize or explain away her acting out, which was after all as far as they all knew an isolated incident. The simplest thing would be to say that Rachel
had pushed her first - but no, she didn't want to cause Rachel more trouble.

She felt eyes on her back, walking from the bus to Jody's house. She stole backward glances from under her hood, the sleepy suburban street with the newly fallen snow lying lumpily over it, like a tarp hastily tossed over a thing to hide it, the big birch tree boughs sagging under bricks and bricks of snow, deadly sharp icicles dripping from lamp posts. These cast shadows, shadows making strange shapes in the snow, shapes that didn't belong on that street. She was familiar with this feeling, this instinct: Momma had never let her go anywhere by herself but sometimes she'd let Alex think she had, send one of the boys to tail her.

Standing in Jody's driveway, seeing no fresh tire tracks in the snow, Alex tried to come up with a story.

Start with the truth and evade from there: she'd wanted to kill Rachel, she'd been so fucking thirsty for it, just like when she'd wanted to kill Jody after Momma had - Maybe it was still inside her, a dormant disease in her mind because sometimes crazy people could act normal for a while, right? like she hadn't really been cured and maybe -

She snapped the band against her wrist again. Looked at her reddened skin, faintly bruising, human.

She went inside, hung her coat in the laundry room so the snowmelt would drip onto linoleum and not the shoes in the closet. Those first moments, walking into this house with someone else's lived-in feel, the old magazines on the coffee tables that should've gone to recycling and the dirty coffee cups that should've gone in the dishwasher, this house that wasn't like the houses Alex used to look at in magazine spreads and guiltily dream about growing up in, wasn't that glossy ideal - it was all the more weird to come home to for that. She went into the kitchen and made herself a sandwich, bologna on sourdough, because she felt so achingly hungry. She felt full after she ate; she almost felt normal. She unloaded the dishwasher. Her book bag was lying on the breakfast bar, homework spilling out. She couldn't think about that stuff right now. From under the sink she got Lysol and she cleaned the counters and the cupboards. Early evening, she was cleaning out the drawer under the oven with harsher chemicals and a scouring pad when Jody got in.

"Hi hon. Did I finally pass my stress-cleaning habit off on you?" she said. "My deepest apologies."

"I don't think it's ever been clean under here and I'm not sure it ever will be." Alex had pulled her hair back with a rubber band. Her face felt naked when she stood, looking Jody in the eye. "Smells like something died - and I'd know."

Jody let that pass, said, "Wanna run the numbers on whose day sucked the most? Because I've gotta doozy."

"No," Alex said. "I mean, I'm fine, today went fine, I talked to people, voluntarily even. There was eye contact and everything. I just want to help out around here more."

"Not that I'm not grateful for this new attitude of yours, but looks like you've got plenty stacked on your plate already."

It took Alex a moment to realize Jody was looking at her homework. Alex forced another smile and she knew by now Jody could tell her real face from her fake but Jody didn't press her on it, and that only made Alex's chest hotter and tighter still.

Over a quickly scratched together dinner of hot dogs and beans Jody told Alex about how Dick
Lawson had backed his Ford through the front of a liquor store, and then there'd been a bottle-throwing fight between him and the store owner. Tackling him had left Jody reeking like a distillery, and she'd had to wash herself three times before she could leave the station - and that got her telling Alex about the previous town drunk, one Bobby Singer, who was exactly what you'd picture when you pictured the town drunk junkyard owner, except for all the bodies buried on his property and the anonymous acts of heroism. That got Jody almost talking about the Sioux Falls zombie war of 2010, except that they never really talked about the zombies - Alex had pieced together that that was how Jody'd lost the husband and the kid and that Singer and the Winchester's were involved, or the cause of it, or whatever, as they seemed to be in most things - but then she moved on to happier stories about times she'd helped him kill some kind of monster (something like Alex's old family). Jody looked tired but happy, and now she'd changed from the Sheriff's uniform into a blue plaid shirt she looked truly like someone's mom. It gave Alex that freaky playing Happy Families feeling. She snapped the band on her wrist again.

After dinner she took her homework upstairs and tried to do it. She hadn't been that far behind academically, to begin with. Momma had cared about her education - why she'd cared Alex couldn't figure, but she'd made sure Alex had the materials she'd needed, and it wasn't like Alex had anything to do but study a lot of the time, how often had she even had her pick of what to watch on TV, her brothers had usually - but no, no, she mustn't think of them now.

She took a bath and she let the water close over her head, Momma's image swimming above her stinging open eyes, looking as heartbroken as when Alex had seen her (betrayed her) last, bubbles blowing out of her open mouth as she started to say something - but Alex pulled her head up, sloshing water over the sides as she scrambled out of the tub.

She had one of her nightmares about being turned that night, about feeling both so. goddamn. strong. and like she was nothing but the sickening gnawing hunger inside her. She was being taken away in a van the way they used to take crazy people to asylums or animals to the pound, she was a rabid animal and she had to be put down. She observed this happening from outside of herself, listening to Rachel talking about girls who didn't need to be saved.

The following morning, a Sunday, Jody went to church. She'd never asked Alex to accompany her though she'd certainly brought it up enough pseudo-offhand, by the way my plans for tomorrow morning what are you doing - Jody thought it would be good for her to go, and her casual concern felt more smothering than if she'd insisted.

Alex wanted to say: Maybe I'd burn up if I touched a crucifix. But after those trips to the school counselor she was trying not to say things like that anymore, even as a joke. Instead she said, "I've got a test on Monday. Yes, already."

What she meant to do was go to Rachel's house and say: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that, you reminded me of something from my oh, so traumatic past and I flipped out, how pathetic is that, yes, I am the school tragically Fucked Up Girl and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't tell.

The morning sky was glacial blue and white, the snow bright and still, walking to Rachel's house. She didn't falter on her way to the front door, rang the bell, and only then noticed the door was slightly ajar. She pressed her eye to the crack, saw the hall light was on. She called hello once, twice, three times, and then she pushed through the door.

The TV was on, Sunday morning cartoon jingle. She was walking down the hall towards it, and then she felt her boot slip, the floor butter-slick, and she looked down, saw the blood smeared across the pale wood, footprints dragging through it. Boot prints, large, male, leisurely making his way out the
door. She swung her head around, saw into the empty kitchen, the faucet trickling, handle half turned. Her own boots, now treading the same bloody path, as she turned heel and fled the scene. *Suspicious behavior,* Momma's voice hissed in her head, *sure to draw attention to us. Is that what you want, stupid girl?*

Outside on the sidewalk, she called Jody, got no answer. Perhaps at church people were supposed to shut their phones off. She pulled her red hood up, like she could hide under it, thinking of what a girl in a red hood signified, the temptation she offered - but that was stupid, stupid and unlike her, she’d never had patience for fairy tales (no huntsman would ever save her). Feeling followed, feeling like she might just be going crazy. It wasn't until she was back at Jody's house that it occurred to her: calling 911 was the kind of thing normal people did in this situation, wasn't it? That was how people responded to emergencies when they weren't the cause of those emergencies.

Stomping her snow-caked boots on the doormat she remembered she was stained with blood, had tracked it home, and she wondered what questions the police would ask, such as why she had come to Rachel's house in the first place.

Taking her coat off, tossing it in the laundry, coming back through the kitchen. The window before her, backdrop of white white lawn and white clouds and a shadow flickered across it, a reflection. In the house, in the hall. Half her mind trying to convince the other half that she was, of course, seeing things.

The part of her mind that knew what being hunted felt like was stronger.

Jody's weapon cache was in the closet with the washer and dryer and the laundry, and she had only to turn around the doorway into the hall to the bedrooms, and she opened the pinewood sewing chest Jody's grandma had given her: inside was a Colt with silver bullets, a flask of holy water, a rosary, various sharp objects, including a syringe, brown stale blood inside it, and that last was what she took.

Then she heard the singing, Momma's favorite song when she was little, the only lullaby she remembered - *she has a smile that it seems to me reminds me of childhood memories,* - guttural male crooning from no particular distance or direction.

She filled her lungs and screamed, slasher-flick shrill, and she ran, that forearm flapping run of the soon to be dead girl in the skimpy outfit on the movie posters, back across the kitchen and into the living room where she kicked over the table in front of the sofa, breaking the glass top, dropped to her knees and draped her belly over it. With the hand not holding the syringe she cut herself on a shard of glass, her blood slowly sliding out, chum in the water.

Bare whisper of his fleet-feet before he had pounced on her, whatever toying he'd meant to do with her forgotten, and he was so goddamn heavy she couldn't breathe couldn't move couldn't think for a second, his cold cold hand clawing at her throat, thick iron fingers pinching her jaw, turning her head, glass splintering under her back as he turned her face-up, and his face was rough and florid, meaty lips curling back from the icicle shine of his fangs, and his eyes looking at her with that old familiar hunger, like she was the only thing in the world he wanted, and like she was nothing but a rack of meat to him at the same time. His carotid bulging, and her needle was sticking in it before she knew she'd done it, her thumb pushing in the plunger, and it took a moment, a moment in which she could not breathe and her blood howled in her ears, before the drugging effect took, and he slumped some two hundred-plus tight-packed pounds onto her. Exerting what was left of her strength to push him off her, and then, her reserves shot, lying there for a moment while the shards of table glass sliced deeper into her skin.
Then she heard it again, the singing: *Now and again she takes me away to that special place* - like Momma's voice, but not. It was powerfully soothing, carrying the surety of being held - which was not something Alex remembered and yet she recognized it, felt the belly-deep pull of it.

She got to her feet, and as she did the vampire's arm stirred like a sluggish snake in the grass. She pressed a hand to her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

She went into the kitchen, got the biggest steak knife off the rack, and when she came back around the island, the vampire was gone. Not simply vanished; he'd crawled over the broken glass, he'd left a blood trail behind him. Blood finger-painted on the wall over the sofa: *come home.*

She felt her head split open, as if the knife in her hand had gone through her skull. The singing split by other words now, like interference on the radio, two channels spliced, and that fatherly voice was telling her something, something she needed to know: *come home come home come home come home your family needs you why did you leave us come home*. When she came back to herself, she was running, she was out in the cold without her coat, without her hood to hide under. The cold, like a visceral slap. She was running down the street. There was a red truck coming her way. The truck slowed. The driver was a neighbor, and he said, "You okay, sweetheart?"

She crossed her arms tight over her chest, stretched her lips back into what she hoped was a passable imitation of a smile.

He waved, said, "Stay warm now."

She walked and she walked and the blocks bled by her, became streets, with businesses, traffic lights, the roar of traffic. Snow falling again, and her in only thin denim. At the bus stop she found the small change purse in the back of her jeans. She had enough for the bus fare out of town. After that she'd have to hitch, or she'd have to steal a car. Her brother, Cody, had taught her how to do that. "But don't go gettin' ideas," he'd said. "This is just for if we gotta split real hurried."

On the bus, thinking about Jody. Leaving her behind, with the broken table, the glass all over the carpet, and the blood, oh the blood, and Rachel's family maybe dead. If there was blood and glass and dead neighbors and she wasn't simply crazy. If she wasn't then someone really was following her, and she should be leading them away from Jody, she shouldn't be around anyone right now, and if she was crazy she was dangerous, and same difference. It sounded good, put like that.

The true reason was that she was running scared and there was a voice in her head singing her a lullaby - *Now and again she takes me away to that special place where if I stay too long I'll probably break down and cry.*

The first time she hitched she stole bills from the man's wallet while he was filling up his tank, and when he came back he said, "You gonna give me something for that dough, baby girl?"

She slammed the heel of her hand against his windpipe, as foreign an impulse as when she'd shoved Rachel, as when she'd wanted to rip Rachel's throat out, and she wanted to do more to him, but she didn't. Stole his whole wallet, that was all.

After that, she hotwired a car, ditched it just before she crossed state lines, then hotwired another car. Sleeping in them, under somebody else's jacket, bone-deep cold and dreams of deep dark woods,
nestled between mountains, and deep dark tunnels, maybe mine shafts. Little girls in pristine white dresses, drinking the red of a still beating heart out of white china, smiling wolffish smiles. She woke from these dreams feeling numb, not the aching numb of deep cold, a deep dark filling up all her empty places.

Then one day, somewhere in the Appalachians, she'd been loitering at a truck stop and a guy got out of a coal hauling truck, came up to her and she didn't back away. The sky looked apt to storm again, worse than rain, and she needed money to spend at the truck stop; if he tried to get her into the cab of his truck she could take his wallet too.

He'd only gotten started on the *hey babe it's cold out here* preliminaries when the cops showed up, no sirens, no lights - plainclothed they peeled out of the night. One was a man who stayed behind to deal with the would-be John or rapist or whatever, while this cop who looked like she could be somebody's grandma but wearing a leather jacket with her hair dyed reddish brown showed Alex into the back of her car. It was a nice SUV, smelled nicer than anything Alex had been inside for a while. The lady said all those things about Alex not being in trouble and how they'd be getting her someplace she'd be safe and it made Alex's gut twist. When the lady asked her name she said, "Alice."

The man came back - no, he was a boy, he looked only a year or two older than Alex, though that could be his baby-fat cheeks. His eyes were cold. No, something worse, deeper, darker, hungry.

"What are you playin' at, Chief?" he said. "Buttering her up?"

"So?" The Chief of Police or whoever the hell she was said. "You don't think the poor lamb's worth a moment's decency?" Her tone reminded Alex, terrifyingly, of Momma's.

They did take her to the police station, an unexpected turn. It was the man and some other cops that showed Alex to a holding cell, more cops than the last time she'd been arrested, and they didn't say any of those cop show things, read her her rights, or whatever. They shut her in a cell with two men, one she knew and one she didn't; one a Winchester, which made a bizarre sense to her. Weren't they somehow the center of everything terrible and inexplicable? Jody's stories said so. Jody also said they could be trusted if Alex needed help. Alex wasn't buying that. Still she descended one step deeper into the cold numbing waters of panic when they took the Winchester, the first familiar face she'd seen in what felt like a very long time but was probably only five days, away. She huddled against the cement; as frozen as she used to be when her family would kill someone. A part of her outside of herself, looking on, disgusted. The stranger in the cell tried to comfort her, tried to give her his coat again. She screamed at him to stay away, stay away, don't you fucking touch me. The screaming broke something open in her, and she was able to think with ice-sharp clarity for a moment.

"There's something messing with my head," she told the stranger. "Something that wanted me here. He can get inside me, he can make me do things. You can't trust me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I've got some familiarity with your sorta situation, kid," the man told her. "It's okay."

It was the Chief that opened the cell door again, said, "Let's get you into some dry things, honey." Letting her out, like a reprieve. Another trap, had to be. The Chief's arm hooked around Alex's shoulder, the old leathery smell of her jacket, and Alex could feel the irresistible strength of that arm pulling her. The stranger in the cell was swearing and threatening the guards if Alex didn't come back in one piece. Chopping their heads off featured, and that was how Alex realized he must be another hunter. She felt no safer for that.
The Chief took Alex to the end of the block and into a tiny office with a few monitors in it, security camera footage, she assumed at a glance.

The Chief's arm slipped off her shoulders, smoothing Alex's hair away from her neck. Alex's eyes dropped to a mug of pens on a fax machine and she fantasized about grabbing one of those pens, jamming it into the Chief's carotid like she'd stuck the vamp with the needle. (Like she'd stuck Momma). She knew damn well she couldn't but the fantasy of control made her feel a little calmer anyway.

The Chief opened up a white shopping bag that was sitting on a swivel chair, took out blue jeans, a woolly turtleneck, white cotton underwear and socks, a new jean jacket, and held them up, like a mother in a department store trying to get her daughter to just pick something.

"It's a long drive," she said. "You'll get cold at the stops."

"You think this is gonna sucker me in?" Alex said. "Being nice to me, buying me stuff, acting like you care, like you're my new - "A bubble of hysterical laughter in her throat, almost big enough to choke on. "My, my grandma what big teeth you have."

"Could say the same to you, little red." She smiled then, a show of teeth, a hint of killing sharpness. "Do you want us to put you back in that cell, with those men, those hunters, because I gotta tell you, honey, they're not too particular between wolves or girls - "

Alex snatched the clothes from the chair, saying, "Whatever. I don't care. I don't care about them. I'm just sick of the games." Heart wanting to rabbit, and she made herself think of the numbing dark until she felt empty all though her ribcage: that was the key to lying to vampires.

"Nothing, huh? What about that surrogate mommy of yours?"

"Who, Sheriff Mills? She doesn't really give a damn about me. Those hunters sent me to her so she'd keep an eye on me, make sure I don't go running back to - She's not even foster care, she's my jailer." She was stripping her clothes off, the Chief watching with eyes that felt like they were trying to skin her; in a dark monitor screen Alex glimpsed her tiny pale reflection, so like a little child she didn't recognize herself at first.. She had settled into a role to play, sort of, and that was why she was able to do this, put one foot back in her boots, and then the other. Good boots, but soaked from days of trudging through snow and mud without reprieve, and why hadn't they gotten her new boots, for all the things they knew about her did they not know her shoe size?

She felt overly warm with the turtleneck scratchy-tight around her neck, and remembered that moment at the library, when she'd shoved Rachel, how strong she'd felt - no, more than strong, she'd tasted power then, and cruelty. Why could she not call that back and use it now?

The Chief's hand at her back, escorting her out of the office, down another grey hall to a door under a neon exit sign that opened to a lot enclosed in brick and chain-link and barbed wire, the sky storm cloud black and the pavement rainwashed black, a van waiting with open doors, and two men in uniform. One was the baby-faced guy, and to him the Chief said,

"Did Ethan go see to our Big Gov problem?"

He shrugged, said, "Yeah, guess so. "

The Chief's fingers were clawing against Alex's back, nails sharp as glass, but the Chief only
drowled, "You'd better go see that he did. Y'all know how the boss-man feels about publicity."

He went back inside.

"Take care of our little lamb, y'here," the Chief said to the one who remained. He had a burly lumberjack build, with his fleshy lips reminding Alex of the one who'd attacked her in Jody's house.

"Oh I'll be watching every inch of her," he said.

"You think you know what he'll do to you," the Chief said, shoving Alex forward, "if she's not intact when she gets there, you got no idea."

"Lay off, Momma. When've you known me me to bruise the merchandise?"

The Chief's derisive snort was not reassuring. Alex wanted to run, even knowing damn well how far she'd get if she tried. It killed something in her to climb in the back of the van as if by her own will, where it smelled of the kinds of chemicals Alex was familiar with using to clean up spilled blood, and sit down on the metal bench, tucking her shaking hands between her knees, the blood roaring in her ears above which Alex could barely hear the Chief's "Strap in." Or the merchandise might get bruised, because that was what she was now, a package of bruisable meat. Right.

She pressed her eyes shut, heard the heavy clank-clank of the doors shutting, the dead bolt sliding home. She snapped the band against her wrist again and barely felt the sting. The van drove off.
Chapter 7

He'd passed out in the john of a one-shack rest stop, sank to his ass and slumped sidelong against the cinderblock wall. Last thing he remembered was feeling the blood seeping out of his side, trickling between his fingers. Then he was waking up from an oblivious darkness that must have been sleep, a dreamless sleep such as he hadn't had since when last he could hardly remember. He dragged himself to his feet, took stock of where he was - this pit stop as far as he could stumble on from where he'd ditched the truck he'd hijacked, stealing through the woods just out of the sight line of passing cars while trying to follow the highway. And what he had - which was the first-aid kit he'd stolen from the truck's glovebox, stocked with gauze and tape and antiseptic cream and an Ace bandage.

He patched the gashes across his obliques with the Ace bandage and tape, evaluating his half-dead color in the grimy mirror, his eyes sunken, misshapen, looking like he'd been awake for days.

He felt no pain, or rather he experienced it at a remove, like a sense-memory. These days, what he felt where pain used to be was like he was holding a wasteland inside himself - the roll of broad bloodied sky over a brittle shell of rock and sifting dust, a sick unreal heat swelling like a silence about to burst into unforgivably violent words.

He had his cellphone and he was getting a signal, albeit only an undependable bar or two. So he dialed Sam and he told him all the things he thought Sam needed to know, across a connection that cut in and out, so all the critical things were probably lost to the static.

After he hung up there was a terrible pounding crash above him and a metallic rattling going on and on, like a hail of gunfire - no, actual hail, but his body reacted like it was something else, and he didn't know how it had happened but he had punched out the mirror and half the glass had fallen into the sink, and pinched between his forefinger and thumb was a long shard waiting for a jugular to slice.

His back was to the cinderblocks and he was still looking into the mirror but the face he was seeing was no longer his own. A face with its features fractured and distended like that class of pretentious nightmare-ish paintings, surrealist or something, but he recognized the who from the black burning eyes and the voice when it said his name rumbling with the depth and surety of the Mississippi.

"You," he said. "Should've fucking known -" (should he have? should he doubt his instincts more or less now? what part of his mind was unraveling fastest, his forebrain or hindbrain? ) "You goddamn motherfucking sonofa-"

The Alpha Vampire smiled at him, his mouth bisected by a wide crack in the glass so now he had two sets of shiny shiny teeth.

"This has been long overdue, my boy."

Dean's palm was smacking the wall behind him, the other holding the glass out front now, like a knife. Mouth flooded with the taste of hot aluminum, he spat, "You've been doing this to me. Making me see things. Think I was -"

"Doing?" The glass sliced the Alpha's face into new dimensions, one eye twice as big as the other, as he tilted his head sidelong. "I can barely get a word in edgewise in that crowded mind of yours, and when I do, I assure you, it is more unpleasant for me than it is for you. Hunger gnawing away at you
like an animal in a trap gnawing its own leg off. My kind were not built to withstand self-deprivation, denial. You die by inches every day. And then there are the voices. Can you blame me if I had to scream to make myself heard?"

"What're you -"

"I sent out a call for help," the Alpha said. "To my children. You seem to have answered, which, I will admit, I did not entirely anticipate. So much else has a claim on you now. Do you want to hear my theory why?"

He straightened his back, tightened bloody fingers slippery on the glass. "These monologues don't usually come with a mute-button."

"Do you remember how it felt to be one of mine?"

The smell of club garbage, his body pinned against a dumpster. The smell of hungry bloody breath on his face. Sam's watching eyes burning like the Alpha's do now, with intent and calculation. The way people with plans for him look at him and he is so so sick of it. A strip of ragged skin forced between his teeth. It was easier to swallow than not to swallow, to let this familiar foreign presence take hold of him and turn him inside out. It has always been easier.

"I've come through worse trips."

"I'm sure it was unpleasant for you, to begin with. We all come into this world the same way: covered in blood, screaming. But tell me, how did it feel when you slaughtered every last one of your new kin?"

Rolling a skull under his boot, sitting dead center in an amphitheater littered with corpses, looking up to the box seats and seeing even his soulless prick of a brother and grandfather look impressed. He didn't give a shit what they felt about it, which was the best thing. Better than having somebody's head under his heel, better than proving he could still do his fucking job when he'd been invaded and ridden by this howling hunger, better than any I am the verb, I am not the object psychobabble Sam would use to explain it away.

"I get where you're headed with this," Dean said. "And if you think you're -"

"I felt you reborn from Purgatory, your soul joined to another son of mine. You burned brighter than he did. The same heat, the same light. Purity." His face did something like a shrug and the shadows clawed up his face and nibbled away at it, shadows not cast by the bare bulb in this shack, must be from the world on the other side of the glass. "I assume you miss it, now more than ever."

"You don't get to a point here, I could just walk out."

"As you wish. You know what will happen to you if you die as you are now. I can save you from that fate. I can make you mine so when your time comes you will come home, to where you can sate yourself without remorse or compunction."

"Yeah, in exchange for what? Lifetime of servitude on earth?"

"A policy of non-interference where my affairs are concerned."

"Save me from becoming a monster - by turning me into the monster who'll be your bitch. Slick.
Right up there with those Nigerian prince emails."

"Dean, Dean," the Alpha said. "Your humanity was on a train that left the station a long time ago, hadn't you noticed? And did you really think I wouldn't take possession of additional leverage before having this little chat?"

"The fuck did you do -" Of course he already knew. Leverage to him had always meant one thing.

"Time enough for that later," the Alpha said, and was gone.

Dean's own face was in barely recognizable pieces, an empty chink where his nose should be, eyes burning the same way the vampire's had. He had to get away from himself.

Dean stumbled out of the rest stop and now thank whatever it was only rain coming down. Sheets of it, hanging blank in the night-black - or was it day now? He walked along the highway, pounding pavement, following the flickering pale lines and forgetting he was supposed to be concealing himself because what did he have to fear anymore, really. He was the kind of numb that lies just on the other side of cold and exhaustion and blood loss - a normal, human numbness.

Later, he found himself standing in a different quality of shadow, and he tilted his head back and back and blinked rapidly to clear his rainwashed eyes. There was a half-decimated mountainside before him, made of blocks and blocks of jagged-edged shadow. From there he found the gravel lot where the poor sonsofbitches still on the mining site had parked their trucks, and he hotwired a Chevy.

He drove in the direction of the town, and Sam, who must not have obeyed his direction to stay put. Must not have taken his word that it was too dangerous to try anything. Must not have trusted his judgment or his good intentions or hell, maybe his sanity. Must not have done what Dean needed him to do which was to stay safe because if he wasn't, well, then. Thinking about that, a tide of fear and rage must've blinded his eyes, because a body was slamming into the truck's grill, a body was rolling up over the hood and cracking the windshield and flying off, and there was a moment when he thought, oh, of course, I've fucking killed someone, and, however am I gonna explain this to Sam, before he had the impulse to slam on the brakes.

With the rain coming down so hard he had to get very close to the little brown heap with the glitter of glass shards studding its eye and jugular and spilled intestines before he was sure it was a deer. So he'd killed Bambi's mama, great. Had this happened in a dream the symbolism would be painfully on the nose. But he wasn't dreaming now. He was pretty sure.

With the Chevy's windshield smashed and airbag belatedly detonated, he wondered how the fuck he was supposed to get to Sam now. Was he supposed to walk back to the mining site and try to nab another truck? Or walk on down the highway through the storm, god knew how many miles until he got back to town or collapsed, whichever.

He walked.

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The rains had been the worst of that winter and the pewter sky was only thinly shot with dawn light, but that morning like any other Jed went down to the river, and like every morning Caroline was kneeling on the muddy bank, her eyes closed and her hands clasped in prayer, rosary trickling through fingers nimble for their seventy two years.
"Mornin', Sister."

Caroline paid him no mind so Jed stuck his hands in his pockets and looked up the broad river, swollen with days of rain and snowmelt run down from the mountains, and thought of how lucky they were their houses were built on slightly more elevated planes than some.

The brim of Caroline's suede leather hat was curling in the slow dying wind. Her shoulders shivered.

"This ain't a convent, you know," Jed said, because he knew pestering would do better than words of caution to get her up from the icy mud before she caught pneumonia. "Don't think a vow to hold your tongue would count out here."

Caroline cocked one crisp grey eye up at him from underneath the brim of her hat.

"Might be worth takin' to a nunnery to get some respite from your unceasin' chatter," she said with the same tartness she'd had since the day he was seventeen and she'd paid him a Benjamin for some work he'd done on her pipes, the first of many an odd job he'd done for her over the years - though it'd been many years now since cold cash had been involved. That tartness hadn't been salved by the Jesus fever she'd come down with some five years back when she'd taken to interpreting all the bad news on the radio as signs and wonders. "I got better things to do than sit around and gossip with you."

"Ministerin' to a poor soul who could use a little company ain't good enough for your holiness?"

Caroline huffed through throat and nostrils both and went back to counting her hand-whittled beads. Not that she was a Catholic, or any denomination in particular. She liked rituals of any fashion and Jed had whittled those beads for her out of gratitude that she hadn't taken to snake-handling like the faithful at the Pentecostal church that was her next nearest neighbor.

Jed looked up the river again to the mountains, those jagged peaks further carved up by the shadows of storm clouds looking like the canines and claws of some MGM movie monster waking from it's mountain hibernation, the wind sweeping down on them like ferocious breath.

"Looks like we're not past the worst of the weather, Carol. I wouldn't put the test to that horizon."

Caroline didn't lift her head. "Everything's gonna wash away in these many waters. As was foretold in the book."

Caroline'd been talking that way for those past five years and Jed, who preferred to live in this here moment thank you very much, had let it get under his skin at first. It was getting to him again.

"Seems that way, don't it? Say, when's that Jesus gettin' here, Carol? Somethin' holdin' him up?"

"He which testifieth these things say surely I come quickly."

"He got a strange notion a quick."

Caroline swatted at a fly about her shoulder. "He ain't got your narrow notion of time, boy."

"Okay, Carol," Jed said. "He happens by, you put in a good word for me."
Jed walked back up what was left of the river bank and set off down the gravel and mud track that passed for road. Should it rain again he'd make another pass by in the afternoon to see that Caroline was safe inside. It would drop his tank of gas troublesomely low but it wasn't as if Caroline had other neighbors who'd be bothered (the Pentecostals were neighborly enough but their church was twenty miles up the river). There were so few folks left that he knew, so few folks left, period. This stretch of valley had never had much beside the mines and even those jobs hadn't been multiplying of late. These last seven years there'd been an exodus that the kids returning from the wars couldn't make up. Jed didn't know where they'd all gone. Charleston maybe, some over the border to the Mississippi delta. Or to the oil fields. He thought about the new report he'd seen yesterday, before the power blew, about the oil train derailment. Things weren't much better in those places from what he'd heard. In fact, they were probably worse. At least out here he still had Susie's visits most Sunday afternoons and the house he'd lived in for some thirty years and even Caroline's company, crazy as she'd gotten. No, that wasn't being fair - Jed could see how the past few years would drive anyone to religion. Or the few before that. Or the many before that.

Bad times had mostly passed Jed by without getting close and personal - September 11th, the housing crash, the oil crisis, any of the wars - and he wasn't worried about sudden catastrophe, those end times Caroline was always talking about.

Now everyone was talking about the new evil that had come to town, like the pale rider, stealing souls away. Tell you true, it didn't mean that much to Jed. It didn't steal cold into his bones like the slow decay of things, the way people's lights could go off inside their eyes sure as on any foreclosed home and they'd stay standing empty for years.

His old Colt .45 issued during his time as a parole officer banged against his aches-when-it-rains hip. He felt like a damn fool still walking around with that thing, like those hunters that boasted they were gonna take down whatever beast - even if it was of the human variety - was stalking the valley, but he'd feel a bigger fool if he didn't take the precaution. Hell, even Caroline kept a pistol in her house though she was just crazy enough to come down to the river every day with no defense but her faith.

Jed came to a place where the ground sloughed off and the river had come near to flooding the road, where the road took a bend around an old yellow buckeye, and it was in the roots of that tree that Jed saw the body. The odd hunch of it, like the man had dropped to his knees with his back slumped forward, and Jed thought for a second maybe he'd been hit by a lightning bolt and fried. Then his back gave a shudder and Jed saw some of the dark spots on his clothes shine red.

He might have been a drunk or a dope fiend, someone escaped from the county prison. Or he'd escaped from whatever had been taking folks around here. That would be something.

Jed almost came up to him then, but the thought of folks disappearing stopped him. He wasn't that afraid to die but the thought of disappearing and Susie and Caroline never knowing what had been his fate stopped him dead in his tracks. He turned back up the road as swift as his bad hip would carry him to where he'd left Caroline kneeling in the mud waiting for Jesus.

"Carol," he huffed. "Carol."

She sighed. "I know what you're about and you'd do better to look to your own preservation - "

"Caroline, there's a man down the road."

"Another one of these derned hunters. He have dogs with him?"
"No, Carol, I think he's hurt and bad. He's on his knees all curled into himself like a sick dog and he don't look up when I come."

Caroline looked up, pocketed her rosary and pushed her hat back till it dangled from her bun. "Then why you standing here yammering on 'stead of helpin' him?"

"I ain't the man I used to be. Go up to the house and call for an ambulance and pray while you're at it that they get here right quicker than usual."

"Phone line's dead," Caroline said, clambering to her feet with aid from a pine branch and waving off the hand he offered her. "We'll have to make do with the two of us. You go for your truck while I wait with the stranger."

"What, Carol, no. You don't know what manner of trouble he's in."

"You are a blaspheming savage, Jedediah Carson - didn't Jesus say that what you've done to the least of these you've done to Him?"

There was no swaying Caroline when she broke out that kind of talk so Jed led her back up the road to the old yellow buckeye. The man hadn't moved. Dawn was stretching its rosy fingers through the bare branches of the buckeye now and they could see the man's right arm bent under him and his left hand stretched out, knuckles scraped and bleeding. He had a big stain on his side and splattered on his sleeves and stains the color of rust on the roots around him.

"We should've both taken your truck," Caroline said and the man raised his head and looked at them.

He didn't look afraid of them and there was no plea for help in his face. He had a look that reminded Jed of the coyotes he would cross paths with some dawns. For a long moment the three of them just stared at each other.

Jed took a step towards him and the man pulled his right arm from underneath himself and along with it a big black semi-automatic such as government agents would carry. That could likely mean one of two things: he was a fed or had taken it off a fed.

Caroline put a hand on Jed's arm and Jed stepped back. He left his own firearm untouched.

"Why don't you put that gun down, honey-child?" Caroline said, using a grandmotherly tone that Jed had only heard her adopt on rare occasion over the decades he'd known her and always with a knee-high child.

"We're here to help you," said Jed. "You ain't gonna shoot us, are you?"

The man said nothing. He stared at them and Jed could hear his quick shallow breathing and could see that he was shivering

"Be the end of all three of us if you do," Caroline said and made the sign of the cross. The man's eyes flickered to that.

"The power lines are down and they're gonna be down in these parts for days. You let us go and we won't be telling no-one we saw you."

The man considered that. He started to nod and then he looked down and saw his left hand and the
blood shining on it red and fresh.

He lowered his gun an inch or two and said, "Get over here, just one of you." There were miles of gravel road in his voice.

Jed took a step forward and the man said, "Lose the gun," almost as an afterthought. Jed unbuckled his holster and let the Colt fall in the mud. He walked within a few feet of the man, his bootsoles sucking in the mud and blood, and the man said, "Stop. Show me your teeth."

Jed stared at him until the man curled his own lip back. Then Jed did the same with his forefinger, exposing his gums. The man made him lean down close enough he could see the sweat standing out on the man's forehead and the bottlegreen of his eyes. His time as a parole officer, Jed had locked eyes with a lot of convicts and most of them had broadcasted their desperation and dislike for him; he was but one more thing tripping them up when they tried to get their feet back under them. Jed had learned to read the tells when a man was desperate and dangerous real well. This man's face had all the tells of Buddy West, the reigning poker champion at Susie's bar.

"Alright," the man said. "Alright."

"You gonna let me help?" Jed wasn't feeling real charitable anymore but best to keep this man feeling they were on his side.

The man lowered his gun.

"I don't know what your story is, but you're gonna need some help. I don't think neither me or the lady over there's gonna be able to carry you up the road the full nine. You able to walk a little?" Maybe he wouldn't be and if he collapsed they could get the gun off him.

The man didn't say anything for awhile and Jed wondered if he mightn't be listening to some voice in his own head. He had been slumped here long enough there were flies in the mud and flies crawling in his bloody clothing. The amount of blood on his clothes was more than a man could survive losing without transfusions, Jed was pretty sure.

"If we leave you out here," Caroline said, "you're gonna die."

The man turned his head and smiled at her with a bitter crook of his mouth. Then he got the rest of the way up and started walking, tucking his gun back in his coat. Jed followed close, watching how smooth he walked except for how sometimes he'd hunch over the side with the darkest stain and press his palm against it, but he never lagged behind.

Caroline had a good sized house and on the first story was a spare bedroom off the parlor that they showed the man into. He shrugged out of his coat, retaining the gun, and the coat fell heavily, shaking out filth on the polished pinewood floor, then he slumped sidelong on the bed. He was still awake but he was the color of old newspaper and when Jed put a hand on his forehead his skin was clammy-damp. He thought in that moment he could probably get the gun off him but something stopped him from doing it and he didn't know if it was kindness or fear. He went into the kitchen to get some water and to breathe and Caroline followed him.

"What're you fixin to do?"

Jed thought about this. He couldn't call for an ambulance or police while the phone lines were down. He could still walk to his place and pray there was enough gas in his Chevy. He could drive the man
to town himself but something told him the man wouldn't take too kindly to that suggestion.

"Where do you think he come from?"

"I don't know," Jed said. "He must have walked from somewhere. He might've been a hiker or a hunter and somethin' clawed him up."

Caroline snorted. "Someone sliced him up, more like. Maybe they're gonna come lookin' for him. Or maybe he cut someone first. You think about that?"

"Where's your sense of charity now, Oh Blessed Mother?"

"I ain't nobody's mother."

But when he mustered the courage to see to the man she accompanied him again.

Midmorning by now and the sky hadn't brightened much. The old glass fixture in the bedroom stayed dark and when he cranked on the emergency lantern the light was yellowish dim. The man had passed into a doze on top of the covers, gun in his hand.

"That's a Glock 9mm," he whispered to Caroline. "Feds carry 'em."

"Gun like that could shoot us both dead before we even knew what hit us," Caroline muttered.

They set the lantern on the bedside table. The man turned his face away from the light but didn't open his eyes. Muscle in his cheek twitched. Jed had a bowl of well water heated over a fire in the kitchen in his arms. Caroline was holding a stack of threadbare washcloths and towels with a spool of the sturdiest thread.

Jed leaned over the man and gently pushed up his coat and shirt. The shirt had also been soaked black with blood and river mud; it was stuck to skin and Jed had to tug on it. He looked up at the man's face but he hadn't opened his eyes. His jaw was tight, though.

"Give me a washcloth."

Caroline handed him a washcloth as crisply as a registered nurse - she had worked at the hospital some decades back, though mainly as a laundress. This was after her no-good sonofabitch husband had drank away the last of her family money. Jed wet the towel and wrung it out and started wiping away the scale of blood that was dried onto the man.

"I don't see no wounds," he said and then he came to the man's side and saw there was an Ace bandage taped to it with blood clotted around the edges and a thin trickle seeping out. Jed peeled away the tape and the bandage with a thick wad of gauze held ready in case the wound started spurting.

Deep grooves ran across the man's lower obliques. There was a pattern-like nature to them that had to be from claws.

Jed felt the man twitch. He checked that the gun hadn't moved and then he looked up and the man was awake, looking at him. Jed smiled.

"Looks like you've been through hell."
The man rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and smiled that same bitter smile. Jed didn't mind because it was the most human look he'd seen on the man's face.

"I'm gonna have to get this shirt off you," Jed said. "Fore you catch pneumonia." He glanced at the gun again. "I'm gonna cut it off if that's alright. So you don't have to raise your arms or sit up or nothin."

By way of answer the man sat upright, and the blood spilled from his side and onto the bedspread as he dropped the gun on his lap, raised his arms and peeled the shirt over his head. Again, Jed didn't try for the gun. He could see some tattoo high on the man's chest, a star or sunburst maybe, maybe something with tribal meaning, but no other wounds. There were some purpling bruises on his back but nothing had broken the skin and Jed had to put two and two together regarding the quantity of blood that had soaked this man's clothes and how much of it could've come out of him. Didn't necessarily mean he was to blame for it, but it was now definitely more fear than feeling charitable that was keeping Jed from going for the gun. His arm turned out as he braced his right hand on the bed while lowering himself down again and Jed saw another scar on his forearm, a burn mark, shiny and raw.

Jed staunched the blood as best he could while Caroline stuck a clean towel underneath the man before he laid back down.

Caroline said, "You're gonna be just fine." Jed wasn't sure she was speaking to the stranger.

"Just fine," Jed said.

Caroline went into the bathroom and started pulling things out of the medicine cabinet. She came back with hydrogen peroxide, iodine. Those pills left over from when she'd had an abscessed tooth two, three years ago.

They gave the man two of Caroline's pills and Jed had a thought about if he could feed the man more - too many - pills, and what would happen then. He shrank from that thought and washed his hands in the now only warm water basin. Caroline poured iodine on her hands and let them air dry. The room was very cold and stinking of blood and river water and his hands were shaking just the tiniest bit while he pressed the gauze to the man's wound while Caroline stitched him up. The man's eyes were open but unfocused and he didn't make a sound.

Caroline tied off the last stitch, the man's eyes slipped closed again soon after, and that was how it was for hours.

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Some time later Caroline woke him up where he'd nodded off in an armchair in her parlor. The electricity was still out and she was standing over Jed with a candle. Jed looked at the old battery radio clock he'd put on the mantle and saw that it was a quarter past midnight.

"What is it?"

"Our boy's not doin' too good. He's burning up."

"Oh Lord," Jed said. He got up and went into the bedroom and picked up the emergency lantern. He held it to the man's face and saw that it was flushed with fever.
"You still got some antibiotics, right?" he said to Caroline.

"Already got some down him. I'll got get somethin' to cool him off with."

Jed sat down on the edge of the bed. He took the man's hot hand between his own.

Caroline came back with wet towels and wiped the man's face and neck. They lifted him and got him to swallow some water and then lowered him back down. He never opened his eyes.

"Now's the time we try and get him in the truck if ever," Jed said.

Caroline shook her head. "I just said the word 'doctor' and he got wild. Told me we should get the hell out if he takes a turn for the worst..."

"Wild how?"

"The kind that's a danger to ripping his stitches, not us."

"I don't know what else to do," Jed said. "I suppose you'd say pray for him. Carol?"

Caroline cleared her throat and Jed looked up at her. "I mostly just study the prophets and the signs," she said. "I'm not goin' down to the river lookin' for comfort. I only ask Him to drop a hint now and then what's around the bend."

Jed sighed. "What about some music then? Even I could use some of that..."

"My kind of music? What did you call it once - chloroform for the ears?"

"Haven't I also told you a time or two that you have the prettiest voice I ever heard?"

She considered for a moment and then she sat down on the other side of the bed. She took the man's other hand in her own and took a deep breath.

"As the dear panteth for the waters, so my soul longeth after thee. You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you. You alone are my strength, my shield. To you alone make my spirit yield. You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship thee..."

The man groaned and his eyes slid open and stared at Caroline. Caroline stopped.

"Go on," Jed said.

"You're my friend and you're my brother even though you are the King. I love you more than any other, so much more than any thing. You alone are my strength and shield, to you alone make my spirit yield."

Caroline continued the hymn and the man watched her the whole time and Jed had the thought that the music was drawing the sickness out of the room, like David's harp charming the evil spirit out of Saul. He didn't really believe that, but it was nice to think. The muscles in the man's jaw bunched up and went slack and he returned Jed's grip. When Caroline finished the silence had a charged quality to match the sky between storms.
"Son," Jed said. The man rolled his head on the pillow. "Son, what's your name?"

The man just gazed at him and Jed was sure he wasn't gonna answer, or if he was, it was gonna be a tale spun with slick cunning fabrications.

"That's alright, you don't have to..."

"Call me Jimmy," he said. His eyes slipped closed. He smiled a smile whose boyishness belied everything else Jed had seen in his face. "Jimmy Hendrix." He didn't say this like he thought he'd be believed, but like he was trying to charmingly defer the question. He wasn't pretending he had nothing to hide, which was a relief and a start.

Jed decided then that he'd try to get a story out of the man before going to the authorities.
Dean opened his eyes onto a room pale with wintry midday light. Above him was a ceiling with cobwebs dangling between exposed pine rafters and a milky light fixture with dark spots collected in its glass bowl that he took for dark stars, no - drops of blood, no - dead insects. He turned his head to the right and saw a window with a dusty blue pull shade. A sound of birds. Melting morning frost streaking the windowpanes. To his left was a cracked door and more electric light beyond.

He sat halfway up and was checked by the wooziness in his head. Once again, he was aware of his torn skin pulling against his new stitches but he felt no pain from the wound. Well. He'd been given aspirin an hour or so ago, he was pretty sure. He moved his legs off the bed and pressed his thumbs into the corners of his eyes when he set his feet on the floor. There was a full glass of water on the nightstand and his mouth was cotton-dry, post black-out dry, but he drank it slowly to make sure it would stay down. He put the glass back on the nightstand and took long slow breaths until his head felt firmly lodged on his shoulders again.

He stood up and walked to the door. He was wearing only his boxers and somebody else's worn flannel shirt. There were a pair of jeans even more worn than the shirt that were folded on a chair at the end of the bed. He pulled them on. His feet were bare and the floorboards were cold. He could hear voices coming from the other side of the door but by another room removed so he couldn't make out what they were saying. He remembered a kitchen furnished with a cracking vinyl dinette and ancient appliances, reminding him of Bobby's kitchen. He remembered the erratic chug of Bobby's fridge like a Chevy choking on its own gasoline and he remembered talking to Castiel there in a dream once.

He pushed through the door and padded across the parlor as softly as he could. There was the doorway that led to the kitchen where the voices were and there was another that led to a short hallway that he walked down until he reached the bathroom at the end of it. He went in and shut the door. He switched on the light and a fluorescent bulb buzzed into life above the medicine cabinet and he turned and looked in the mirror.

He saw himself, only. He looked better than he had at the rest stop. His eyes were bright, his skin had living-color. He didn't look like the kind of person you would necessarily be terrified to have in your own home, if you judged that sort of thing by appearances, which, of course, you shouldn't.

He turned the tap on and started scrubbing his hands with a thin bar of soap that had a funny herbal smell, like maybe it was homemade. He scrubbed his wet hands over his face. Tried to think through what had happened to him. A primordial monster of monsters had been fucking around in his head, fucking over his perception of reality, that he had established. It wasn't the primordial monster of monsters he thought it was, which might be a relief, depended on how you looked at it. He was still scrubbing his hands. He thought about the vampire saying "leverage" and he thought about Sam who he had walked away from for no good reason and he thought about what could be happening to Sam right now and the rage he felt then was near impossible to wrangle before he struck out and smashed something. Everything seemed to shift beneath him and he sat down hard on the toilet lid and put his forehead on the cool porcelain edge of the sink and breathed through his clenched teeth.

The power came back on right after the man's fever broke for good, which was sooner than Jed or Caroline had any reason to anticipate. "Praise the Maker," Caroline said. Jed was half-inclined to say the same, but instead he praised whatever new management the power company must be under.
Jed went through the man's possessions. He'd taken them off him while he slept, as he had after he'd passed through a night of straining and twitching and sometimes opening his eyes and staring at the ceiling without responding to anything until well into morning when he'd finally slept like the dead. In between the fever breaking and trying to sort the man out so he was not lying like a cadaver on the covers Jed had picked through his clothes for the things he carried that might provide identification. He had them spread now on the kitchen table, where the best light was coming through the east facing window, this midday brighter than the last, only a nylon-thin haze of cloud filtering milky sunshine by which Jed could read the fine print on the man's badge.

He had: the Glock 9mm, an FBI id in an inside pocket of his coat, a wallet with Visa and Mastercard and a thick wad of cash - (thick enough to set the old alarms off in Jed's head, because in his experience he'd only find men carrying that quantity of cash after a drug deal or a big hustle) - a Bowie knife that'd been strapped to his jeans, and a cellphone with a contact list that Jed was scrolling through.

What he didn't have was a driver's license. Half Jed's mind and morning had been taken up by trying to sort out an un-alarming explanation for that.

Caroline had put some twists of jerky and two pieces of dark toast (only kind her toaster would produce) on a plate and was taking it to the man. Agent Ritchie, his badge read. She paused beside the table and looked over Jed's shoulder.

"Well?" she said.

"There anythin' in holy writ against invadin' the privacy of a man's phone?"

"You find the oddest times to be concerned about bein' a busybody."

Jed pressed the contact that went by a big R. The phone rang four times and then got picked up.

"The hell time do you call this, man?" Groggy and male and broadly southwestern. "This better be a fuckin' code black case. No, wait - it better fuckin' not. Not again. I just got back to my old lady last night and if I have to hit the road again this soon she'll nail my fuckin' scrotum to the wall - "

"Sorry, misdial," Jed said, and hung up.

"Fine goin'," Caroline said. "Those years workin' for the law didn't teach you nothin' bout askin' questions?"

"I was mostly in the business of deliverin' warnings," Jed said. "And there was a reason I took an early retirement."

"Because you were a bleeding heart who'd cut a con the benefit of the doubt he'd just taken a wrong turn when he was five miles out across state lines?"

Jed sighed, rocked his chair back on its hind legs - a habit Caroline could always bring back to him. "That was the one time and Wilder's ex takin' the kid out of state was not part of their custody arrangement so he had some cause - "

Just as well that it was that moment the man - Hendrix or Ritchie or whatever they should call him - took to looming in the doorway to the parlor. Jed let his chair drop and its spindly legs rattled like dice. The man had moved too quiet for one whose frame wasn't exactly lightly built and who'd been half delirious through the night. He had on the jeans and one of the flannels Caroline's husband had left behind. The shirt fit fine, was only a little moth-eaten around the collar. He didn't look great (except that under different circumstances he could hold a powerful attraction for the ladies), but he
didn't look like he was in danger of toppling where he stood anymore either. The first thing his eyes tracked to was his Glock, where it lay near Jed's left hand on the table. Then the cellphone, in Jed's right. Then the badge. He was half in shadow but Jed thought he saw his throat ripple, swallowing.

"Hey fellas," the man said. "Got a lot to thank you for. Guess I could start by making some explanations - "

"You can start by sittin' and havin' some sustenance," Caroline said. She set the jerky and toast on the table. "Sorry but this is about the only things that for sure won't have gone off without the power."

"Sounds fine, Carol," Jed said.

Caroline got the coffee pot out and poured three mugs. The man's mouth parted, then closed. He scrubbed a hand down his face. He sat down at the table opposite Jed and now there was approximately three feet between his hand and a gun. Caroline sat down between them. Jed had set the phone back on the table, screen up.

"Who'dya call?" the man asked.

"No-one who particularly appreciated hearin' from you," Jed said.

"That doesn't narrow it down by much," the man said.

Jed handed his phone back across the table. Took note of the man's busted knuckles again as he took the phone. When he saw what his most recent call was he grimaced, squeezed his lips together.

"Look, uh," he said. His eyes flickered back and forth between Jed and Caroline. "Why don't I just start with the story behind the story here..."

His story was that he was a fed, working the case of the vanishing men (and a few women, Susie had told him that that wild child Gretta Hunt had gone two weeks back or thereabouts) of Burnside valley, and it had been very routine: time spent at the station, time spent at the morgue, spoke to a family or two, and then somebody called in a tip and he was driving Route 9 to follow it up when his car got blindsided and went off the road.

His voice dropped into guttural intensity to relate the climactic incident.

Someone had smashed the passenger window and crawled in the car with him and clawed him up.

"Clawed?" Jed said.

"Yeah," the man said. "It felt like he had a hook or somethin', not a regular pigsticker." His voice perfectly pitched for horrified disbelief. "Unloaded my gun a few times and I knew I hit him cause I got his blood all over me...But he kept coming on like a revenant - "

"What sortsa noises did he make?" Caroline asked with her eyes coming alight like she was starting to enjoy this.

"Like nothing I'd ever heard a man make."

"Wampus beast," Caroline said, and there was a quirk to the corner of the man's lip for a second like maybe satisfaction. "Not sayin' I think that's what it was," Caroline said with a sniff, off Jed's looking askance. "Only that that's what it sounds like."
Jed had a half a minute pause to mull this over and to reason that this might be why the man had been so suspicious of them when they'd come to him down by the river. Might be.

He hadn't asked about the driver's license. Was sure that if he did the man would have an answer for it and Jed would have no way to ascertain was it true or not, so.

"You called the cops yet?" the man asked them, smooth as oil, with just a pinch of honest urgency.

"Not yet."

"Good, I'm gonna need to call this one in myself. Looks like I was set-up. Soon as I can I need to check in with my partner."

"Get some vittles down first," Caroline said.

The man hesitated for a few seconds while the hunger built on his face; the plate was picked clean in four bites.

To make his call the man went into the parlor where if he spoke low he'd be out of earshot. Jed guessed whoever he'd called didn't pick up, he was so brief. He came back with his face pale and drawn.

"Could I get a ride into town?" he said.

"Course, son," Jed said without thinking it through. Getting to be a habit with him, that.

"Best a luck," Caroline said to them both, her jaw squared like she was the one who'd again stupidly volunteered herself to walk into god knows what. "Lord be beside you both."

The man had scooped up his possessions, gun included, before Jed had time to blink, card-counter quick. Jed had retrieved his own Colt from down the road that morning and cleaned it as best he could. He had it on him now. He trusted the gun's being in working order more than he trusted his own common sense on when to shoot.

Jed walked with the man down the muddy track to his house, the river sliding turbidly by, under an ever blue-er sky where a flock of cardinals was wheeling, the boom-boom of hunters long rifles echoing off the foothills.

Jed went into the cellar of his house where he had a canister of gas. He put what was left into the tank of his Chevy and he thought it would be enough to get him into the heart of town, but he'd have to stop at a fill-up joint on his way back and he'd hoped not to have to do that till he got his next social security check.

The Chevy still smelled strongly of tobacco though Susie had gotten Jed to give up the habit, mostly.

Driving, Jed turned on the radio and the news yammered on about the oil train derailment and the people who had burned up on the river bank and about the record levels of rain in Burnside's county and the dead cattle bloating and bursting in the weak winter sun. The sort of signs that had turned Caroline to religion. News full of flood and fires and brutal, inexplicable violence. Jed scrolled through stations until he got to -

*I couldn't say what went through his mind. Anyway he left the world behind. Everybody knows the same old story, in love or war you can lose your glory*

-and then somehow Jed and the stranger got into arguing over what lyrics mirrored what aspects of
There was a lull, and then the man said, "So whadya do round here?"

"The river ain't bad for trout. There's always enough round the house in need a fixin' to keep an ex-part-time handyman in practice."

"So a handyman, huh."

"Used to be I punched the clock as a parole officer. A while ago. I took an early retirement."

"How come?" the man asked. His voice flat, didn't care what reply Jed gave him, that was obvious without even the benefit of a sidelong glance.

"I got into it with notions a helping folks out. Y'know, to get their lives back together. Maybe there just weren't enough good lives round these parts for the gettin."

"Yeah," the man said. "I could see that."

"Maybe it was the people. No - not the - just people." This he'd never let himself speak before. Bleeding heart, Caroline had called him. Well, he'd tried to be. "People bein' what people are which is - we're just animals - thinkin' we're so civilized and proper in this here 21st century, but really we're just as dirty and violent and cruel as we were ten thousand years ago. Probably worse - now we have guns and - AR-15s standing in stead of clubs."

He felt the man's eyes on him then, hot. His own skin, heating like a tin roof baking in the sun. Part of him ashamed of having said that even to this choice of confessor who was unlikely to repeat it or to remotely care what he thought; part of him relieved to get it off his chest - he felt so much lighter in that instant - or was he mistaking lightness for hollowness? That hollow inside of him which was the reason he'd never talk about these things, so he wouldn't have to pick at it?

"Maybe it was just my deficiencies in the people skills department."

"Your people skills seem just fine to me," the man said. "Kept me from shooting you when I was half out of my mind."

"So how's your job?" Jed turned back on him. "Current circumstances excepted. Unless current circumstances are about your usual in which case, condolences I guess."

"Has its days."

The man gave him directions to the lot of "vacation" cabins on the outskirts of town. He pulled up to one with a tin roof shimmering in the pale winter sun. The man set his jaw and went inside. Jed looked himself in the face in the rearview, muttered, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Didn't get an answer to that either.

The binder they'd fought over - that he'd walked out over - was gone from the table and the first thing Dean did was pull Sam's duffle out from where it had been kicked under the sofa bed, root through it till he found the binder. Shut, it was only plastic and vinyl and Sam hadn't taken it with him, hadn't had anything planned for it, not today - so why was his throat tightening up? He returned the binder to Sam's duffle. They'd settle the matter later.

The room looked like it had been vacated in the ordinary style. So. There was that. Sam hadn't done
as he'd been fucking told, of course. How long he'd been gone would depend on how long he'd
listened to what Dean had said to him, which meant that Dean wasted a few moments trying to think
things through like Sam would have thought them, trying to climb inside the labyrinthine canals of
Sam's Cro-Magnon skull - harder than it had ever been and he didn't know if he should blame that on
Sam, the Mark, himself.

So, okay. Sam's laptop and a spread of notecards were on the kitchenette table. He poked his finger
in the inches of cold grounds in the coffeemaker, determined that Sam had to be strung-out on sleep
loss and buzzed as fuck. He checked the closet: a few shirts and the Fed suits were still on the
hangers. He checked end table drawers and under the pillow and the kitchenette sink and cupboards
for the guns and knives and styrofoam cartons and hotcups and saranwrap that Sam would definitely
have cleared out had he had any intention of making his exit permanent. Okay, okay - Sam hadn't
run off on him in any definitive sense; his rage should be cooling now; the only things he should be
feeling towards Sam should be worry and moderate irritation; he should not want to bash Sam's head
in, figuratively or otherwise. Sam must have been worried about him so must have gone looking for
him - he had put them both in this situation after all, by walking out on Sam. How could he have
done that? How could he have let any of this happen?

That was a question he'd usually - while on the job - shoot dead before it got through the door but,
considering how little sense he was making of anything, how little grasp he had on reality right now,
maybe he had to entertain it a while.

He dragged a hand down his face, watched it drop, the dark red shine on his fingers. Blood in his
mouth again. He probed around with his tongue, found the ragged tissue where he'd bitten into his
inner lip.

He'd taken this case because it was the right and smart thing to do. And because he'd been coming
off a bad few days. He tried not to speak of 'bad days' - like Sam would - tried not to keep count, but
sometimes there was no getting around it.

He'd handed off the Blade to Cas, which had been an act of will. He then spent the time he hadn't
spent passed out needing and fantasizing about how to get it back with the same intensity he used to
sit and think of ways to get rid of the Mark until he'd given up - no, not given up, come to terms -
sort of. Cas had been gone from the bunker for most of that time, which was good, considering how
he'd figured into Dean's fantasies, as the principle agent of Dean not having the Blade. After Dean
himself.

Dean hadn't been avoiding Sam, exactly. He'd slumped boneless into Sam's arms and Sam had
picked shards of glass out of his skin and applied tape and a few stitches where he was still bleeding
and Dean had faked better now for a few hours. That was the obligatory post-near-death-experience
bonding covered. But. He'd been so fucking tired after fighting Cain, a tiredness that touched
something deep inside him that hadn't been touched since before the Mark. So he'd passed out, and
when he woke he wished he hadn't, so he drank until he passed out again. Sam had been smart
enough not to be around him right then.

He'd raided the kitchen for booze preemptive to this but his stash ran out in just over forty-eight
hours and after he'd sobered up enough he had to pay some mind to the hunger curdled with the
nausea in his gut. And he still wasn't avoiding Sam, exactly. But it was definitely unwanted when,
with all the space in the bunker, all the empty fucking space separating them just in the kitchen, they
still collided. He bet Sam probably wasn't even that hungry. Or at least that he didn't need that
particular apple from the cupboard right behind Dean. It was a green apple, and who even liked the
green ones. The scrape of Sam's hand against his sleeve itched like a burr. The rest of him didn't
much feel anything at all – it just wanted the Blade and to some extent perceived his brother as
another block against him having it. This caused seething stormheads to roll in over that wasteland inside him, but the dust and bone of it didn't kick up much. The only thing in movement was the throb of pain right behind his eyes, right in the meat of his chest, started by the sight of Sam's bones too sharp under his skin and his dark rimmed eyes and knowing it was because of him. Slitting Sam's throat would take that look off his face, he thought, with no intent behind it. Felt nauseated with himself, still.

It didn’t stop him from putting a layer of mayo on his bread. Thinking: say something, hell, just say hi. Like a person.

Sam was braver than him. In these moments, Sam was always braver than him. It was one of the things he least liked about his brother.

“Hey, Dean?” he said, smiling that child-shy smile. How the hell did he still have that smile in his arsenal anyway?

“Heya Sammy.” Smiling in turn, with a sliver of teeth. He didn’t say anything more than that – he’d have to lie concerning any how-you-doings and while he could still deceive Sam about the big things - he could deceive Sam about the contents of Sam's own mind and body - Sam knew his small lies like he knew the pattern of the stitches he’d made in Sam’s skin, the dangerous pattern of breathing that told when it was better not to wake him from a nightmare, and whatever mood he might be in coming off a bender. Head-spinning to consider how much Sam could know about him while understanding so little.

Sam took his apple.

“Good to see you mobile again.” On egg-shells, but meaning it.

Dean ached. Turned rapidly, or so he thought – at least he didn’t notice making a decision to move. But he had his palm on Sam’s forearm, thumb pressed firmly over a big vein and they stood face to face. Sam's eyes widened and his throat rippled slightly, ambivalent about their proximity.

“You gonna have some real food too?” Nonchalant, he was sure. “I can make some.”

"No - I'm good, thanks."

"Right," Dean said. Hand off Sam's arm, he proceeded to smear mayo roughly over his slice of bread. Felt Sam watching his hands, the bread knife. Dean took another slice, repeated his task. Waited for Sam to offer something to the effect of "You wanna watch the game?" Opened the fridge, tried to choose between a half a carton of chicken strips and whatever that brown, muck-colored slab was - meatloaf? Had they ever had meatloaf? Christ, the fridge was empty. Not even a Bud Light. He grabbed the chicken strips, laid them on the bread, closed the sandwich. He shifted to leave.

"You never told me what happened with Cain. Apart from the obvious, I mean."

He jerked to a stop, a marionette jerk. Didn't take time to consider what tone or consequences this conversation might take on before responding -

"The hell's that supposed to mean? There is no apart, Sam. We fought, he died, you want a blow-by-blow, go watch MMA."

"He didn't say anything to you?" Sam's mouth compressed, brows doing their pensive thing. Asking the precise kind of question you only asked when you already knew the answer - but how could he know, how the fuck could he know.
"Course he did. Usual shit. I was doomed to end up like him, ask not for whom the bell tolls, blah blah." Slip in a reference to one of those books Sam was usually oh so surprised to hear he'd read, that was good. Masterful deflection.

Didn't work.

"Yeah, well. Cain didn't know you."

Dean stood on the hallway threshold, left ankle an indeterminate pivot, watching sidelong as Sam picked at a bruise on his apple and struggled to think of a follow-up platitude.

"Like you do," Dean said. Regretted it.

"Yeah," Sam said, slightly strangled.

Dean walked out without gracing that with a response, about which he later felt as remorseful as he did about anything - it was all a miserable blur.

He had to go back to work to avoid such painfully awkward encounters with his brother. Working was the only thing that brought him peace or sanity or the desire to sober up for long hours - whatever. That was what he told Sam when Sam broke out the "Maybe it's a little too soon.

He'd taken this case because he wanted to, wanted to be keeping busy. Because of Sam. So maybe that last took it out of the category of want and into what he'd had to do, or maybe it didn't. The point was, it was one of many missing persons cases and violent deaths under the right kind of inexplicable circumstances and he'd chosen this one because, well, the number of victims was high and the state of the corpses would almost make Kramer proud and the case promised a long and absorbing spell away from home.

The full _Beautiful Mind_ experience had only started when he got to this town, so maybe it only worked in proximity and the Alpha was nearby and that would easy things up, wouldn't it. Or maybe it was only a coincidence of timing.

What was the matter with him? He'd been cured, he'd passed the are-you-human test, (certain circumstances excepted), he was not the brother who was disposed to - no, not driving down that switchback. Whatever else he was, he wasn't craving human blood. In the culinary sense.

It took another few minutes to occur to him that he did in fact have a parallel case to study. He sat down at the table, strummed through a stack of Sam's notecards and dialed Jody.

She picked up, asked him first off if he had some idea about Alex, which answered a lot right there. "Maybe," he said.

"Honestly didn't want to drag you boys in when I know you're wading through your own piles of crap out...wherever the hell you are. I called Sam, because, well, there are only so many people alive who have any idea of what Alex must've been going through. Maybe I was just looking for someone to tell me that it isn't my fault."

Sizzle in the background, and he pictured her burning pancakes on the stovetop (maybe they were a favorite of Alex's) while her eyes burned holes in the driveway out the kitchen window. The worry lines at the corners of her mouth and her short hair sticking up where she’d run her fingers through it, her rumpled Sheriff’s jacket unzipped over woolly sweater and jeans. Hand clutching the spatula propped on her hip, forgetting to flip the pancakes. He could almost smell them burning.
"I don't, uh," he said. "How long's she been gone?"

"Since last Sunday. Why? You know something, I know you know something, and don't bother hedging - I don't just sniff out bullshit professionally, I'm a mother - it's my entire goddamn life."

He told her the truth, or the bones of it at least. No way to give a comprehensive explanation of that time his brother let him get turned by a vampire that wouldn't unearth a ton of shit he shouldn't be shoveling through right now.

"So this Alpha. He wants you back, you think he might want Alex."

"Probably me a hell of a lot more than Alex. But yeah, she blows through town, he'd snatch her too. Fifty Shades-level possessive bastard that way." He regretted making that reference as Jody sucked in a loaded breath.

"You think he might be in town, where you are. Where the hell are you?"

"Look, Jody - "

"No, don't you goddamn dare - "Look Jody don't-worry-your-little-amateur-head me." Think I haven't already started tracing this call?"

He had to slide out his pictured backdrop of Jody's kitchen and insert Sioux Falls police station office.

"You shouldn't have told me that," he said. Didn't hang up though. "What's cooking?"

"What?"

"Sizzle, I could hear a - Never mind." He gave her Burnside. Was relieved, after she'd hung up with a steely as hell - "See you soon," that he'd gotten off without her asking where his brother was.

He got up, grabbed a half-empty duffle. Started pounding in all the shit they'd managed to strew around the room in just the - what? day and a half they'd been there like he was sinking his fists into someone. Seeing Sam's face and wanting to hit him, hold him. He strapped on more metal. The afternoon light shafting through the windows crisp and clear. Cold winter sun.

He walked out the door.
Chapter 9

The man was gone going on a half hour and in that time the sky's color where it met the pine's arrow points solidified into a steel blue, the kind of blue that spelled maybe snowfall when the temperature dipped another few degrees. The man appeared in the doorway again, walked out under the long shadow of the cabin; his shoulders now had a weight-of-the-world brace to them and there was some other stiffness in the way he walked that made Jed suspect he was packing more metal. He had two duffles in his hands.

"Cleared the place out," he said to Jed. Terse. He pulled a stack of notecards out of the pocket of one duffle, fanned them like playing cards.

"Should you, uh, talk to the manager or..."

"Sorry," the man said. "If you could just give me a lift to the station I'll finally get outta your hair."

"Need to roll by a fill-up joint first," Jed said.

There was one just on the other side of the rental cabin's lot. While Jed was putting just as much gas as he couldn't do without in the tank the man winded across the parking lot, looked around him like he was scoping the crowd, then went inside the Gas 'n Sip. Jed leaned against the trunk of the Chevy, a boot propped on the chrome bumper and a fist wrapped around the gas pump. Looked out to the mountains, one peak of stark solid white and the crows on the telephone wires silhouetted against it shiny like they'd been sketched with expensive new ink. The man was gone a while again. Long enough that Jed wondered if maybe he would just disappear on him now and if that'd be a bad thing, all considered. Well, it would be mighty anticlimactic, wouldn't it.

Dean went into the Gas 'n Sip, grabbed two Snickers and an El Sol, paid up. Thinking: anybody here could be a monster and then he'd get to kill them. That obviously underaged boy eyeing the smokes, for instance. Or not kill - drag into the restroom and barricade the door and stuff a sock in their mouth and slowly take them to pieces until they told him wherever the hell Sam had gone.

Standing in the shadow of a Lone Star logo'd oil truck, drinking the El Sol while wishing hard that it were something stronger, he made the call to Cas. The "Hey, dude, please tell me you're now loaded enough to buy a new set of wheels in Atlantic City and book it here sometime this week" call. The "Hey, so you remember that bloodsucking Alpha-douche - no, other one - who popped up during some of the low-points of our knowing each other - like that time you brought my brother back from Hell wrong or while your eggs were scrambled - more so than usual I mean, ha ha. Well, guess what..." call.

He opened with, "How's Atlantic City?"

"In economic free-fall," Cas said. "America's economists say on the news radio that the casino industry might be past the point of no return. Somehow sin is still on the rise. Why? Oh. Nevermind. You've been talking to Sam, and he told you..."

"Right," he said. "About Sam." Thinking about Sam and Cas talking behind his back. "When isn't it about Sam." He hadn't meant to say that, or think it. Waited for the punch of guilt that didn't come.

"Where is your brother now?" Cas asked. And of course Dean had read fucking Genesis, and of course he got the allusion here. The irony, the kick in the teeth.
"I don't know," he said. And then, the full story.

Cas agreed to make the drive but was vague on the time-line - well, disorienting as the slow creep of travel by road must be to him Dean couldn't hold that against him. So long as he got here in time.

That insanely gullible old-ish - his skin was stretched smooth over wide cheekbones and bristly jaw but with heavy creases around the eyes and mouth so it was hard to make his age - guy Dean had somehow suckered into giving him a lift - Jed Whoever - was drumming his fingers on the wheel of his Chevy. Dean got in, tossed him a Snickers.

"Thanks," he said. "But I'm s'posed to be watchin' my blood sugar. Or at least that's what the doctor told me last time I was at a clinic, which was seven years back." He ripped open the wrapper with his teeth anyway, pulling out of the Gas ’n Sip.

Dean sat slumped low, watching the shadows of pines and telephone-poles streak over the hood and the windshield, watching the threads of winter sunlight travel across his arms and legs. Letting how strange it was to be a passenger in a car settle into him. Half wishing he'd shaken Jed already and hotwired something. How much of a douche did that make him that he'd rather steal somebody else's car than let a good Samaritan give him a lift? Christ, he wanted the Impala. What had Sam gotten her into? If his baby was in enemy hands he'd break Sam's - no. No. He wasn't doing that anymore. That - there was a special word for it. Ideation. Sam had used that word in the context of some case or other and Dean had looked up the dictionary definition. Suicidal ideation. Homicidal ideation. Paranoid ideation. The act of forming ideas. If it was an act it was something he could stop doing, wasn't it?

Town was in the state of torpor that came after a deluge. The roofs and pavement and traffic lights and lamp-posts and storefront windows all dripping wet and the streets much emptier than the last afternoon he'd been here. Jed pulled into the lot between city hall and the station.

"Alright, man, thanks for everything. I can take it from here."

"Sure you won't need another ride?"

"Oh, I'm sure they'll have something available for me."

Jed opened his mouth, evidently thought better - his eyes were pale and clear and Dean thought he could see all the workings inside them like clockwork - closed it.

Dean got out of Chevy, went inside. The station just as busy-seeming, though this time he felt more eyes lifting from the ancient monitors and fixing on him.

Joni Mitchell was crooning about falling too fast and wanting freedom in the Chief's office and some junior cop was hunching over her desk and poking his finger at something - a grid on a map. Whipped around when Dean strode through the door - a flash of something between irritation or alarm on his baby-face. Dean thought about the woman in the cop uniform he'd seen that night in the barn. Thought about how anybody in this building could be a monster which meant that he could be killing them by the end of the day. The machete he had strapped inside his jacket, the second best winter jacket, his best currently soaked in blood.

"Howdy do Chief," he said.

"Agent," she said. "I assume you're here to share how your state-of-the-art big gov techniques have busted this case wide open and wow all the little folks here."

Baby-faced cop ducked his head, smirking.
"No," he said. "Saving that for Monday. I'm here about my partner."

She laced her stubby, silver beringed fingers together on top of the map. "That'll do Bradley," she said. Bradley let himself out of the office, still smirking. *That'll do pig* flashed through Dean's mind, but he bit it back.

"Your partner," she said. "Legs-like-a-tall-glass-of-water partner?"

"Has he been by here in the past forty-eight hours?"

"No. Why? Oh no, no. Don't tell me. You haven't mislaid him, have ya? Oh, if that don't beat all. A federal agent now - guess no-one's too high-and-mighty - "

"Yeah, well, wouldn't be the first time, would it. Remember Marshal Cohen. Or was that Kubrick? Y'know, that other fed who went missing round 'bout a month back. Funny how that one stayed out of the papers. And your files."

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I remember them - couple a cons who blew through town, never did learn what their game was with using the cover of a badge and a gun. Brash, even for the kind of confidence men we get in these parts. Maybe they met the fate their breed deserve, maybe they didn't - wasn't worth the ink and the paper, either way. We've lost far more deserving men than that, Agent. As for your partner - I sure hope you ain't expecting us to divert too many of our people and their precious time to the case of an outsider foolhardy enough to get himself vanished two days into - "

"Two days," he said. "Why two? Thought you hadn't seen him in three."

"Heard he was at a crime scene, y'know, that decapitation in the nice part of town - even in these sensational times that'll rise to the top of the water cooler chatter. Didn't he tell you about it?"

"Yeah, usually you gotta go on twitter to see a beheading these days," he said. Watching her face, which remained cool, composed, a slight squint to her eyes.

Maybe Sam had tried to call him, couldn't get a signal. Was this before or after Dean had told him to stay put? Was it right to be angry at Sam right now? Was it right that he was hoping so hard that somebody in this building would bare their teeth already because he had packed the best of the small machetes and it would be a shame not to use it?

There'd been a time when thinking about Sam made him feel calmer, more human. In Hell, he thought. In Hell there'd been times when Sam was what Dean saw, even after he didn't remember why, was what Dean saw when he screamed and later when he took up the knife. And then, there'd been times when Sam wasn't. It was the latter that'd been easier.

Jed waited barely ten minutes before trailing the man into the station. It wasn't until he was standing like a goddamn fool in the lobby behind the humorously spindly cover of a potted fern that it occurred to him: Maybe he was doing this out of boredom. The man was interesting, and maybe that was the true reason Jed was following him around. His strange story and smart eyes, the perfect control he could exercise over every muscle in his face, the genuine feeling he could pitch in his voice so what he was saying sounded true whatever sense was really in it. So okay, maybe that was simply the ol' conman shine, but it worked for a reason.

Or maybe he still had hang-ups about helping people who simply didn't want his help, no-way, no-how. Sounded like him.
Usually when people went around trying to mend the lives of other folks it was because there was something broken in their own, broken inside them. Jed had a bachelors in psychology and quite a few case studies that'd passed through his life, he knew that much.

It was strange. For all that cancer had killed their momma when Jed was six and his brother Jonah three, Jed had never considered their childhood as cast in tragedy.

Burnside was not a bad place to grow up. It had a church and a handful of bars and a baseball field and Uncle Harley's big house next to a river that teemed with trout, and Jed thought that was the bare minimum necessary for getting on with. Later, he would only change his mind about the church.

He and Jonah both liked tramping around the woods and they both liked fishing in the river when they came to Uncle Harley's every day after school while Dad was down in the mines. Jed liked knowing the lay of the land as well as he did, the few good hang-outs in town and all the good hiding places in the woods. He thought Jonah liked the quiet even better than he did with the amount of time Jonah would slink off on his own in those woods. Perhaps that was his first great misconception about their life.

Jed liked it best when it was him and Jonah camped out together in the summers. Lying on their backs, flashlight beams bouncing eerily off the trees stretching up above them, Jed would make up stupid stories and Jonah would always listen. He liked the Bible one his name had come from which Jed would tell over and over with some variation on it each time. Sometimes Bible Jonah made it out of the whale's belly, sometimes he didn't. His Jonah liked it either way. In the fall, they went hunting with Uncle Harley and sometimes their father. In the winter, they made forts out of the furniture when the whole valley was snowed in, crawled around in them pretending to be miners, like their father.

Dad working those long hours in the mines back when they were dug into the mountains did what he could for them but he'd never signed up to raise two boys all on his own. He never got over their momma dying. He drank too much, but in the quiet way.

Uncle Harley had what Jed sorta understood was an important job at the prison so he wasn't around much either, but he provided the big old farmhouse by the river whenever they could drop by which was the best thing for two growing boys who'd had to share a room most of their lives.

Jed was doing handyman work at fourteen, riding his bicycle along gravel tracks to houses on the outskirts of town or in the foothills well beyond it, and when he graduated high school Uncle Harley only had to help him halfway along with the money to get into the community college, and then to the big state college to complete his bachelors. Jed didn't even take the post-graduation summer off, though later he'd wish that he and Jonah had got one last camping trip together.

Dad and Harley were proud of him and Jonah didn't really understand but Jonah didn't understand anything about Jed back then - nor would he later on. Jed had his mind set on being a parole officer. Jed wanted a job where he helped people, where he could see what imprint he was making on the world, and this was the first obvious opportunity. He thought he could help people out by giving the worthy ones second chances and he thought that was at least as good as being a cop, busting up drunk 'n disorderlies and writing up wife-beaters then letting them back at it like they mostly did.

Well, then he got the job. Folks didn't reform to even his most modest expectations; his bachelors in psychology couldn't explain to his satisfaction why they wouldn't.

Most days, Jed didn't really like the job or the people or himself all that much, but he still got up.

That was Jed.
Jed could see the silhouette of the man through the frosted panes of the Chief's office doors, and he told himself he'd wait until the man came out of the office and be done with it.

Then he caught somebody's eyes on him out of the corner of his own and his heart did a frog-hop in his chest.

"That you, Jed?" a kid said.

The kid was instantly familiar to Jed though Jed hadn't spoken to him since his retirement. Now here he was in a lieutenant's badge, not looking a day older, shiny-skinned and uniform ironed like paper.

"Heya Bud," Jed said.

Buddy shook his head. "'S Bradley now."

"Heya Bradley. Lookin' swamped round here. How can I be of service?"

"It's Susanna. She called in 'bout half an hour ago. Jed - it was about a Jonah Carson, causin' a disturbance and I was gonna go out myself, but well, thought you should know - Don't know if you wanna handle it yourself, but if you do, well, I wouldn't think a standing in your way. "

"Thanks son," Jed said. He licked his upper lip, considering. Acclimating to breathing around that feeling of having been kicked in the gut. "Ain't hurt himself, has he? Or anyone else?"

Bradley sighed. "Not yet. Said he's hustlin' in the backroom which ain't exactly exceptional, but, well, you know how it goes. Could escalate"

"You know I ain't laid eyes on him in nineteen years."

"Yeah," Bradley said, then with a quirk of his lip that Jed could tell had its own untold story behind it. "But what's nineteen years radio silence between brothers?"

"What indeed," Jed said.

Seemed today was the day time was going to be folding in on itself, memory wrapped around him like a chain.

Jonah had been running away since when Jed could first remember him.

When he was a kid, it had been a game like any other: How far could he get, how many supplies raided from the kitchen drawer could he smuggle in his first-grade backpack, held together with safety pins after the zipper jammed. When the old Swiss Army knife was missing from the junk drawer, that was how you knew Jonah was gone.

Jed brought him back within a couple of hours, usually. By that time, Uncle Harley had had enough summers to teach him plenty about animal tracking and Jonah gave him many a chance to keep his skills sharp. Most of the time, Jonah was just holed up somewhere between the farmyard fence and the river with a secondhand copy of Tom Sawyer or a Hardy Boys, a damp blanket draped over a few sticks in the ground by way of a lean-to, stomach growling like a junkyard dog from having had only huckleberries for dinner.

It was kid stuff, until it wasn't.

It had been a bad winter. Jonah had graduated high school and taken a 'gap year' (that's what he called it, real fancy-like, like he was gonna backpack across the Alps or something) that stretched
into two and he was moody as shit and prone to destructive urges, touched base on all the teenage cliches. He kept stealing the keys to Jed's new Chevy, vanishing into the night while Jed slept, and the car came back dusty and smelling like liquor and smoke and sex and Jed was patient with him - Jed was patient as the goddamn graveyard - Jed gave him space.

With the years gone by and with the distance that had opened up between Jed and everybody else when Dad had passed and Uncle Harley had passed and left the big farmhouse to Jed - Well, then, Jed would consider that perhaps that patience and space had been more for his benefit than for Jonah's.

Jed was just on the cusp of disillusionment and still sweating his job, convinced that pulling double shifts would make the difference in somebody's life and still taking a lot of shit because he was the warden's nephew, even though Uncle Harley had just had his second stroke and you'd think folks might be a little more considerate on the subject. The days slurried together, like he was trudging through ankle-deep sleet anywhere he could go and full of blood-flushed faces, bloodshot bleary eyes, and every time Jed had to confront a person about violating the terms of their parole he felt like somebody had baptized him in the frozen December river, it was such a shock to his stupidly idealistic system. Then he came home to Jonah bitching and sniping and slamming cans around. Dad went out on the back patio with his pack of Camels or passed out drunk on the couch more nights than since Jed's dim memories of his momma's death.

He and Jonah got into a fight the week before Christmas.

They'd been in the parking lot at the police station, Jed taking five after turning in another disappointing report and Jonah rolling up in a new pickup with his winter flannel unzipped over the wifebeater he'd slept in last night. Started just arguing with Jed asking where the pickup had come from and insinuating that it was mighty risky of Jonah to bring it by the station and it escalated. Nobody was even drunk, and it was so bitingly cold nobody could blame it on hot blood with a straight face. Jonah had thrown the first punch, a detail that Jed would cling to for the cold comfort of righteousness on his bad nights.

It was a rough meat thudding fight, made of elbows and wild swung roundhouses, based on dim impressions of cop shows and John Wayne movies. They kept winding up in breathless clinches, arms thrown tight around each other before they got breath enough to hit again. Jonah wound up with a couple cracked ribs, courtesy of Jed's busted knuckles and sprained wrist. Jonah, with a seriousness of intent that was the most surprising thing - been awhile since he took anything so seriously - concentrated much of his attention on Jed's face: blacked both eyes, whipped his elbow into Jed's mouth like he wanted to smear it right off his face and shut him up for good, which, maybe he did.

The Chief came out and so'd a couple other officers and pried them apart, eventually. Jed had watched how Jonah's face shone with sweat and how he almost escaped their hold, lunging at Jed, the curl of his lip over his teeth smearing his whole face unrecognizable. Jed was boneless in the Chief's grip, pain lighting his whole body like a Christmas tree.

The Chief had put them both in the same cell, called in the doc to confirm that they weren't too badly hurt, and then left them locked up for the night.

He told Jed not to worry about his job, it was clear as day he hadn't started it. The cell was just to avoid the appearance of favoritism. Sorry about your uncle, he's a good man who don't deserve this.

They didn't speak for a few hours and Jed had been sinking into this tar pit inside him, blindfolded by a heavy ice pack over his swelling eyes. Eventually he moved the ice pack off one eye and he could see the smeary shapes of things and the electric Christmas lights strung over the desk opposite
the holding cell sharp as icicles and he tried sitting up and then had to stagger off the bunk to vomit violently in the toilet. Jonah was breathing shallow, lying like a stone on the bunk above him and Jed wondered if the painkillers he'd been given for his ribs had knocked him out.

Then Jonah said, "I'm takin' off after the holidays," casual as he would talk about, say, taking something back to the store.

"Where?" Jed asked. "You can't take that truck out of state."

Jonah laughed but it sounded really painful, and Jed almost covered his ears not to hear him wheezing and groaning. Jed dropped to his ass with his back against the concrete right by the toilet, feeling shittier by the minute, the aches in his wrist and head radiating to the bottom of his chest and the tips of his fingers. Dim impression of their first real fight - not the kind where they tried to snag each other's sandals off with their toes, the cruel and scarring kind - overlaying everything. This one time when Jonah had stolen away in the woods without him and Jed had been so mad about it that when he found Jonah eating huckleberries he'd ripped a fistful off the bush and tried to pry Jonah's tiny jaw open and cram them all inside. Jonah had made a small pathetic noise but he hadn't stopped until Jonah had laid very still for much too long, and then Jed had started sobbing I'm sorry I'm sorry please forgive me I'm sorry. Jonah's eyes had sprung open and looked at him coldly like a tiny adult and he'd been faking, faking. Or that was how Jed remembered it now.

"Charleston, to start with," Jonah said. "And like I was tryna tell you, that truck's mine. It's bout the only thing that is. Ever has been."

"What." Jed spit the word out too fast, groaned. "The fuck are you talkin' about?"

"Getting out, Jed. Done with this poison town."

Jed remembered this time he'd seen a farmer take a mattock and swing it into a frozen pond, breaking up the ice so his cattle could get at the water. How the ice had shattered and the water burst, sharp as glass, how water that cold was liketa peel your skin off.

"I thought you were over this." All the times he'd gone to check on Jonah when Jonah was small and found him missing, that first brief swoop of fear that maybe this time it wasn't just a game. "Finally grown outta this shit."

"Actually," Jonah told him with his enunciation maddeningly level even while each breath punched out like an accusation. "It's this shit that's been growin' up in me - like I can feel it inside me like jungle vines and if I don't tear it up at the root now it ain't ever comin' out. You ever felt it inside you, brother? Could you even admit it to yourself?"

Jed hadn't wanted to listen to this. He knew Jonah's reasons, he'd heard them all before. Not just from Jonah, from a lot of kids their age. There was nothing to do in Burnside. There were the mines and the few stores and the prison and the one factory that had already fallen on lean times and the Sheriff's office and the church. Jonah didn't want to spend the rest of his life in any of these boxes. Their dad and Uncle Harley would never understand what the hell Jonah was all about, never forgive him. Jed had his place in enforcing the rule of law, whatever the hell that meant, but Jonah didn't have anything.

Jed kept telling him no, no, we can fix this right here, but Jonah laid it all out anyway. It was all true, was the thing. What Jonah's prospects were in this town, what he had the right to feel about it.

They spent the rest of their night in jail not sleeping, not talking except once when Jonah said, "Jed?" and Jed answered, "Yeah," staring through the bars that were pretty clear by then. Perhaps in that
fight he had been the one to take less damage.

"Don't hate me," Jonah said. Jed didn't reply which was the beginning of a long-track record of him not getting it right in those sort of moments.

Jonah was as good as his word. He packed up the truck that it turned out wasn't stolen; he'd gotten it from the junkyard and he'd put it back together while Jed wasn't paying attention. He made the rounds saying goodbye for a week, and by New Years he was gone. Jed had to redefine what a shock to the system meant, was numb to a lot for a long time afterwards.

Jonah wound up in the Mississippi basin, working at something or other on the river. "Thinks he's the next Samuel L Clemens," was how Jed would explain Jonah's absence to folks who asked after that tornado brother of his - which was sugar coating it a bit, he was sure.

He sent Jed postcards from time to time, dusky fingerprints and barely decipherable scrawls of names and places and dates, and on occasion - say every five, six months - Jonah drunk-dialed him, usually stoned like a rock slide and just chewing up whatever he meant to say and spitting it out in indigestible pieces so not even a meaningful silence could speak between them.

Jed got on with his life on account of not having any other realistic option.

He had his job and for a while longer what was left of his family and even if he had never been much for friends his own age he had farmhouse upon farmhouse of older people, employers from his handyman days, just dying to mother him - except for Caroline which was maybe why Jed had gravitated to her company. Jed could smile no matter how lousy he felt, one skill he'd picked up from his dad, and he tried to be content with what he'd been left. It was probably more than he deserved.

By the time Jed made up his mind to go the man had come out of the Chief's office, had spotted Jed and had accosted him with a, "What're you still doing here?" like Jed was the one of the two of them with a record of unaccountable behavior, like Jed hadn't been helping him despite all the misgivings any sane person would have about it. Jed was about to say something sharp to that effect but was checked when he saw that the man had a brand new edge to his jaw, a flash of unhinged darkness in his eyes. Whatever words had been had with the Chief hadn't gone good for him. So instead Jed said -

"Got some news about my brother. Heard he might be in trouble."

The man blinked in a big way, looked at Jed like he was really seeing him now. It was unnerving.

"Got a get goin'," Jed said.

"So'm I," the man said.

An awkward pause, then Jed had to ask, "Where're you headed to?" and the man had to tell him -

"To this bar, last place my partner thought I might've gone, probably would be the first place he'd look."

And Jed had to ask, "That ain't by any chance the bar n' grill on Front Street?"

The man said, "Yeah, actually," and so fate was sealed that Jed would be driving the man again. For the last time, he swore to himself, because now he had enough on his own plate to deal with.
Susie's place was roiling: glittering sound of glass and the clacking of bar-stool legs as people milled about, an electric guitar burning through the house band's usual blues-y rhythms. There was Ed at the bar, wearing a shirt that said 'Ed' on the pocket. Ed was huge: at least 6'5, with a spare keg and a couple of cans kept under the expanse of his baby-blue t-shirt. The bar's unofficial bouncer on account of how he could heave about anyone out with minimal bodily harm. Jed wondered if his services would be required before long, if that was why he was minding the front.

He asked for Susie. She came out of the back, eyes peeling the crowd like paring knives, one hand tight around the neck of a bottle of bourbon.

"Hey you," she said.

"Hey yourself," he said. Her eyes tracked to the man at his right, as well they might, he stood out - but then they flared a little in surprised recognition.

"What's happenin' here?" she said.

Jed said, "Where is he Susie?" at the same time as the man said, "Need to have another word with you, ma'am."

"Where's who?" she said. "And what?"

"M brother, of course. You tryna pull the wool over me Susie?"

Susie let out a sigh, roughened and resigned, that closed the distance between them sure as one hand covering another. It was always like that when he got to see her: they met like strangers and then she’d do or say some small thing that made him feel as close to her as he’d ever been to anyone. Noticed again how lovely she was, too, that green woven into the plaid of her shirt and how it brought out the honey-color in her eyes.

"Honest to god I did not know he was in town Jed."

"Right," he said. "Well I heard different."

"Heard there's a stranger in the back room," she said. "It's been one big bustle of an afternoon with folks crowdin' in to get warm so I haven't scoped it out but somebody should. You're welcome to. But Jed, be careful."

Jed was turning away from the bar as the stranger stepped up to have his words with Susie - presumably about his missing partner but Jed didn't hear what he was saying through the din that quickly closed between them.

It had been in this bar that Jonah had once called him up and tried to explain himself.

"Not like it's not still in my bones," Jonah told him. "Some things.. they just creep inside a you and they don't ever come out."

The bar at the time belonged to an Al and didn't have half the class and comfort. Jed had had his eye on Susie even then when she'd been mostly bussing tables and just started going with Al and it was only a few months till she'd be pregnant and he thought that would be that. Susie was the only shot he'd ever known to come around twice

"It's late, Jonah." Rote protest that Jonah didn't pause to acknowledge.

"Not like I'm not, that I don't think about the place. 'S home, Jed, you know? Love or hate it there'll
"Obviously." Jed's eyes were squinting, hand braced flat against the bar counter. Wishing Jonah would shut up and wishing he were here in about equal measure.

"Don't, don't you take that tone with me," Jonah said, and then an uneven hitching sound - the giggles, he supposed. "You gotta listen to me, Jed."

"Always do, Jonah."

"Think I'll be buried there. Come home for that, at least. Be buried beside you. That make you happy?"

Jonah breathed for a minute, giving Jed a chance to respond but he was in no condition. His breastbone felt crushed, ribs caved in. He almost said *come home now*. Didn't.

"I just can't stick it out right now, man, on account a there's all this other shit. Maybe it's no better out here but it's my stuff and nobody else's and you've always had your own stuff, you've always known how to draw the fences around yourself but I don't, Jed, and it ain't your fault. Ain't nobody's fault. You uner- understand..."

Jed stayed quiet for a long time, until Jonah had asked, brittle, "Jed?"

Jed had said, "Sleep it off, Jonah."

Jonah refused, wanted to keep talking until Jed would tell him I understand you and there's nothing to forgive and Jed wasn't going to do that. Jed hung up on him.

It went on like that for years, decades. Drunk-dials and postcards with names of people he'd never met, pictures of places he'd never been and was tired of imagining. It hurt way down in his stomach, acid anger and aching longing, and never went away. He only again saw Jonah when Dad was in the hospital hooked up to the breathing machines with the lung cancer that there was no telling had come from breathing coal dust or the packs of Camels, and at Uncle Harley's funeral, after his third stroke. Lately, there'd been only silence.

Jed was banging through the back room doors and breathing shallow trying not to cough up the smoke. The room was banked with shadow, the bulbs flickering faint and counting on the low afternoon - no, dripping red sunset already, where had the day gone? - to bleed through the dust-caked window. Jed found his brother playing cards at the table with three players who were not the usual crowd.

He didn't recognize Jonah at first glance—and on second glance, it was just something familiar around the mouth, around the dark hooded eyes. He'd cut his hair. Razored it right down to the skin, and that was hard to see past, at first. Had he joined the army after all? The thought that he might've done that and not let Jed know knocked the breath out of him all over again. But he didn't have the air of a military man in his James Dean jacket with the collar popped and the claw of a tattoo just peaking out around his jugular. He'd lost weight. Lost color. But it wasn't a bad look on him, the new sharp cut to jaw and cheekbones. He looked a good decade younger than Jed.

Jed was slouched back, his mouth working on a toothpick. Jed could tell from that crooked fall of his wrist, that just askew way he held his cards, that Jonah was bluffing at the moment. He could tell from the barest curl of Jonah's lip that he was looking to get away with it, too.

Jed's first instinct was to freeze up and just stare awhile and he had to barrel beyond that instinct. So
Jed came on him strong, running his mouth fast and grabbing at Jonah's shoulder. Jonah shrugged Jed's hand off, answering none of his questions; he slanted a look up at him from under one sharp-cocked brow, a conspiratorial hint of warning. He flicked a few Jacksons into the pot, seeing and raising.

Jed frowned at the other men, with their rat-tails and blue-ish tattoos; the back room regulars were as rough as you'd expect but not as seedy as these. "How we doin', fellas? Haven't seen much of you in these parts. Pals of my brother here?"

The man dealing glowered at Jed, bared cragged teeth the color of weak beer. "Tell him to mind his own self," he said to Jonah.

Jonah smirked mildly. "Jed, mind yourself."

It hurt, how impersonal it was, more than he had imagined it could still hurt. "Takin' orders now, are we? Tell me you didn't join up or somethin'."

Jonah ignored that and Jed was at a loss to do else but loom behind his brother's shoulder and watch Jonah take the pot. Told himself he was eyeing the situation for the safety of the bar's other patrons, and for Susie. They started another hand and Jed took a moment to case the men. Webs of scar tissue and the crooks of formerly dislocated knuckles marked the hands cramped around the cards. They were folding one after another, glaring at Jonah like he'd screwed their old ladies and shot their dogs to boot.

"Call," Jonah said to the dealer, the only one still in. His voice a threat that didn't have to be raised. That wasn't right, whatever else Jonah might be, that cool controlled menace wasn't right. He flipped his cards. "Five through Jack of Spades." Straight flush.

Jed whistled lowly without meaning to, knuckled at his mouth. Jonah was impassive, one pale hand at rest on the table. The dealer had a haze of disbelief hovering with the cigarette smoke round his brow. Then he smiled with those bad-news teeth, cold snake smile as he flattened his cards for all to see. Kings, four of a kind, should be good enough. Shit.

Jonah reached for the pot, the red sunset gleaming on his shiny leather cuff. Jed didn't miss the dealer dropping his hands off the table, still smiling that bad-news smile. He couldn't have a gun under there, not in an establishment such as this, backroom poker game or no. This was as respectably public as Burnside got.

"You're pretty good, huh," the dealer said. Jonah didn't answer, one shoulder half-rising in a shrug. "Y'know how I know? 'Cause the number a cheaters I've nailed over the years and even I can't tell how you've done it."

The kind of statement that could kill a room. Even the smoke tasted staler. Silver ring on Jonah's left index caught the light, the blood red shine, as his hands tensed.

"Hell, son, no need for that kinda talk," Jed said, words piling up in his throat. "We have a liking to keep a civil tongue in a place like this - "

"I wasn't cheating," Jonah said and it should've been hard petulance like Jed remembered not this new voice that was cool and level and utterly controlled.

"Won't be if you just walk away right now and make like this never happened," Jed said. "C'mon little brother, let's go."

The dealer nodded, leaned forward. "You go. The money stays. Everybody walks while they still
got the kneecaps to do it with."

"Man makes a good case," Jed said, eyeing the exit, the one exit. Susie would've tipped Ed off that he was in here and all he'd have to do was holler -

"I won that money fair, brother," Jonah said without taking his eyes off the dealer. "Not that I'd expect you to be thinkin' any different."

"Yeah, but he seems a might more in need of it than you do." Jed scratched across his scalp, licked his lip again, nervous ticks that at other times he'd be self-conscious about. "You gonna make a big thing with me mixed up in it too?"

"I wasn't cheating," he said. "And what the fuck would you know about what I need?"

"You can pay up," the dealer broke in, getting impatient. "You can pay the fuck up - we'll all forget we ever saw your faces."

"Jesus Christ." Jed looked over the three men with their calloused, meaty hands and blood-hungry eyes. He shook his head, backed up a step. "Fine, this the way you wanna play your homecomin'? You're on your own on this one, Jonah."

"Like that'll be a great change," Jonah said. Up-tick of his jaw, like maybe he was smiling. Jed couldn't see his mouth. Could only see the reaction of the other players.

Tension singing like the shiver of a knife on a whetstone.

The dealer's eyes went huge, darting to Jed and back to Jonah. A cigarette stub with a long antennae of ash hit the table in front of one of the other men. All three of them stared at Jonah like he was a devastating news report: fire, flood, mine-shaft collapse.

Jonah shook his head, his jaw outlined sharply. Still slumped low but only a fool would take him for at ease: the potential for violence was a stripped wire that ran around the table, strung every man in the room to the same fate.

"Doin' it myself." Jonah tipped his chin up. "Goddamn fuckin' right." He finally let his gaze drop from the dealer, who had this smell rolling off him now like he was sweating like a stuck pig. Jonah stretched out his hand to sweep the cash into it. Dingy sunset gleamed off his scalp and off the coins that bounced off the table, rolled across the floor and Jed stomped down on a spiraling nickel, ground the grime into it. He exhaled, no idea how but thinking the moment of immediate peril behind them. Then Jonah stood up, faced him. He was wearing this Cheshire grin like nothing Jed had seen before. His mouth full of impossible teeth, like a piranhas.

"Tell me you ain't let me down again, brother, and come alone," he said.
"Some beastie got your tongue, brother?"

Jed was trying to think, trying so goddamn hard, kept turning his mind over like turning a key in ignition, hoping to hear the starter grind away. His damn fool mind kept choking, of course it did, how could he be blamed? Jonah had teeth like a cottonmouth, like a coyote, like some predator from a grisly scene on a PBS nature show. Piranha, his mind supplied again. That wasn't helpful.

Caroline might've said wampus beast or wendigo or skinwalker. She might've recited one of those bloody verses from Revelation that Jed had always assumed had been written while some prophet was lit as hell - *see it rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy*. Jed knew a few otherwise sensible folks who would've started talking Area 51 and X-Files, which Jed had watched diligently, he got the appeal, but there was just as much feverish wishful make-belief in that stuff as there was in religion. What did that leave him with?

"Go ahead and say it," Jonah said. "That m-word I know you're thinkin'. Say it."

Jed shook his head. Said, "What the hell happened to you?"

"Happened," Jonah said, no longer grinning, thank god - or God, if he was running with the biblical interpretation - "ain't the word I would use. It's what I did, Jed. It's what I became, what I made of myself. I fuckin' finally made something of myself. See?"

Movement flared off the side of Jed's vision, would've had him jumping out of his skin were he not already about as startled as he could get. The dealer had flipped over his chair, was charging Jonah with his own teeth bared and a fluorescent ray catching all the tints of them, the chipped edges and sharp canines - all in a flash. He might've been trying to sink a fist into Jonah's kidneys, wasn't clear before Jonah had grabbed him by the wrist. Grabbed him without turning his head, without looking down, or even blinking. He twisted that wrist in some cruel and exaggerated fashion that caused a crackling like kindling. A great gasp and a shuddering groan, and the man collapsed to his knees. Jonah still held his wrist, gave it another crank that caused another louder crack, a greater bone to break. Jonah's face was calm and cruel. The dealer's buddies had been half out of their chairs but the first crack of bone froze them in place and then they just watched it happen with hang-jawed disbelief.

Jed was still shaking his head, feeling more foolish by the second. All the rest of his body stood stock still, but his skin was tingling on the cusp of pain and inside he could feel his spine and ribs and sternum and heart and innards all quivering like a mold of jelly fresh plopped on the plate. "Please." His mouth was so parched it felt like he'd had a towel stuffed down it. "Please. Tell me. Tell me that this is some sick fuckin' joke and this is you screwin' around because you're still mad and I'm sorry I didn't look you up for all those years, I was meanin' to but I was scared, so scared of what mighta happened to you and then it would be my fault, and I'm sorry, Jonah, I'm sorry."

Jonah looked him in the eye, said, "Don't need your apology. I am so far beyond all that, you got no idea." He dropped the arm of the dealer who collapsed on his side with a high whine filtering through his gritted teeth, rocked back and forth like a carrion beetle on its back, good arm clinging to his broken bones. One of his buddies stood, started a slow sideways shuffle towards him that was almost comical to Jed's half-hysterical mind. Jonah paid him no concern.

Jed swallowed hard, hurting. "Tell me. Tell me who you are. Tell me what you are."
The other man behind the table spat the word out - "Monster." - but neither Jonah nor Jed paid him any mind.

Long moment of silence, then Jonah said, "You're gonna find out eventually. I've been born again, in a matter of speaking. I've been baptized. I don't know the words for what I am - Or maybe I do, I don't know. I do know I'm not – what I was. But I'm still who I was." He looked Jed square in the eye again. "Lilah Carson was my mother. Jacob Carson was my father. Just like they were your momma and daddy. They made me, just like they made you, and I was born into this family just like you were, I'm denyin' none of that. And we were kids together, and we went trompin all over the woods and buildin' forts in Uncle Harley's house and fishin' in his river, and to tell you the truth, I always hated fishing. You tried to make me happy in this stinkin' little miserable town, tried your best. And I left and I missed you. So fuckin' much and I never once told you. So no matter what I am, we had that life, nothin' can change it or wipe it out. I'm still your brother. That's who I am. But. I'm something so much more and I'm somebody else's now, too. You're just gonna have to get used to that. Sorry. I know you never liked to share."

Jed stared back, mute. His innards had stopped shaking, turned to lead, weighing him down so his feet were nailed to the floor and he couldn't move. Not an inch to save his life.

Jonah sighed. "Whatever." He looked back at the elk head mounted on the wall, flicked an amused glance down at the dealer rocking and groaning and gurgling on the floor. "You don't have to be afraid of me, Jed." And then, after a beat, and softer, "I won't hurt you. No-one's gonna make me do that, not against my will." He slanted his eyes back, and his expression was complicated now, complicated like a person is complicated, meanings twisted and tangled together. "I got value to 'em , I'm a big part of somethin' so much bigger...Don't think they'd try, but... Like I said I'm still your brother. But there's some things that I have to do tonight you ain't gonna like. You ain't gonna like it one bit. Now, about that federal agent you just so happened to walk in with..."

He talked to Susanna, got confirmation that Sam had come round here, had asked around about him, had left - she thought she heard sirens soon thereafter passing by, and that was it.

Dean got a table. He was drinking bourbon again. Had meant to order beer but he'd caught sight of the bottle in Susanna's hand and asked for the Jim Beam Black instead.

He'd also ordered a pulled rib on rye, was squeezing the botle of barbecue sauce over the meat, the dark purple-ish brown meat that looked nothing like what he thought of when he thought of ribs: the rich red intercostal meat with the rib bones gleaming like piano keys when skin has been freshly flayed.

He made his eyes lift from the meat, fix on the waitress - well, her tight-packed ass in jeans, feathers of her hair sweeping the small of her back where her shirt was riding up over an intricate latticework of ink - instead. The house band covering the Stones again, a slow-burn rendition of Paint It Black streamed through the general din of bar chatter and blurred all voices into the bass and electric chords. Now and again, a striking scrap of conversation reached him. "I fought two fuckin' civil wars in two fuckin' other people's countries and I ain't fightin' a third on behalf of fuckin' anybody..." and "Whadya mean V. Tech wouldn't let you in? With the brains on you.." and "Look, we all know with the robotics takin' over those jobs ain't ever comin' back..." and the band -

*I could not foresee this thing happening to you*

He got another call from Jody, her talking with highway noise in the background and him picturing her white-knuckling the wheel with both hands, phone cradled by her shoulder. He gulped thickly,
bourbon hitting him hard, maybe because it'd been a while since he'd had the hard stuff in his mostly empty stomach. Had to ready himself for the questions he was sure she was going to ask, the how did you boys think splitting up was a good idea, haven't you ever seen a single slasher flick, why did you let your brother out of your sight, where the hell has your head been at questions.

Got a surprise when she said, "I got some news for you, I think. I've been looking into your case. Seventeen men missing and only nine bodies come back...and the bodies that've been turning up haven't been doing so corresponding to the order they were taken in. Now what does that tell ya?"

He swagged bourbon again. "That the others are being kept for some purpose while some are gettin' the boot off the island, or whatever. In pieces."

"Bingo," Jody said. "Also: shit. What's this Alpha of yours doing with these people? Harvesting them? Turning them? Other than blood-slaves and self-replicating, what the hell do vampires want?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I've had a run-in with some of his minions, and they weren't just fangs. Think this might be bigger than vampires..."

"Yeah, so, get this," she said, and his heart clenched at the familiar phrase. "I widened my search, looked for other nexuses of disappearances and savaged bodies turning up. And it's not just Burnside. I found other towns where it's looking like the same damn crapstorm: one's down by the border in Arizona, this border town that's basically run by this motorcycle club that makes Sons of Anarchy look like a sitcom, and they're constantly getting into turf wars with the Narcos, and so the violence has been chalked up to that...but otherwise the gang's been quiet, no drive-bys, no blow-outs, no public killings, which is unusual for them. Then there's this podunk riverfront town in Mississippi..."

"Yeah," he said, "I get it. This douchebag's a big fuckin' player. I just don't know what's his game yet. But when I track him down, I'll get it out of him."

"When we track him down," she said. "Because he's probably got Alex, and god, I can't even think of what he might be doing to her. Or Sam."

"Right," he said. Swallowed again. "Jody, I'm. I gotta go."

He lowered the phone, picked up a potato chip and used its edge to scratch lines in the barbecue sauce on his plate. Sometimes, it helped to have something in his hands. Fidgeting, for a few seconds turning something over - a socket wrench, a pen, an empty USB-stick - between his finger and thumb could take the edge off. He'd heard it explained by one of those self-help audiobooks: worrying things with your hands could be a physical outlet for anxiety, anger, wanting to scratch somebody's eyes out just for looking at you. Wanting the Blade, the killing stroke never more than a fingertip away. With his other hand he was tapping his phone gently, gently against the edge of the table.

He wanted Cas to get here already. He could steal his burger. He could say, "You're still down for killing me, right?" and make Cas frown that concerned petulant frown. Say something so goddamn literal and stilted about emojis or cat penises or Atlantic City or whatever and he wouldn't even care if Cas was doing the awkward routine on purpose just to make out like nothing had changed with them.

Cas might tell him again that what he had done was for the right reasons, what a good role model he was, and coming from Cas, who had seen him inside-out, rotting soul and putrefied meatsuit, seen him in Hell and in Purgatory and what remained of him when he got back, it might actually mean something.
Then he'd ask Cas to promise him again, once more, with feeling. *Help me, Castiel, you're my only hope.* Or whatever the fuck he needed to say. *When my time comes, put me down, a mercy kill or however you need to think about it.* Considering how they first got acquainted, it would have the sweet ring of irony to it. *Hey, didn't you once say you could throw me back into Hell?*

It was cruel, he got that, he'd been on the other side enough times. He understood that Cas had all this inexplicable, battered, ill-adviced affection for him and he was grateful for that, he was. Just not grateful enough not to take advantage of it.

He thought about how he'd like to have Charlie here with him. About whether her arm was still in a cast and how her blood had looked on the back of his steady, steady fist and how she'd forgiven him and then taken the first pretext to run as far from him as she could get. Smart girl. *You say you're sorry? Then prove it.*

The tabletop came slowly into focus in front of him, wasteland of brown and black woodgrain, river of salt running through a scratch. Dusting of tapped-out cigarette ash. His eyes were burning. He rubbed them then forced his eyes up and saw Sam standing a few feet from him. Sam holding his laptop under one arm, in his other hand that poison green apple, thumbnail still picking at the bruise. The green ones weren't meant to be eaten raw anyway, they were meant to be baked in pie, what the hell was Sam's problem? *Other* than that he was wearing a white shirt with those stupid pearly buttons and was leaking blood dark as barbecue sauce from a hole in his abdomen, frowning down at Dean. Dean blinked, rubbed at his eyes and blinked again. Felt sorry for it when he'd made the image of Sam go away.

He wished Sam were here. He wished that he could rage at him for being gone until Sam cut him off with that righteous bitchface of his and told Dean to stop being a fucking jerk, *please, won't you just talk about what's really eating at you,* and he wished that after a few hours of mutual sulking they would be able to just walk past it like they always do.

This fantasy might not have been based on their relationship in recent years, but. Fuck it. It was what he wanted.

He thought about getting in touch with Crowley, Crowley might know something, a big player converting human souls en masse to be bound to a different realm, Crowley should be on top of this and should really share what he knew with the team. The team on which he had recently made very clear Crowley wasn't exactly a valued player in any band-of-brothers sense. Shit. Yeah, he could see that had had a downside. He might never have cracked open *The Art of War With Monsters* (though they had it prominently displayed on a shelf in the bunker's war room and he did mean to get to it sometime) but he could totally pass long con 101 and he did understand that you're not supposed to tip your hand until you've milked the mark for all they're worth. Then he'd blown it for the sweet satisfaction of putting that look on Crowley's face, make him feel what it was like to be *had.* Bonus: to get Crowley out of his face, remove the temptation of what was after all just one more shiny self-destruct button - there'd be some strange mixed-feelings on that one, but you'd have your reason, get it done, no remorse.

But did it really matter?

After all, he'd broken this...thing they had off any number of times - in fact one of the first things he'd said to Crowley when he woke up warm and cozy in his memory-foam deathbed was, "You know I'm not stickin' around, right?"

"We'll see about that," Crowley had drawled, but Dean could make out that faint fucking delicious glimmer of hurt in the corner's of his eyes. "Once you've had time to properly think over everything you owe me now."
"And you also get that our kind aren't exactly big on gratitude?"

"Our kind," Crowley said. "Might I congratulate you on finally reaching a measure of self-acceptance."

Crowley, of course, had meant the exact mocking opposite: what are you?

What Dean was, what he had with Crowley - no, all he had with Crowley was tearing anonymously through dives, dodging hints and insinuations about commitment and permanence and making something of himself, while stringing Crowley along for - what? company?

Embarrassing. Right. That was the word he'd chosen for that whole circus. That was all it was.

Still, it would be something if after that last time he'd admitted to yanking Crowley's chain, after that last bridge he'd burned, he could still use Crowley.

He said oh fuck it and he raised his phone and he speed dialed Crowley. No answer, of course. He left a long, loud, obnoxious voicemail demanding Crowley show his face and not telling him why. He swilled down the last of his bourbon, exited out the back. In the alley, he straightened up, still breathing hard, and started to walk. He forced himself not to think. Every time a thought started, he forced it down. Every time a memory started replaying, he hummed until it went away. Walked blindly down the alley.

Right on the backhand of Burnside's good parts was the bad side of town, end of the alley opening onto a backstreet that was like some downscaled version of those urban-decay post-apocalyptic wastelands, buildings half-shells with broken windows and peeling condemned posters, burnt-out cars, overflow of trash and ditched shopping carts, the odd half-skeletal cat leering out of the blackest shadow like that kind of behavior would entice anybody to feed them.

Dean was casing for a car worth hotwiring, just until he got the Impala back. Of course, then it occurred to him that he'd left the duffles behind in Jed's Chevy, no way to proceed without them. Shit.

Not-thinking had its upsides and downsides. Upside: he felt like he was holding it together better. Downside: he forgot his invaluable, incriminating gear in some ex-lawman civilian's car. Which maybe did detract from the upside a bit.

While rethinking everything he'd done this evening he stumbled over an obscenely fat rat that'd skittered out from under an abandoned tire. Then, faint on the wind he could hear something, sounded like a howl.

He looked up, on the block to his right could see a long shut-down factory, looked a good four stories, and he could see a figure, up on the ramparts, arms flung out wide for balance like he was Nik Wallenda about to walk the wire.

Dean started to run as the figure - tall, a man, and he was screaming Sam inside his head even though he had no reason to think it would be, that was just a default panic response- spun, started swirling his arms, and overbalanced. Hung in the air for an instant, as if floating weightless, before he plummeted. In the next second Dean heard the slam-smack of impact go off like a bomb, like it should rattle the windows and draw a crowd of hundreds, with news crews and maybe a helicopter, to the scene.

Dean didn't stop running even though he knew what to expect, there were few ways a person could die that would be new to his rodeo. And sure enough there the body was, beside the tires of a camo-
painted Jeep, big nicotine-yellow coat zipping up the body, but Dean didn't need to open it up to know all that was left was chunks of jagged-edged bone and gristle mashed inside his bag of skin. He was already leaking blood from every orifice, and it looked engine-oil black in the night, he was leaking like an oil train derailed, about to catch fire. Bleeding into a long straggle of beard that looked like a maggot might plop out of it any second, and he had just been some old homeless dude who couldn't hack it any longer. Or -

It was the stench that gave the demon away, even over the rank stench of this backstreet, sulfur so thick on the air that when Dean inhaled he could feel it slither up inside his nostrils practically like a Khan worm, wriggling its way through his smelling system, bombarding its cells so brutally that klaxons sounded the alarm. His senses picked up on this just a second too late to save him from the chain slung around his neck, instantaneous inability to breathe, pipes pancaked, vision shot, lungs feeling about to pop from panic. Bare seconds while his brain was still in working order.

He got the switchblade out of his boot, had to turn it over in his numbing hand, then missed on his first strike back. Only on the second did he sink it into thigh meat, the sciatic nerve if he was lucky, give it a good twist. Must've been lucky, because the chain slackened, and he rolled his head to the side, dropped and rolled out from under the demon's hold. He moved to push himself up, the shadow of the demon falling over him as he made it too slowly to his hands and knees.

He hadn't quite made it to his feet before the demon had yanked knife from knee and recovered. Also of note, the demon was fucking huge - was possessing big Ed from the bar, that was why.

A kick to the face had the usual effect: his ears ringing, his mouth tasting like warm pennies. His jaw clicked and ached when he worked it open, spat a string of blood to the pavement. Again, didn't get the chance to push himself to his feet before he was ripped backwards, the back of his head cracking the windshield as he thudded onto the high hood of the Jeep.

Spine shuddering against the hood, his fingers scrabbled and squeaked against the icy aluminum. He raised his head as far as he could manage, blinked blood from his eye, blood running thick from his left temple.

The sonofabitch met his gaze. Lunged forward, and it wasn't the most gracefully executed lunge, the demon must not be accustomed to the bulk of Ed's meatsuit.

Dean dodged the double-fisted blow, rolled right off of the hood onto the street with his palm smacking into a puddle of homeless dude's blood, spat another mouthful of blood to the asphalt as he pushed up on shaky arms and worked himself up to standing.

Dean felt it when his skin split, when the demon's fist still clutching the chain hit and the crack of bone shook so hard even the ringing in his ears was stunned silent.

He went flying again, met a big glass window that took him into the factory. Glass breaking all around him, tumbling and twisting through the whirl of glittering shards.

It took a fair amount of effort but after he landed he continued the roll, made it onto his back. His surroundings were still making like a whirlwind for a second while Dean struggled to catch his breath and hey, he was feeling pain again, it had finally gotten a raise to the top corner office of his consciousness. Now he had to work to suppress the renewed raging of his obliques, the new injured rib, the fresh pain shouting out from a half dozen other places throughout his body.

He breathed in that whiff of sulfur cutting the general air of decay as the demon sauntered toward him. This was the last straw for his lungs, which decided to say fuck this noise and reject the bitter dust-choked air they were being subjected to pulling in, make him gag, go into a harsh coughing fit.
He hadn't recovered from the coughing when he turned and ran. He was going to do this right, he was going to kill the demon, of course he would, but he would not lose control now. So he ran into what had been a factory for manufacturing equipment for when mining had been all about tunneling under mountains, drills and good old fashioned dynamite. There'd been parts of drills left to rust on the belts, barely recognizable chunks of rust-cracked metal and by what backstreet fluorescence filtered in their shadows were even harder to recognize, the distended shifting shapes of them making for decent camouflage. He ducked around one row of belts, cut between another, then rolled under another, needed to get some distance, some perspective. The demon continued his slow stalk, probably figured Dean was panicking.

He was stalling, letting his lungs recover a second. Now seemed a good time to get caught up on that pre-fight banter they'd missed out on.

"You ain't another one of Abaddon's ex-groupies, are you?"

"That poser-bitch? No fucking way, dude, I would never follow someone who was all slogans and stump speech, no policy proposals, no plan..."

"Fuck," Dean said, and now he was really pissed-off, not even the kind that was craving murder, the kind of pissed that had him rolling his eyes and slamming doors and bottles around. "What is it with everybody having to have plans and principles? Whatever happened to just random destruction and death for its own sake?"

"Wow. You've been one of us and, man, you still don't get our kind. What's the point of getting a second life if you don't stand for anything?"

"You expect me to believe Crowley sent you?"

"Why not? Shit. You honestly have a hard time believing he could be over you?"

"I think sending one thug with a chain ain't his style."

"I took initiative."

"And you're dumb enough to think he'll thank you for it?"

"No. Did you hear nothing I said about taking a stand for the greater good?"

"Dude, I can't even die. Kill me and there's only one person you'll be doin' a favor and it sure as fuck ain't you."

"Oh really? Then why don't you step the fuck up here and take it?"

Dean had to oblige him. Ditched caution, stealth, took him at a head-on run. After all, he'd recently worked out his latest mantra, which was actually the same-old mantra he'd known all his life: get it out on the bad guys, get it out on the bad guys. If he tore this pure black-hatted bastard apart with his bare hands (no teeth, see? he had limits) he would be less likely to do it to somebody who didn't quite have it coming. Fuck abstinence, fuck denial, it was all about letting the hunger out in controlled bursts. He was in control, he was in control, he had it all under motherfucking control -

Lower level piece of shit, definitely. They were really scraping the bottom of the barrel for the ones to send up against him since Abaddon, since Cain and it was boring, made him miss Purgatory all over again, made him feel stupidly invincible, which of course he wasn't, and he should try to remember that but it was difficult in these moments -
He straddled the demon on the floor and the thing inside Ed was still laughing even as Dean gained the upper hand, but the laughter cut quickly enough to gasps and gurgling, and Dean might've popped at least one finger against its cheekbone, hammering away at the thick ridges of Ed's skull, but hey, no more pain, the wasteland inside him had been swept blessedly dead quiet.

When the demon stopped moving beneath him, Dean pushed off the ground, used the momentum to make it all the way to his feet, his eyes moving back into a patterned sweep of the immediate area. Wrapping his left arm around his middle, he limped farther into the factory, stretched to grab the end of a loose hanging pipe. He yanked a length free and spun, clocking the demon across the head with an amusing bong of metal on bone right as the sonofabitch was lurching toward him. Then he rotated the pipe in his hand, rushed forth to jam the jagged end through that t-shirt and pad of muscle and splintering bone, popped a lung and whatever else was in between, pinning the demon to the crumbling drywall just to the right of the shattered window.

When he was satisfied that the asshole wasn't moving again, Dean staggered back, dropped his hands to his knees to keep himself from going all the way to the floor, gaze eating up the screaming demon speared to the wall.

"Never get tired of doin' that," Dean rasped, texture of the words like burning sand in his gullet, his throat bruised. He straightened, his left arm once more wrapped tight around his midsection, thinking c'mon, c'mon to the Mark, which maybe he shouldn't be doing but the opioid effect had been nice while it lasted.

He was still in good enough shape to get the hell out of Dodge, but he wasn't looking for any more unfinished business. He didn't have the demon-killing knife. That was on Sam, he hoped. But an exorcism, old school - he could do that. Let him confess to Crowley, who sure as fuck hadn't authorized this and wouldn't be pleased whatever he felt toward Dean at the moment.

But wait. Why should Crowley get the satisfaction of delegating to some other incompetent minion the task of taking this fucker apart when if he had just answered Dean's call in person they wouldn't be having this issue? He had his Colt in his waistband now with six rounds of devil's-trap bullets, he could put one between Ed's eyes so the demon would have no escape and there were plenty of implements in this factory he could improvise to -

The demon made the decision to cut out before Dean made up his mind. He pulled out the Colt, got off a shot that went through Ed's left-hand ribs but the demon had clawed up into his throat and passed by the point of no return. He was forced to stand by, watch the thick sooty smoke swirl and rush upward -

"He-help…me."

Dean jumped and dropped his eyes, saw fresh blood bubbling from the lips of Ed, just bartender Ed now, dying, shot and impaled against the wall.

"Ple-ease."

Dean took a step back, shook his head, croaked, "I…"

Ed's eyeballs were bloodshot, bulging, looked likely to pop right out of their sockets, and his pupils had grown huge, taking in too much.

"Close your eyes," Dean said. Coughed.

Ed, beyond hearing, choked on one last agonizing gurgle of breath drawn in, and his head dropped
forward silently on what should be the corresponding exhale, a dark line of blood trailing to connect his mouth and the factory's carpet of dust.

Dean averted his own eyes, the harsh drag of his own breaths now clogging his ears. Glass shards from the shattered window crackle-popped like corn under his boots as he turned. He threw a hand up against the window frame to maintain some semblance of balance and had to snatch it back again to avoid the broken glass slicing him up even more while making his way out.

The fight had of course marked up the Jeep, only vehicle he'd spotted in this vicinity that looked likely to make it around the block. Anyway, there was still the matter of the duffle bags in Jed's car so he would have to double back, take the riskier move of nabbing something from the bar's front lot. Or not. Not while it was this busy and bright. He'd have to get walking. It was getting colder, snow was seeming an iron-clad guarantee. Fuck. He was pretty much fucked either way and fresh out of people - things - to take it out on.

Maybe it was because he was feeling so raw in that moment, so humanly permeable, that that was the moment it happened. Or not. What did he know?

He is aware of what is happening to him overlaying what he thinks is happening to him. Dean imagines an onion, getting eviscerated by a paring knife. You slice and slice, filleting the layers, and the onion will make you cry before you know what is happening, so he pats himself on the back for the metaphor.

One layer, and the truth is that he is running.

Two layers, and the truth is that his fever is back, brain fever - one of those illustrated classics comics he read to Sammy had some colonial adventurer in the Congo coming down with brain fever, whatever the hell that was, and that sounded like his situation. The brain fever, not the colonial or the Congo, he wasn't that sonofabitch Kurtz, now was he, and when had he read that story, one of the few high school assignments he'd ever completed - was it while he was at that boy's home, was he...

Three layers, the onion's core plops out like an organ, and the truth is that he is being hunted.

He runs. Branches nick his arms like razors, but he doesn't worry over it, the razors are only figurative. It is so cold the mouthfuls of muddy air and icy fog hurt his throat and lungs as he swallows, his eyes searching for light, for an out from these pines and their claws, from this dream he knows inside and out, from before it came real and long after.

He knows he won't make it, he will never make it. He is not stupid. His ears are sharp, prey animal-sharp which is different from predator-sharp though how this is he doesn't know. He is seeing from one side now: as prey, game, a game to them. He hears the howling, the one unmistakable sound. He will forget his brother's voice before he forgets their howls.

No use to hurry - they had him before he ever took off running and they'll have him when it's over.

Over. Over is when they take his sight and take his voice and sometimes take both leave him in the mute black where he can still hear them still feel everything they do to him and can't even cry out against it. They give him his voice when they want to hear him scream when they want him to talk when they want they want they want and when he realizes what they want he will refuse to give it to them but there really is no use.

Over is when they make him talk. That onion again, filleted skin by skin, they make him tell them everything, a slow flaying, fears, shames, secrets, loves until he can't bear the sound of his own voice peeling and slicing and carving out himself and feeding it to them in ribbons. He will do this until
they leave him with nothing to himself and they are telling him how they are going to use what he's fed to them tell him he's done this to himself then they leave him alone to scream in the dark until he gives up his voice once more and still it isn't over.

Still, he runs. Soles of his feet ingrained with blood and dirt, too raw to steady his legs while crossing the unforgiving woods.

But he needs.

Needs to go where there's light and his brother's face. To tell him at least. Tell him. What. The muddy forest air now feels like nothing but mud filling his lungs and he can't draw breath to speak and there really is no use.

But he runs.

He falls, and this is good because it means things must be over. He is right - everything goes black, screen sliding right, just like in the movies. Lights out. It's for the best.

Soft snow scatters across his face as he opens his eyes. He's lying on a street corner, in a gutter swollen with snow. Touching his cheek gingerly, his skin comes away clean of blood and the woods.

Where is he? He had hoped for Purgatory, as a reprieve from dreams of hounds and Hell, surely he is owed a reprieve, he took his turn as prey and now -

It's a stupid question. He is in Burnside, the Appalachians, a deserted backstreet. Only, he can't remember how he came to be on this road. Did he fall during a bad fight? Is the demon waiting to finish him off - see the look of peace on his face when it drinks his blood - no, that's vampires with the blood drinking, he should know. There should be vampires somewhere round here, that was the general idea of this - vampire-bat-signal-radio, now if only it came with one of those CNN chyrons he could know what...

Springing to his feet, he groans as the bones in his legs and arms crack and pop beneath his weight. Stiff, like he'd been dead a while.

Sighing, he glances around and feels his ears roaring louder and louder as he does.

Sam. Sam is here. Or not here, but standing right across the street. Half in shadow, storefront awning hanging over his head piled with bricks and bricks of snow. So Sam is the point of this vision, obviously and redundantly, when is Sam not. What, did the Alpha think Dean would need a reminder of what he is looking for, what is on the table - when is Sam's life not on the table? When has Dean looked for anything else?

The Mark burns. Dean swallows. His ears roar like snow-swollen rivers.

He tries to say - Give him back.

He will have to cross the road to get to Sam, which is the set-up for the lamest of jokes and an accurate metaphor. Cross roads, cross streams, it is almost as good as his imaginary onion, as the snake swallowing its own tail.

The bitch is, this is not about giving him what he wants, this is about taunting him with what he can't have. He stares hungrily at Sam who is wearing what can only be called his resting bitchface, a look Dean has not seen in much too long. Lately it's been all dewy eyes and tentative mouth treading so carefully and making him feel like more of a monster.
He stares at Sam with tender, bone-deep yearning and it makes him feel human, the way they are supposed to keep each other, to keep...

In the street, in the snow, he sees a body, come between them. The spill of blood, arcing to either side of it, like dead angel wings. The pristine white backdrop makes the sheen of blood beautiful. Not that it matters, because men and angels are both dropping like flies these days and he and Sam can just walk around the corpse like they walk around everything else.

He crosses the street. The snow is still falling, much too much, but neither snow nor body get in his way. Sam is here. Sam is dressed in black jacket, scarf, black pants, a regular undertaker. Death. Behind him, a church. That is new. It is made of stone and stained glass, stark and serious in the white winter light. Balanced on the edge of a mountain, it has tiny wooden doors and an old, rotten cemetery. Dean tries to adjust to the new altitude while his eardrums pop.

You want to know what I confessed in there? Sam asks him. His voice cold, clean of tears.

Not really, no - It is not a sensitive thing to say but this is his vision and that means it has to go the way he wants it to. He inhales the smells of winter, the pine, frozen sky and the woodsmoke from some faraway cabin.

I want you to come for me. I don't care what you are. I don't care what you do. I just want -

This isn't my brother talking, he echoes to Sam, who shakes his head. Mute, tearful now. My brother still thinks he can save me. My brother always thinks -

You'll do what you have to do, Sam says. And I will never forgive you because there's nothing to forgive.

More fucking candy-coated cliches, Dean says. Can't you give me anything else?

You won't like it, Sam says. It's not good being alone, is it?

That's not an answer. Dean wants to shake him. Wants to cling to his shoulders, before he vanishes again.

He doesn't get the chance. He surfaces.

Surfaced, in the alley, all the way up the alley like he'd stayed on his feet the whole time, walking. He was still on his feet, nevermind the state of his skull or ribcage. He felt fantastic. Fucking Mark, high of the kill, finally kicked in.

He was standing close to the bar, the back exit where he'd come out, red graffiti on muck-brown brick - *Hang in there, baby*, enclosed within a wobbly attempt at a heart. Weird uplifting message for a bar's back alley, for this town, for this part of the country. Not that he was judging, he was just tired, tired of all this -

He heard a crash, some collision of body or bodies and wood or glass, followed up by a hoarse, manly scream, then - crack, a rifle shot. Shit.

Had he not just learned a lesson about not-thinking, he might've barreled in, but he had, so.

On one hand:

He had made a resolution to stay away from bar brawls while he had the Mark and thus far stuck to it.
He had killed one of the bartenders and facing his coworkers and patrons so soon after would be distinctly awkward.

He had blood on his hands and blood spotting his other good winter jacket (shit) and had walked only a block and a half from two dead bodies. Now was the time for stealing the getaway car, not diving straight into the next highly public showdown.

He needed to find Sam. Nothing going down in that bar was likely to take him one step closer to Sam.

The Mark was burning again. His hands were shaking. The sound of violence had sparked that craving, all over again. Siren song.

Other hand:

Jed and Susanna were in there and he really did feel obliged to them, felt he owed them better than an unceremonious ditching and also protecting the people of this town was sort of supposed to be his job. Fuck smart, it was the right thing to do.

The right thing to do. Right.

One hand a hairsbreadth from his Colt, with the other he pushed the bar's rear door inward and he re-crossed the threshold, under the neon red exit sign.
Driving for hours through day-round rainy dark and down hilly backroads, she pondered the meaning of losing.

There was no use beating around the bush. She had lost - lost everything, one way or the other. Of course, she was always too smart to be on the losing team, but here she was anyway, careening along switchbacks, mountain and forest shadow mirroring and melting into the asphalt so it was like driving through long tunnels. It was raining, faint rumble of thunder in the distance, getting fainter, sounded like it too was fleeing the scene. But the rain was getting harder, filling the car with the sound of it drumming against the metal frame. She had picked the winning team, but being on the team wasn't the same thing as winning; there was the boss and then there was the rest of them, tributaries feeding his great river, and how could she have ever thought it'd be otherwise? If she never got what she'd came for...

She'd learned about losing early.

According to the stories she was raised on she'd been born into what was once a real family, real being the word of consequence: money to burn in the bank, names on signposts at the corners of paved streets, a great house that put all others to shame by the reach of its shadow. And like all such families who remained in that part of the country, the reality was lost when they weren't looking, blinded by their own shine - it was blown away in a whirl of dust, the paint flaked off the signs, the apples shriveled and dropped in the unharvested orchard, and the name wore out like a dollar that'd changed hands by the hundreds.

The final stroke: her daddy had died. Automobile accident, so goddamn common, even in a time and town where rubber was rare on the road, and maybe he'd been drinking when he'd gone hurtling through that bridge rail and into the river - that was one subject where there was enough respect left in town for their name that nobody talked about it.

They were still rich in memory, in memories of what they were meant to be. Didn't matter that the town was mowed flat and pillered empty as a drained lakebed. They still had the town mines and dreamed in coal, by definition transmutable into diamonds if you swore by that kind of magic and they did, oh, they did. Transmutation and revival - they would call the promise of the old days back to life if they had to sacrifice their last eyeteeth to do it. Not that the situation was that desperate yet - they still had all their teeth, a few good inches of shoe leather; desperation was the wolf at their door but it hadn't gotten in yet. They had much farther still to fall, and maybe that made it worse in the end.

The oldest son was football captain, until he was the former football captain, but that still meant something so long as he stayed in town, that captaincy something for his strong shoulders to bear while he was marking summertime until he could leave again, until he could kick up dust behind him and run back into the wide-open arms of Yale or Duke or whatever law school would take him in, hand him a degree weighted down with names of the kind that wouldn't wear with fickle fortune. The second son, too. He was bound to get a degree in business. Bound to be something else to suit the times once things started going right again, right after the firstborn had done it. No offers for him, but he was bright enough, a midday sun's brightness, no matter if his face was such that no girl ever danced with him or no fellow ever bought him a beer. He'd make something of himself. Their momma rattling around trying to half-keep up that big house and father-who-art-in-heaven both had so much to be proud of, even still. One of those sons was gonna be governor, sure as sand, or at least congressman, the face of the county if not of the whole state.
It would take money, though, to get these grand plans off the ground, and what last they'd had had
gone in the ground with their father's grand funeral services.

So it came down to the girls. The girls and their would-be savior, a man who was in the meat-
packing business, among other shadowy Chicagoan things. He'd done business with their father, he'd
been a friend to their father, and when their father had gone off overseas he'd been a friend to their
momma. Real good friend, wanted to make good on that friendship, take the whole family under his
wing.

Really, it came down to the oldest girl on account of her body, the fine figure she cut. Marriageable.
beddable, sellable - and past time, too. Kathy, she was called by at the time.

He came back from Chicago and blew into town like he was never not there, six months too late for
their father's funeral. One minute it was a threadbare town with dust underfoot that turned everyone
the pale shade of a sepia photograph (or was that another trick of memory?), next it was his town in
prospect if not yet in deed, every acre was potential property, ready to be turned over.

Leon, was his name. Lion it meant in French, as he liked to mention when introducing himself to the
townsfolk, like such dumb hicks could never figure that for themselves.

He brought friends with him, younger men mostly. Business associates, he called them, and they
wore tailored suits fit for any banker but didn't bother to disguise their bruised knuckles and
bloodshot eyes, the occasional clink of their knuckle-brass in secret pockets.

They all had their eyes on Kathy when the boss-man wasn't looking too close - sometimes even
when he was. One in particular looked hard and hungry, the way her momma (the goddamn
hypocrite) had warned her about.

One in particular. She saw him the first time at sundown, warm purplish summer dusk, eating a
browning apple on the steps of the Apostolic Tabernacle, like Adam. Where's his Eve? was the first
thing she ever wondered about him. She was on her way to the movies, they had a proper movie
house by that time - the town's last decent construction project. She was taking her sister to see
Dorothy get twister-borne away to Oz for the first time, and the girl asked her all these dumb
questions about how it was the colors bloomed into life on the celluloid and why they drained away
again when that dumb bitch Dorothy decided she wanted to be back in Kansas again after all.

She thought she felt eyes watching her in the dark theater. She never did see him. She liked it, that
somebody would go the trouble of sneaking around to see her. Not that it meant anything.

She would have gone through with it, marrying Leon. He would've taken her away from her chores
on the farm and the small-town trap and onto Chicago, where she imagined life in some kind of
gilded cage with untarnished silverware and sheets that were always clean and movie houses with
chandeliers and lush velvet seats. She told herself she could learn to like the cage, learn to like it like
she liked anything that shined.

She might not get a better offer. Every year beyond twenty was a mile deeper into old maid territory,
and that was more lonesome and perilous than any route out east. And then, there'd always been
something wrong with her, something that marked her as not like the other girls. Maybe it was the
way her daddy had raised her, the dangerous crime flicks he'd let her see, the time he'd taught her
how to shoot bottles off a fence, nicknaming her his little firecracker. Maybe it was the way she
darned the hems of her polka dots and florals too short, maybe it was the nickels she wasted on
drugstore lipsticks, the way her long curls tangled in the dust by the railroad tracks which she would
traverse acres of dusty rocky fields so she could walk along - or maybe it was a deeper meanness, a
profound lack, like a fairy-tale curse on her heart. Whatever it was, it smoldered like sparks in the
underbrush, unseen. It didn't matter. She could fool most men most of the time.

It would all have worked out.

If only he would have stopped fucking her mother.

Some scorcher midday in August, through the glass pane in the kitchen door, there was an image that Kathy knew could not be right.

She broke it into pieces for herself, like long division.

One leg, no, two, four. Four legs. Tangled, sinfully tangled.

A thrust or a guttural movement.

One mouth open, keening. Dark lipstick, was it the color of plums? Would it taste of overly ripe fruit or bloody bruised skin or of a woman's sins, inherent, like the preacher was always hollering about?

A short, lumpy back. Sweat in the hollows, the dimples. Heavy as a barrel, as a stone.

The table was a mess. Yeasty dough left uncovered that'd failed to rise. A cup of grainy coffee with a milk skin on top.

Kathy closed her eyes. Her hot heart beating like the wings of a swallow in a snare, only it wasn't fear, wasn't panic, oh no, it was nearer to a thrill, something like she imagined flying must be like.

She knew straightaway what she had to do.

Kathy was leaning against the LaSalle convertible that belonged to Leon's right hand, the one who she'd seen at the Tabernacle. Mr. Chambers, his names was. By this time in their acquaintanceship, he and Kathy flirted sometimes. She thought they understood each other. Chambers understood she loved the movies and wanted to be a girl in a picture, any picture, but preferably one of those shadowy crime pictures where the dame looked like she was half-made of razors - and so he talked to her like she was, lots of arch and canny gals-and-dames-like-yous. Kathy thought she understood that he was a notorious smooth-talking, chain-smoking cold-assed motherfucker. Love 'em and leave 'em were the words he lived by and so being virginal and marked off for another must be a big part of her appeal.

"Hey, Katie-girl," he drawled, leaning in to capture a kiss from her pale chapped lips. She dodged it and it landed on the flushed skin of her neck.

"I need twenty bucks, Mr. C." she said, her lips curling into a grin that she ducked her head to half-hide, fingertips fluttering in to rest on his belt buckle. "Please?" Her trill was a perfect impression of that floozy Leon thought he had his eye on. Wouldn't quite fool Chambers but she didn't intend it to.

Her hand drifted lower.

His pupils dilated, his Adam's apple bobbing like a cork.

"Oo-oh, you are pleased to see me." Her hand dancing over the new shape and heft of him, inexpert but that was the point of the act. A note of desperation. "I could help you out there, if you want."
His lip twitched. Hard shine in his eyes. Maybe a little dangerous but so was she now, by god, so the hell was she.

His tough, calloused fingers stuffed some crumpled notes into her hand. Kathy smiled, sliver of demure teeth, and slid them under the sailor-suit collar of her summer dress.

"Thanks ever so, darlin'." She turned on her heel, walked away in a whirl of white polka dots. She heard him click open his lighter, light a cigarette behind her. She didn't look back.

This wasn't the first time she thought she'd played him for a fool. It wouldn't be the last she'd be so mistaken.

Chambers's twenty gave her enough to buy a shotgun. Got herself a new lipstick too, painted her mouth like Snow White's.

(She'd collected another two-hundred from Johnny, Burt, Harold and Tony in the same way.)

She went into the gun shop and talked about her oldest brother, y'know, the football captain? wantin' something real special for his b'day to the shop assistant. It was the oldest son who had her daddy's rifle and of course the shop assistant knew that, had heard him bragging about his eye for targets enough times. When he said something about it, about sons treasuring their father's heirlooms above any other valuable, Kathy slammed his face against the counter and got her first taste of what it was to make human blood pour out.

Obviously, he gave her the gun for free.

... Kathy tied Leon to the kitchen chair like some girl in a Leonard Cohen song, one of those songs that was like a key fitting in her memory lock-box, would later do. It was a Sunday morning and she'd played sick to get out of going to church and she'd asked for Leon to come see her, give her a get-well kiss. The moment he set foot over the threshold she'd bashed the rifle butt into the side of his skull.

"Why, was all he asked, while she puttered around the kitchen like she was trying to make up her mind what to have for after-church tea or something, why was all he bleated over and over and over over and over again until she'd gone goddamned crazy because he still didn't have a fucking clue, and he had blood all over half his face, his cheeks and jowls quivering like liver so fresh it'd just been carved out of the cow's carcass.

"Because you're a lowlife scumbag who fucked my momma while Daddy was in France. That's fucking why." Her voice didn't waver, didn't give an inch. She could've tacked on other reasons but felt she should stick to the most righteous one.

She was remembering her father teaching her how to hold his rifle, shooting bottles on a fence, telling her, "You gotta promise you're gonna take what you want, cause 'ain't nobody gonna hand it to you. You're gonna have to give 'em hell Katie-girl. "

"That's it?" he sputtered.

Kathy wanted to crack his skull like an eggshell and paint the walls with his brains. She wanted to hack his head off with a steak knife and leave it on the kitchen table for her mother and brothers to find, a goodbye note. This sack of meat was what you thought you could sell me to.

"Please -" Acrid stench stinging in her nostrils - oh hell's bells he'd fucking pissed himself from fear,
of her, and Kathy was laughing and whatever it was wrong that'd smoldered in her innards and her heart and her brains was finally going off like firecrackers, her laugh spilling like broken whiskey bottles.

"Leon, baby, do me a favor?" Kathy said. "Shut the goddamned hell up."

She emptied the barrel into his body and she didn't look away once. His blood matched her lipstick, his eyes glazed with unshed tears. He looked more human to her dead than he'd ever looked so alive. But she couldn't let that get to her now, could she? She pressed a kiss against his cheek - nobody else in this town wore paint that color - and left her old life behind.

Which was to say that Chambers caught up with her down by the railroad tracks, sundown again, when he came roaring across the barren wheat field in his uncannily shiny LaSalle. She wasn't afraid. He whistled like a wolf, a true wolf, so different from any boy in town.

He told her -

"Was biding my time till the tastiest moment to do him myself and I sure am glad I waited. Got to watch the whole show through the window, and darlin', you were better than any picture"

"What kind of man are you?" she asked him, marveling. It was sundown again and his warm wolf grin was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"Honey," he said, "there ain't no other kind like me."

When he opened his vein for her it was like he opened a map to every road in America. Gave her the key, unlocked the secret that America's roads were more than just grit and gravel, steaming asphalt and blowing dust. They were a web knitting the vast sprawl together, a symbol of hope and prosperity and home. There were no American stories that did not begin or end with roads. On the road, she would be her own story now.

She drove away in the LaSalle.

From that moment by the rails he'd always told her that she wasn't made, she was created by her own two hands.

Wasn't that true about all monsters, though?

The storm broke and the sky was silvery bright as moonshine, and just as sharp as moonshine of the other kind; it was not a sky you could drift up away in. It wouldn't snow today, the clouds were now too thin for that, at least at this latitude, but there was hoarfrost on her Mustang that morning, and on the scrubby bushes someone had planted next to the parking lot in a sad attempt at making it look like something other than a smear of gravel and shattered bottles over which the motel sign drunkenly blinked.

She had moved out of the farmhouse because she suddenly couldn't stomach the memories anymore. Even though those memories were lies; even though she had never lived there, never lost anything there except another scrap of her tattered pride. But it was close enough. The next worst thing.

She was on her way out of town, no question about that; it was past time to get the fuck out of Dodge - but she still had remnants of the blood Winchester'd spilled and the bodies she'd burned
smudged under her skin and there was no way she was leaving sober. So she'd had to head back into
town, this godforsaken isolated valley town, too far to any other. Check into the motel, meaning to
shower, get a bite to eat. Instead she laid on the bed looking for familiar faces in the ceiling's
watermarks and did neither of those things.

It was morning and all the bars were closed and while there were always panhandlers on the streets
obscenely easy for the picking the stench of them churned her stomach and so she had to stop for
coffee, just to keep herself occupied.

So she was in this diner, a diner like any other; the linoleum was dirty, smudged by slushy footprints,
and the vinyl seats were patched with duct tape, but the silverware glinted, reflecting yellow light,
and she blinked and that was where she found him. It was a pity, because the diner was a refuge
from that seeping morning chill and the waitress hadn't given her any weird looks such as might
tempt her into snapping the woman's neck, even though she hadn't showered for the past thirty-six
hours and she was pretty sure she looked like it, her cloying perfume only accenting her body odor.
She almost pretended she hadn't seen him, to buy herself some time, but then he looked up from
under that stupid goddamn spaghetti-western hat and made eye contact and her clever plan was shot
to hell. He got up from his booth in the corner, sauntered over to her like a gunslinger, grubby and
unshaven, rough in dirty jeans. Posturing even when there was barely a soul around to appreciate it.
All for show, not that, she had to admit, she was in a position to judge.

He slid onto the bench across from her, propped his elbow on the window ledge.

"Of all the gin joints," he said. "Just the woman I was lookin' to see. Got a message to relay.
Telephone games, you know how it is. I guess at your age, never having got a handle on texting,
must not feel as goddamn ridiculous to you as it does to me."

She had her sunglasses on to hide the hungry shadows around her eyes but was sure he could feel
her glare from behind them, sure half the diner could.

"Guess what: you're gettin' a second chance," he said. "Teacher's pet."

She blinked at that last: it seemed a non-sequitur.

"Chance at what?" she said. Her nails were digging into the crack between the table's metal rim and
Formica top.

"Doin' what you were supposed to do in the first place, what else? You know some other definition
of second chance I don't?"

She'd been harboring fantasies that the boss would let her go, make a clean break, and it was only
now that she saw clear how stupid she'd been. This wasn't a second chance, no such thing, this
mindscREW just wasn't over yet.

"He still want the Winchester alive?"

"You really need to keep your eye on the big picture, sweetheart," he said. "Get with the program."

"I've never been in your fucking program," she said. Drank her coffee and it tasted like iron. "And
I've got my own picture to be getting on with."

"Sure you do," he said. "But honey, nobody likes a girl who'll never play ball."

"I'll do it," she said. Refrained from the rhetorical question: do I have a choice? "Gather up the
posse," she said, meaning for posse to mock his hat, but he was oblivious to such digs as usual. Or
maybe he enjoyed them, maybe that was the point. "Draw up a proper plan this time with no input from you, if you don't mind." Her tone implying that she hoped he did mind, hoped he minded a lot.

He shrugged. "Blame what you let slip through your fingers on me, why don't you. The boss-man obviously don't. And whadya need a plan for, anyway? This ain't military science we're talkin' about, this is retrieving a loose nuke."

"You think science wouldn't come into that? I could almost envy you your simple mind, Carson."

He smiled that cold-snake smile. Truth was, she did envy him: she didn't believe he cared for anyone or ever had and so he knew nothing of missing or loneliness or revenge, nothing about any of it. He saw the face she put on in the morning: that she was a creature of grief and brutality and (naturally) lipstick red as blood. He didn't see what was behind it, for all that he smiled at her like she was so transparent.

"What you need," he said, "is to double stock on canon fodder."

"What I need," she said," is for you to get outta my face."

He let her down again by obliging before the matter could come to a conflagration.

She pulled out her case and her lighter, ignited a Marlboro. That got the waitress to put on a purselipped grimace, jerk her head to the no-smoking sign. She blew out hard, smoke hanging a screen in front of her face, waiting for the waitress to start something. Get over here, say something prissy or sugary-scolding, like Momma used to - Oh, sorry dear, didn't you see the rules...?

After, she went back to the motel and re-touched her makeup. She spiked her lashes like Faye Dunaway in Bonnie and Clyde, a favorite, one she saw with her man after she left home - two symmetrical flicks of eyeliner, blush cutting down the cheekbones, mascara the color of the darkness just beyond the streetlamp's range and, of course, that famous lick of ruby adorning her lips. No peacoat, no dress, no kitten-toes - she dressed like the woman she'd been when she'd had her own fucking posse, the highway queen who'd hacked off her hair with a switchblade and wore leather jackets and jeans that clung to her legs and black boots anchoring her feet to the road.

It was an art that escaped some people. She'd have to run by the station to let the Chief know she was taking point on this one - rub it in her face - and the Chief would lend her men without letting her forget they were on loan, a dispensation. The Chief would also say something rude about her hair, the long dark streaks of her roots growing out.

The Chief had after all said to her, concerning the mini skirts she'd dressed the girl in, that she didn't see why a lady had to get all two-penny tarted up in this day and age to get the job done. As if the way of men with women changed with the times.

She was dressed for memorable and for murder, ideally. Of course, it might not go down that way. Might be nobody would be playing ball and nobody would be taking their toys home in one piece. She might just kill him, winning team and obligation and gameplan be damned.

She had her doubts. Maybe the boss had written her off as a liability and meant for Winchester to kill her. Indirect and cruel - that sounded like him.

She had the sudden idea that she was playing Russian roulette with her own impulses, and she didn't know which chamber was loaded - she wasn't the man behind the curtain. The thing was, putting the gun down just wasn't an option. What did that leave her with?

There came a time when you had to cut your losses or go crazy trying to add them up.
Chapter 12

What acts had corresponded to the noises he'd heard were not readily apparent when he first shouldered his way back into the now thicker crush of bodies, broke through to almost the only open floor space, located at roughly the bar's geographical center - a situation which meant he might as well have gotten up onstage and assailed everyone with karaoke (again) for the attention he would draw. Not that it mattered, because here he had a pretty good view of what was going down and, well. Shit.

The layout of the bar - special emphasis on the exits - was covered, grid by grid, by people who could almost pass for people, it was just an impression of soldierly unified purpose that gave them away – he counted about six in local cop uniform, standing in pairs, shoulder to shoulder. Then there were more loosely placed men (and a few women, what were they, recruitment tokens? how were they being picked? and should he maybe have put more effort into cracking this earlier, before he walked out on the case and on his brother and everything went to hell again...) who had a seedy living-on-the-bleeding-edge look even for this town, but it was their eyes that were the dead giveaway, special emphasis on the dead, lights still on but nobody home anymore. He got that these must be those folks who'd gone missing and hadn't come back home mutilated corpses, lucky them – all doing the loom-menacingly-around-the-hostages act, the hostages who so far did not know they were hostages, didn't know what to make of any of this. Some of them had recognized the missing townsfolk, were crying out or babbling in confusion and relief, some were cowed by the presence of cops and by their superior grasp of the tenuously leashed violence suspended in the air. Those folks were edging toward the exits but he could make out at a glance that nobody was gonna be getting out, every exit had been covered, it had been a bottleneck trap for him and he didn't need to look back to know the bottle had been corked. It's what he would have done.

So, this situation was fucked, from a tactical perspective. For one thing, if there was a monster-whisperer hostage negotiator on Team Winchester he was not on call right now.

"Party don't start 'til I walk in, huh," he said. Winced internally at himself, was half-glad Sam wasn't around to hear that.

He glanced at the now deserted stage, saw that the band was not taking the Titanic stance, had dropped their instruments and ditched stage and spotlight.

It occurred to him that he had seen everybody in this bar dead in a dream, his hands slick with their blood. He looked for Susanna behind the counter, didn't see her - that could be good news or bad and he took it for good because he had so little of that. He looked for Jed, had to sweep the entire bar again before he picked him out from the ranks of ragged denim and flannel and camo and trucker caps, category fifty and up, and he was in a back corner by the entrance to the poker room, being restrained by another man who seemed dimly familiar, fluorescence gleaming off his skinhead-ish scalp but his face in shadow, restraining Jed in an almost bear hug that seemed to annoy more than frighten him. Dean gave Jed a nod that could mean either settle down, it's not as bad as you think or sorry about your life, depending on how this turned out.

With the next hard beat of his heart a frontman - woman - stepped up. He recognized her first by the razor-edge of her body as she strolled toward him out of the shadowed alcove behind the pool tables, doing that dramatic-entrance thing like she was materializing straight out of the dark, chiseled out of shadow. As the woman - Kat? Kathy? Katherine? walked past what he assumed were her troops and their hostages there was a general scramble to get out of her way. She stopped, facing him across the empty floor space, just out of range of a swing from a long-range blade.
For a half-a-minute the woman stood there, let him look at her. Her posture was casual, arms crossed in front of her, mouth set almost into a frown. Slick dark eyes, hooded, eyelashes like scaffolding hanging above. Her dark roots had grown out fast, looked like the copper dye had flaked off like rust. That and the leather jacket, the ripped jeans. Familiar, just not quite placeable.

"Recognize me now, baby?" Slight shift in accent, in posture, more of a cock to her hip.

"Lotta women have asked me that," he replied ever more inanely, but forgive him, he was still ripping the room apart with his eyes, searching for an exit through which all the civilians could be neatly shepherded or for any kind of solution to this supremely fucking shithole situation he was in right now. His brain was working overtime on desperate tactical calculations and coming up dry of even a Hail Mary pass, so he couldn't exactly give his best to the banter.

She prowled closer, closer, much too close, brought their bodies into the proximity that spelled only fight or fuck, sometimes both, sometimes something more one-sided and nasty, a slow murder. Her hand was at his throat, gliding up his jawline, sharp imprint of her fingernails on his cheek, her breath as visceral on his lips as any collision of teeth and tongue.

"Much as I'd like to, I can't entirely blame you," she said. "Word on the street is, you've blown through more lives than I have since then. So who's the necrophiliac now?"

He got it then, though it wasn't exactly a thunderclap sort of sudden clarity. There'd been a case and he'd tangled with her (he'd been bait, then she'd been bait, everybody was a sack of meat to somebody, whatever, nothing personal) and though the circumstances did stand out in his memory some, it wasn't really to do with her. It was family stuff. That hunt, the last proper monster hunt he and Sam had been on with Dad, the one that had netted them the Colt. Okay, so, yeah. Vampires. There'd been vampires that had gotten away and there'd been something - sounded funnier every time he heard it - about mating and scenting for life which maybe they should've taken seriously no matter how obnoxiously Twilight it sounded, but they'd never chased down those loose ends, him and Sam, because they'd been dealing with so much other shit and as their fuck-ups by omission went he wouldn't have ranked that one in the top ten if he had ever thought about it, which up till now he hadn't.

"Yeah, stuff's coming back," he said. "Somehow, I just still can't seem to care."

She drew back a step, then another step, then another so she was out of arm's reach again, then she turned her head and gave the nod to one of her men. He was standing beside the waitress who'd topped Dean's bourbon off earlier, and the monster rounded on her and grabbed her by the throat with one hand, squeezed her pipes so she couldn't scream, while the other arm was stretching out, had long, long nails like werewolf or kitsune nails and they stabbed her in the chest, right through the heart, and then his arm just – kept going. He plunged through her heart, her ribcage, her spine shattered, and then his hand came through on the other side, glistening red all over. There was a lot of screaming, stampeding feet, walls and windows getting pounded, a lot of rattling, like an earthquake, maybe Richter 5. Then there was a gun going off again, a pistol this time, drawn by one of the monsters in cop getup, and the screaming and stomping rose to Richter 6, and then there was another shot and a burst of glass shards, the bullet had taken out one of the lights, and an authoritatively militant shout for everybody to get down on the ground, and some more screaming and stomping that died down slow as the hostages wised up to their situation and generally complied.

Shit. He should've seen that coming.

"Kate."

"Glad to see there's still some lights on upstairs."
Dean swallowed, narrowed his eyes, forced a grin. "You here to serve up some ice-cold revenge, bitch? What's it been, ten friggin' years? Man, considering you're supposed to have had our scent all this time you sure are slow on the chase."

Kate laughed, overdramatic, the long line of her throat stretching back in a white flash.

"I came a long way to talk to you, you know," Kate said, "And all you wanna do is get physical. Cut me to ribbons with your big manly bone - where is it, by the way?"

"Oh, you're gonna find out."

"There's really no need we can't all be civil here."

"Since when in your sorry-ass life have you ever been civil, you sick bitch."

"When I'm making a deal, all business. I came to offer you something you seem to be fresh out of."

The only movement in a solid thirty seconds was the slow stretch of a smile across Kate's red, red mouth. Dean's eyes caught on the flash of jewelry in her ears, long industrial spikes of silver in her lobes, like if she needed a spare nail for impromptu carpentry or whatever vampires used nails on.

"So what are we talkin' here. What exactly are you proposing?"

A small hum came from behind Kate's lips as she tilted her head in disappointment, and Dean was really not liking how those slippery dark eyes were crawling all over him, swallowing up every inch of his body they could light on. "Alright then, I'll get right to it. You come with me, Dean, and I'll give you my word and my bosses - remember him? Big Daddy vampire? You've done business with him before? that nobody will harm one Pantene'd hair on little Sammy's head."

"Bullshit."

"You gotta love the symmetry of it, the way everything's coming full circle. First, your little gang uses me to get to the man I love...now I get to use yours. Assuming, of course, that you've ever really loved anyone. I don't know, have you? Or are you just as dead inside as they say?"

"Your deal is bullshit," he said. "Are you fucking kidding me? This is supposed to be personal for you, my dad whacked the Clive to your Bonnie and you're here to talk business? The cog in some masterplan that you probably don't even understand?"

Kate cracked her neck sideways and withdrew a hand from her jacket, tense arch of her fingers, flash of white knuckles. "So you don't believe me, okay. Do I have to get the boss-man here himself to tell you? I'm not kidding, he gave me his royal seal or whatever; we signed a contract and everything. Very official. You get it up for that sorta thing, don't you? Putting your ass up for sale."

"Not gonna happen." Dean rocked forward on the right ball of his foot, grounded by the left heel, adopted a tauter fighting stance. "My bet's on you going Fredo the second you got me without all these witnesses and you finally rip my heart out like you shoulda done years ago."

"Rip your heart out? Is that your idea of poetry? Not everybody is so fucking literal, baby. You've never much seemed to care about your own heart, anyway. That's never been the way to get at you."

He felt exposed, like boarding a plane without a single razor on him, like that first time he'd taken off the amulet in twenty years; he felt stripped and raw and that raw place was honestly tempted by her offer. That place thought her offer might take him to Sam and that place was screaming fuck tactics and fuck collateral damage, getting to Sam was the only thing that mattered.
He was opening his mouth, for the first time that night totally unsure of what he was going to say, which meant what happened next was probably him getting saved, although there should be ironic quotation marks around "saved" just as there were pretty much anytime the word could be applied to him.

That was when the feds showed up.

His first thought, when he heard the distant sirens and the outside voice carried over by the megaphone, was that this might be another hallucination - what was it called, an auditory hallucination - and hell maybe this whole crazy ugly scene was just one more mindfuck, like the bad kind of djinn-trip, playing on every chord of what he hated, what he feared: Sam was gone, he was cornered and outnumbered if not outgunned, the Mark was screaming that it was his only out, people were going to die because of him, and now the feds had shown up and were berating him over a megaphone to walk out with his hands in the air, he was pinned down, there was no other out, nobody else had to get hurt here, yadda, yadda.

"The fuck is that?" Kate said, dramatic swish of hair from which Sam could take pointers as she swept her glare across as many of her minions as possible. "Is that - are the feds busting us?"

There was a nervous chuckle from some corner.

"I thought you said this had been taken care of." Kate's glare was now set on somebody who didn't even look old enough to be in a bar but was wearing one of those cop uniforms. "You said you'd killed them."

He gave a who-me? shrug. "Well not me personally - Obviously, there was more of 'em about than we were told. Look, I only do what comes down the chain of command, I don't overstep like..."

"Did that fucking has-been bitch-hag undercut me?" Kate asked the room at large.

"Probably," Dean said, because why let the opening to sow dissension among one's enemies go - "Can't trust anybody these days."

Some hostage screamed for the feds to help them, got a skull-cracking kick to the face, and that set off more screaming. Somebody shot out another light, for dramatic effect or whatever, which gave the bar a cozier atmosphere really, bottle glass shining behind the bar, neon beer logos glittering in the windows. He noticed that El Sol slogan again: go someplace better. He was starting to resent it.

"Well, fucking fine," Kate said. "Guess we're now open to all customers, roll out the welcome mat already."

Dean opened his mouth to make some concession if they just wouldn't do that, he had enough clarity on the tactical situation to realize that the collateral damage could still multiply by factoring in more belligerent people with guns and enough humanity left that he still cared about the collateral, but apparently not enough because the words got lodged in his gullet, the words got choked back while the bar's front doors got unblocked and pulled open in a flash, and with a lack of caution that looked idiotic even to him, three agents in those blue windbreakers with ATF emblazoned in yellow and two men in the cowhide and denim of what he guessed to be the county sheriff and deputy filed in, fanned out, guns drawn, getting the bead on him. He raised his hands, pressed his eyes shut for a second, wishing he could palm his forehead in exaggerated fashion, opened them again and this was still happening.

"Ma'am, please, come towards me," that ATF lady, eerily pale skin and eyes, hair pinned back but in disarray, haloing her head, said to Kate. "Ma'am, it's okay, I've got you covered."
"Ooh, are you gonna protect me from him?" Kate said. Turned to the side, keeping both him and the ATF in sight from her peripherals. "From this big bad boy who's surely made me do such nasty things?"

"What is she," the agent's eyes on him, glacial, "your new brainwashed groupie?"

"The hell are you doing here now?" was all he could think to ask, little as it mattered.

"What, like it's not clear? Get on your fucking knees already."

He went ahead with the obvious comeback about what could be expected on a first date, anything to stall, keep as many people as he could alive as long as he could because he'd never backed down from a losing fight, and why start now?

"Your partner just fucking murdered mine, you sick fuck," the agent said, and her voice was a low and guttural rasp that he would have considered unspeakably hot under other circumstances, and really, what the hell was wrong with him, thinking that right now - "So if you think I have the fucking patience for your little games, think again."

"My, my," Kate said. "We got a hot one, here." Arms crossed again, leaning back on her heel, reclining stance that said she was settling in to watch this play out. Until she got bored and started dropping bodies. "And to think you accused me of making things personal."

"Notice anything kinda screwy about this little party you just gate-crashed?" Dean asked.

"Knew there was something crooked at the core of this town from the moment we got here." The agent's eyes flicked to one of the local cops. "But we'll have all the time to unravel your part in it later. If you're still breathing."

"Get on your face and you can walk outta here with no new holes, that's our deal," the sheriff said.

"Listen," Dean said. "I don't want to die." One of those technical truths that could be spun out into a slick fabrication. "So you wanna cut a deal, I'll cut a deal. Just tell me where my brother's gone."

Honest question: he wanted to know if they'd seen him.

"You see any lawyers around here?" This agent honestly had the worst negotiation manners of anybody in this bar, and that was saying something. Her colleagues were side-eyeing her like she was a ticking bomb about to blow her top, at least when they weren't looking at him like he was an oncoming nuclear meltdown.

"How did you make us anyway?"

Dean wasn't expecting an answer, got -

"Your aliases." Which, okay, he got that those were often a hazard, but really? "My partner, big into 70's punk." Which: what? Pastiest of whitebread had been Dean's only impression of the guy. Also: she was referring to her dead partner in present tense which dispelled any doubt that this was personal. "Spungen and Ritchie - Sid and Nancy, right? That's cute. It was your brother who confirmed his theory - slipped up, answered to the wrong alias."

"Well, I'll have words with him about that," he said. "As soon as I get him back." It came out like a threat, and he wasn't even fixed on who he was threatening, it was just that razor-edged thing inside him, threatening to tear out from under his skin when too many bodies pressed too close. Too many fucking bodies, with all their faces, watching him with judging eyes, hateful or fearful, it didn't matter.
"You realize you're about to make Waco look like your agency's finest hour?" So maybe he was just venting now, what else could he do: one inescapable factor he had to consider was that the greatest possible danger to everybody in this bar was him.

What set off the inescapable slide of violence was nothing under his control, or for that matter under the control of anybody struggling to come out on top here - somebody dropped a bottle, one of the bar's patrons, one of the pieces of collateral damage in the making, lost their hold on their drink, maybe with a sweat slick palm that just couldn't keep their grip, didn't matter why, only that there was the sudden and violent sound of shattering glass. Followed straight up by the almighty cra-aaa-ck of a neck getting broken, and the screaming and stampeding started back up, Richter 7, and it wasn't long until another gunshot went off.

Bodies crushing closer to him every second, the screaming blurring into one long howl. The blood rose in the air, coated the back of his throat as he pulled in labored breaths. Dean tried to draw his machete, but Kate had slipped away in the crowd while he was just getting a hand under the collar of his jacket, nevermind working it out of the straps.

It started like it had never stopped: an aching heat seeping across that wasteland inside him.

He snarled, "Don't be as dumb as you look" to the first attackers closing in on him. For a moment, he thought they were halting in their tracks, thought it was self-preservation instinct.

Then a particular raw cry broke through behind him, and he turned towards it, dropping his shoulder and his guard because he was struggling so damn badly to keep it on a leash, choke down that fever. He didn't want to come around swinging, or worse, if it was somebody in distress - he was supposed to be helping.

Shocking pain scored across this brow, swipe of claws that he had to swerve to protect an eyeball from, and he fell to the shaking floorboards, on a level with the stampeding feet, in a red haze of blurred vision and spiking agony, and then –

A crack was opening inside him, widening, dust spilling down into it, a sinkhole that got deeper, breached a fault line that opened wide like a crater on Mars: falling with a scream that went on and on because this abyss went straight down to the Pit and fumes were billowing up out of it, gas waiting for the spark that would set it off, flash-fire, consuming everything.

Then it was gone, and Dean's (human) senses came back like the tight snap of a rubber band. He shakily pushed up from the floor, registered the pulse of a second set of open wounds in his head, the trickle of blood down his face and that sickly heat spreading through his veins and meat and organs, drying out every cell. He couldn't sate that thirst, not here, not now when it was just this mad crush and tangle of bodies, already getting ripped apart, blood smearing everyone together, the lines all blurred.

He wouldn't.

He blinked to clear his vision, turned his face up to the men - monsters - damn, still needed a name for these things - moving in on him.

The guy standing over him had already reared his foot back, was scant inches from connecting with the side of Dean's head.

Dean sprung back, kicked the sonofabitch's legs out from under him.

He went down as one of his buddy's steel-capped toes dug into Dean's ribs and flipped him onto his
These guys had moved in as a coordinated unit but the next minute they were getting sloppy, the stampeding chaos around them, all that goddamn endless screaming must be getting on their nerves too.

Dean was reeling from a blow, pinwheeling backward against the lip of the band stage before he even realized he'd made it to his feet, and everything in the bar was washed infrared, literally, like movie psychedelia or Martian dust, though it might just be blood dripping in his eyes.

Then he made out that the one who'd hit him now had his hands raised and his hands were emanating an electric shimmer, crackling lace of live power, shooting off blue sparks. A djinn's hands. What, he thought, and, fuck.

That was douchebag number-one.

Douchebag number-two was in charge of manually subduing him so that the one with the magic fingers could lay hands on, armed beside the claws with a giant-ass ring on his right hand, a bottle opener at its center that cracked against Dean's cheekbone when he brought his fist down.

Dean got a couple of retaliatory hits in, solid strikes that bruised flesh, that popped someone's nose and at least one of his fingers, and not for a second did the ringing pain in his head abate, or the jackhammering pain in his heart as it tried to bust out of its ribcage bars.

A pain that would only abate if he gave in, just did what he had to do, just got it over with already.

No, he thought, and staggered back with the heel of his hand pressed to the dripping pulse in his temple, scrubbed the back of his hand across his blood-clouded eyes. Hard jolt to his chest and he hit the stage on his back, felt something inside of himself give, visceral as ribs breaking and intestines sliding out of a hole in your gut.

Dean grunted and rolled as he dropped to the floor, snaking his arm around to reach once more for the machete harnessed at his back as blurry red figures closed in. He finally managed to get the hilt of the machete in his hand, and as he was hefting the weapon the electric fingers grazed him. Singed across his right upper arm, and he could smell charred fabric and flesh, a ragged groan filled his ears, blocked out the background noise a second - he was braced for more psychedelic shit but all it seemed to do was yank an ace out from his house of cards, the illusion that he had it under control.

He finished with them pretty quickly after that.

Afterward, he thought of Jed, and it was one of those ringing moments of clarity that sent him hurtling back into himself at ninety miles per hour, and he looked around, stumbled in a circle, bodily shoving into people because what else could he do? And were it not for the slickness and the smell of hot blood on everything and the crunch of cartilage as he accidentally trod on somebody's limp hand, it would be more like trying to elbow through some crazy club scene than anything. Except for how people were getting ripped bone from socket, skin from muscle, sinew from bone at the hands and claws and teeth of what were once their fellow townsfolk. That crackling pop-pop-pop that could be either gunfire or bones getting broken in rapid-fire concert. Except for that goddamn endless screaming, that one long howl that had had all the humanity flayed from it. Except for how it was like being back in Hell.

How it was like being back in Purgatory, that first night: alone and surrounded, balanced on the blade of the knife that would decide if he'd be predator or prey here.
He'd settled the matter with a Zippo and dry brush, strapped to the end of a long steel blade. The fear of fire was more primal than any bloodlust. It really was that simple.

He made it to near that spot by the entrance to the backroom where Jed had been held, and Jed was gone, of course Jed was gone, what was he thinking. What. He had to get out of there. He couldn't help anyone. He never could.

He couldn't chart the exact progression of him getting out, only knew that in the aftermath he had even more blood spilled down his clothes, sticking his clothes to his skin, seeping into his skin, staining.

He stumbled out the front doors and saw that he had underestimated the situation.

The feds had, in fact, surrounded the building with an armada of black-van-driving reinforcements, who had established a near solid perimeter, and going by the flash-bang and wall of smoke that rolled up to meet him and the machine gun fire now ripping apart the night along with everything else, they were impressively if hopelessly and inadequately armed.

This couldn't be all because of him.

He staggered onward and the smoke slowly cleared. The entire world was still washed red with blood, running through his eyes and down his hands.

Part of his mind was still clear, still running tactical assessment. There was no mistaking him for a non-combatant, if only by the way he was striding, searching, not blindly fleeing. Then, of course, the machete in his hand. It'd take a miracle for him not to get shot - record-scratch - he paused to be annoyed with himself for thinking the word miracle and once more expunged it from his mental vocabulary.

He saw an agent crouched behind a van, talking into radio or cellphone, and he wanted to tell him to cut his losses and run, but the words wouldn't come out. He saw the agent's eyes rise, take him in, horror-struck, then slide over his shoulder. His ears picked out the sound of a rifle butt getting a better brace against somebody's shoulder, and he spun on his left heel, drawing the Colt with his free hand, and leveled it at an agent with an assault rifle and riot-gear armor, good for him, wouldn't save him from getting his head ripped clean off his shoulders, a dead man walking.

Let him do it, Dean thought, because so was he.

This stand-off only spanned a couple seconds, then there was another flash-bang and another rolling wall of smoke and screams rolling up to swamp them, and Dean ducked and ran behind the van.

When he came out on the other side he was making his way towards Jed's Chevy, and funnily enough so was Jed and the man - monster or whatever - he'd seen restraining Jed earlier was with him, pulling Jed along by the arm.

"Hey," Dean shouted, or something like it, his voice was so hoarse and his mouth so dry, Christ, he needed a drink. "Hold up." They did hold up. The man dropped Jed's arm, rounding on him with a big, bright, shark-toothy smile, cocked his head, said -

"Hey, I was wonderin' - what about you could possibly be worth all this?"

He was dimly familiar, and Dean had had it with dimly familiar people.

This one put up a better fight than the others, though all of them had been a cut above the average mook, who were usually only a cut above the average bar brawler, but this one - this one had deadly
caution and precision, this one didn't underestimate Dean a second, this one fought the way you fight a monster who outclasses you on every level, the way you fight when with the next second you could be dead.

It was close, which was more than Dean could say of any fight he'd been in since Cain; he was staggering through it, almost on autopilot, exhausted and bleeding, half of him outside himself and still clinging to those last shards of control, glass fragile and sharp, cutting him to ribbons.

Of course he could go down in this parking lot, he could bleed out again and it wouldn't make a fucking bit of difference. It was that thought, that rage that got him on top, machete horizontal in hand, thinking or saying: look at me, show me that this is real, that I'm really here.

And it was that rage that made it yet another bizarre thing when he heard Jed yelling "Stop" and he actually did.

It sounded enough like Sam, the desperation in it, the pleading, whatever was underlying it, that he could make it pass for what he wanted more than anything, more than he wanted the kill.

It was that realization of his priorities that caused a great parameter shift by which he could consider what he was doing in a cold, clarifying light and decide maybe it wasn't right, strategy-wise. He could use a prisoner.

He bashed him in the head with the hilt of the machete a couple more times and then he said to Jed, "Help me get him up," and Jed did. Dean started regretting it as they got him over the tailgate, dropped him on the truck bed, where there were a few cables with which Dean had to waste a full minute hogtying him, for all the good that would do when he woke up.

There were others nearby in the lot, he felt their eyes on him, stripping him to the bone, but most were after easier pickings, so much for mission discipline. Kate, he thought, it would be a mistake to leave her alive again. Where was she? But it'd also be a mistake to leave Jed alone to look for her. Hell, pretty much anything he did was a mistake.

"We gotta go," Dean said, this crackling red thing beneath his skin, this burning taste in the air, at the back of his throat, beneath the scent of gasoline and alcohol and even fresh blood, deeper in than anything. "Come on."

Jed didn't reply. Dean tried the handle and exhaled when the hinges creaked loudly as he opened it. "Gimme the keys."

Sliding into the front seat, Dean grabbed the keys out of Jed's clammy palm, fumbled with the sticky metal, getting them in ignition.

"C'mon, c'mon," he muttered as he listened for the starter. "Start your rusty ass, you sonofabitch - "

With that, the Chevy coughed to life.

"Atta boy." Something hit the hood. No - somebody. She - it was a she, young, barely legal and baring teeth that were vamp - no, more like vetala - rose as he gunned the engine, made the cab rattle. She fell away. Dean could see her in his headlights, rolling in a gravel ditch that bordered the lot and then in a series of movements almost too quick for the eye, launching herself into the air, gone.

A concussive thump and she was on the roof of the Chevy. He yanked the gear stick into drive with his right hand, spun the wheel with his left, swiveled across the parking lot far as he could go without colliding with a van or truck or upright body, maybe six feet and he hit the brakes, sending him and Jed lurching forward. She tumbled onto the hood but held on. Any second, she'd be tearing the
windshield right off. Dean was fumbling for his machete which had somehow slipped from his thigh to the footwell then to under the seats, when he heard three close shots. He saw a round strike her in the shoulder, quick spark of impact. Her nose scrunched and her eyes half-rolled in teenage-girl annoyance.

"Hey!" somebody was idiotically yelling. "Hey!

She turned her face and so did Dean, saw the sheriff. Not the deputy, and there was a joke there, something about something -

With a compressing twitch of her body, she launched herself into the air as the sheriff got off a final useless shot. Dean looked away.

He stomped on the accelerator, yanked the wheel into a 180. The Chevy shot into the ditch of slush and gravel that bordered the lot, the wheels digging and spinning, then screeching onto pavement. They barreled down the long drive away from the shoot-out-cum-slaughterhouse, through the bright storefronts lining the good parts of town, world outside the windows smearing as he accelerated to sixty, seventy, eighty miles per hour, didn't dare push harder, not all Chevys could be his baby.

He used the cuff of his shirt to wipe the blood from his eyes, flinched as he grazed the wound on his forehead. He hazarded a glance in his rearview, saw eyes looking back that weren't his, and his white-knuckled hands jerked on the wheel, tires spinning out over hoarfrost. He took the next corner on two wheels, and found a barren street of strip malls and mom-and-pop shops, storefront signs winking cheery neon, warm streetlamp glow, horror wiped all out of sight, like magic.

"Wha - what the hell was that?" Jed coughed, rasped, sounded like he'd choked down a lungful of smoke. "What the hell were those people? What's he - what's wrong with them?"

"Jefferson Starships," Dean said, empty reflex. Flat silence followed and he didn't dare take his eyes from the street again but he could picture perfectly how Jed must be looking at him. "Because they're horrible and hard - nevermind."

Flat silence.

"Sorry 'bout all this," Dean said, and no, he wasn't proud of having nothing to offer but another meaningless apology. But he didn't feel much else about it, everything swallowed by a devastating sense of loss that usually only could mean the loss of his family but right now spelled out the loss of opportunity. Of kills he could've made, more blood on his hands, Christ, what was wrong with him.

Over the rooftops and the night-black silhouettes of mountains he saw stars, smeared by the speed he was going, looking like they were falling. Reminded him of one of those fun facts he'd memorized in case someone tried to tell him to just calm down on an airplane: getting ejected from a plane in free fall, the slipstream could tear the clothes right off your body, and he wondered how fast you'd have to plummet to get your skin stripped off, bones popped out of sockets, muscles torn apart, whole limbs flying away - he'd google it later, when he got to wherever he was going. Right now, he would do the only thing he could do: drive.
Chapter 13

Voices. Underwater sound-quality.

"Chill the fuck out. This ain't as bad as you think."

"Nyah, but that don't mean it ain"t bad enough by half."

Oxygen returned incrementally to his brain, his greyed-out vision sparking burst-capillary red. Sam felt something sharp pierce his skin, something alien yet horrifyingly familiar.

Injection, a needle sliding into his vein, inserting some mystery substance into his blood - he heard a cracked, choked sound come out of his throat, also familiar.

The boot had lifted off his throat but there was a weight like a cinderblock across his chest, a shadowy indeterminable face much too close to his, nails scratching dully against his cheek. The monster's breath washed hot over Sam's ear.

"There's more where that came from. And trust me, son, you don't want no more of that."

His breath receded and Sam watched helplessly as blackness sucked up his last threads of sight.

He snapped his eyes open, stared upwards, and it was like he was looking through a steamed-up shower panel. He started to push up on his elbows, faltered, then sank back onto something concrete - no, metal - a bench? He still felt like he had that block of concrete on his chest. Remembered being dosed, the needle sliding into his vein.

The mystery substance had been a fairly benign sedative, Sam figured, in some forward-thinking segment of his brain where he fostered an innate place of complete calm coupled with a usable, steady panic - he had felt a needle, not a bony spike protruding from monster-flesh or a set of fangs.

It was just a sedative, he told himself a dozen times in the span of seconds. It was a plea for levelheadedness as well as an order accented like Dad or like Dean. Just a sedative. That was all.

Only, a sedative meant hours when he'd been blacked out, hours he couldn't account for, and there was only one possible explanation for why he was alive now: he was being kept until he could be used for something, and that thought sent terror crawling through him, knotting him up inside like macrame.

He could hear something, another voice, dripping down to him like he was underwater but only a few feet from the surface, perhaps lying on the floor of the bathtub. He thought he could manage that so he tried to pull his head back to clear air.

"Sam? Please. Don't. Just relax. Relax, or you'll just make it worse..." Girl's voice, gentle and breathy, trying to pull him from a nightmare, and he lurched toward it, a drowning man toward a life buoy.

"Jess," he choked out. A soap-bubble second in which he saw her in his mind's eye more clearly than he had in years, since Lucifer had stolen her face. Her eyes round with worry, that waterfall of butter-yellow hair he could remember how it felt to wind around his fingers, still wearing her Smurf shirt without irony. Jess was the funniest girl he'd ever met but she wasn't a big fan of irony.
A half-second later he remembered that it couldn't be Jess and with that he ruled out most other women who'd been in his life. "Jody?"

A hand was pressing him back down, insistent, and he recoiled - an unknown hand could be intending to do anything to him - tried to wriggle himself away from it, ended up falling back, sputtering through a mildly bruised larynx (he had gotten pretty good over the years at identifying degrees of throat bruising) while he flailed around with his one competent hand and felt the weight of his deathly numb one, which he must've been lying on somehow, flapping brokenly, chained to the other. Handcuffs, of course.

Belatedly the voice returned, low, apologetic. "No...Alex, it's Alex. Sam, can you hear me?"

Sam squinted through what was now debris floating across his field of vision, blobs and strings and swirls, like he was swimming under garbage somebody had strewn over a lake. He finally pinpointed the face peering down at him, wide-eyed and white as...as a half-dead victim or a traumatized witness. Which was she?

"Alex," he said. "You okay?"

He saw her shake her head, tendrils of dark hair flapping across his field of vision.

"Am I okay? God...you, are you okay? You're a mess, what did those guys do to you?"

Alex's voice was rising in pitch, growing reedy with panic, and Sam shook himself into some sort of calm. He reached out a hand again, grabbed at her arm, her dry denim sleeve. Her jacket was dry. That, at least, was good.

"Fine. Be fine." He was trying to jump his brain onto the next page, trying to use that throb of panic as a kick-start to get this mess into some kind of order. "Did they hurt you?"

Alex brushed her hair from her eyes. "No...no. It just - they dressed me like I was a kid or something and they put me in this van and I was by myself a long time. I thought they might've killed you. They're vampires, Sam."

That didn't sound right though he was without the mental clarity to even begin to expound on why not. "Yeah, well, maybe." He coughed, groaned. "Are we still in Burnside?"

"The town? No, I don't think so. Like I said, we've been driving a long time. I tried to count time, but...It was so dark, so fucking dark, I couldn't keep track of anything. They stopped twice, first time was at this rest stop where they let me out to pee and gave me funyuns and M&Ms. It was raining. Second time was when they put you in here. The rain had stopped by then. I don't know where you came from or what they were doing to you but it looks like they might've shot you up with something. You - really don't look so hot.

"Did you get a handle on how many of them there were?"

"Like, the whole police station? I don't know. It didn't seem like a normal nest, not like a family..." Her mouth twisted and her eyes dropped when she said family.

He shifted his legs experimentally and a dull ache pounded in his knees for a moment, the joints stiff to equal many hours of immobilization. A moment later the weight on his ankles registered as shackles, iron and old, but then he had come from an old police station and by what he could discern from the engine's laborious chugging was riding in an old police van. He patted at those places in his clothes where blades and picks were most carefully concealed, found them gone. He must've been searched while he was out. His insides were knotting up again, thinking about that. Hours blacked
out that he couldn't account for. Hours when -

"They sent one of them after me, when I was at Jody's. I think - I think they might've driven me here. I've been having these dreams..."

She fell silent. He listened to the sound of tires rolling with all too frequent bumps and skids over cracked asphalt, gravel and heavy ice, on a road that'd likely gone unkept for at least a decade. Felt like they were on an incline, so probably an old mountain switchback.

"We take a lotta turns?" he asked her.

"Yeah. At least one every twenty minutes, felt like. Lot of hairpins. I got sick twice - sorry."

He didn't smell anything, another sense not fully back online. His vision was still only half-coalesced, edges muted, blackness lurking in every corner, threatening to swallow everything again if he turned his head too fast.

"How about Roy?"

"Who?"

"Guy who was in the cell with us."

"Haven't seen him since. Who was he to you?"

"A hunter." Was that a relief? Not really. Just one more unknown to pack away with the hours when he'd been blacked out.

There would be no point, he told himself, in going back over how this - all of this - could have been avoided if only he had done something differently.

He proceeded to go back over it anyway.

He shouldn't have let Dean walk out that door. He should have promised caution, to consult with Dean before he made any decision about the Mark and magic and sacrifice, whatever this merry-go-round-of-knives entailed this time - he should've told Dean whatever he wanted to hear.

Except he knew that wasn't the problem. Dean was a bloodhound for sniffing out excuses to get on his high horse about things like this. The problem - and here he paused again to remind himself that this was not a useful train of thought to be on - was that Dean didn't want his help. Again.

Dean had sure wanted to be saved when he was the one holing up in the bunker doing the obsessive sleep-deprived researching thing. When it was Sam -

On the subject of saving: Dean would be looking for him, wouldn't he? He had confidence that Dean was doing better than he was right now. Some twinned sense of Dean being his big brother and Dean having that unstoppable killing-machine deal going on told him that Dean was probably doing better. Also told him that he'd really fucked this up, because now Dean had to be looking for him, doing god knows what - Sammy's in trouble again, must be Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday, going half out of his mind - No, be honest. Half was the starting point. Half was on a 'good day.'

Half-crazy was what they'd been talking around for months (years), trying to preserve a status quo like razor-thin ice: you didn't need to shoot her that much and you didn't need to cut the throats on every last one of them and what the hell is that supposed to mean, you only feel like you when you've killed - who are you the rest of the time, then -
He needed help.

Cas, he thought, and then added another layer of intent behind the name, formed it in prayer. *Castiel. If you don't mind. I'm sorry to do this again. I - we need some help.*

Communicating via prayer came harder than it had in the past. He tried to relate what had happened on this case and got derailed a few times. He hadn't done this in a while, prayer was more Dean's thing these days. Prayer as voicemail, anyway.

The on-your-knees, palm-to-palm kind. Act of faith. Sam hadn't done that either, in a while. He went through these spells of thinking he'd burned that bridge before something in him started it up again. He hadn't done it since the Trials, since that confession, which had been another promise he had afterward failed to make good on.

He felt the van take another sharp turn, heard the wheels crunch over mud and gravel and ice, jolt to a stop. He made himself sit up, too fast. A bizarre show of razor-edged shadow and throbbing red light behind his eyes, then the turmoil in his head subsiding into wooziness.

"You get a shot," he said to Alex. "Run. Don't look back. Don't wait for me."

"Don't flatter yourself." Her voice trembled.

The van's doors were pulled open and he was blinded, industrial flashlight glaring in his eyes, burning and tearing them up, and he tried to get his hands up to defend his eyes at the same time as he was swinging his legs off the bench, climbing to his feet. This took too much of his strength, sapped his reserves. It was just a sedative - correction: a powerful sedative with unknown side effects. He wasn't doing himself any favors by underestimating how fucked he was.

He half shuffled, half got dragged down the van's off-ramp. His vision got itself together enough that he could tell he was right about having traveled on a mountainside switchback, and that some of the glare abrading his sight was refracting off heavy hoarfrost. He raised his eyes to the towering canopy of spruce-firs, branches tipped with blades of snow, needles of sunlight piercing through the trees and pewter clouds. As best as he could gauge the sun's direction it was about midday.

By the sound of things, Alex was putting up more of a fight than he was, cursing and clawing and kicking. He should try for a distraction big enough that she'd have her opening to bolt. Bolt down this mountainside in the fleeting hours until winter's killing night. Right. If she didn't have a chance to run he should at least throw himself in front of her - but just when his knees no longer threatened to buckle from the combined strain of of too-long disuse and the weight of shackles, and he was twisting to look over his shoulder in the direction of her voice, a hood was yanked over his head. Two sets of hands on his arms were again marching him forward. His boots were treading over solidly frozen mud and sharp gravel, at an upward incline, threatening to skid if he tried to plant them and fight. Which he didn't. That calm place, that part of his brain which refused to ever just quit, was accusing him of giving in too easily, of having a death wish or of expecting his brother to swoop in and save him - neither of which was fair. He just couldn't do anything until he knew how it might endanger Alex. The problem with that persistently calm part of him was that it was often unhelpfully critical.

He counted thirteen steps they made him take, which his mind interpreted, possibly just to feel it was keeping busy, as a potentially significant number. Alex had stopped swearing and he could hear her panicked breathing over the labored moan of the mountainside wind.

"Alex," he tried calling out and his voice seemed to float aimlessly around the blackness he was trapped inside. He didn't hear an answer but maybe she just didn't care about reassuring him, maybe
she didn't see what he could do about her situation. Which was fair.

This all felt very staged, he thought. Like an execution, except not, because then why were they not
dead yet and why would they have their faces hooded? You only blindfold your victim when you
can't stand to look them in the eye and register their common humanity, which shouldn't be a
problem here. So perhaps they were being taken someplace they weren't supposed to see, someplace
they weren't supposed to know how to get into (or out of).

That was how far his gathering understanding got before he felt the weight of hands on his
shoulders, forcing him down on his aching knees, and another voice, a new regional accent blown in
from the west coast, maybe SoCal, saying that a Winchester hadn't been included under the terms of
the deal. He groaned internally at hearing there was a deal. A deal meant different factions and it
meant competing interests and it meant plans within plans and it was never good. All the worst
epochs of his life had started with deals.

The retort made to that complaint was in a furious undertone that Sam's pool of reference filled in as
"I am altering the terms of the deal. Pray I do not alter it further."

He heard Alex cry out his name, the syllable whipped through his ears by the wind without his being
able to tell from what distance or direction. He felt the hem of the bag over his head lifted up and his
neck bared, exposing the direct line to his carotid artery, and he was expecting the needle but not the
icy fingers, brushing the side of his neck. Not the familiar power in them he would never not hate his
ability to feel an answering charge to, prickling under his skin.

He wasted the next second dreading the possible faceplant onto frozen mud before he lost
consciousness again.

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White electric light seeped under his eyelids, pried them open to a remote white ceiling. He slid his
eyes an inch to the right and saw an opaque plastic curtain. His body jerked an inch sideways,
instinctively testing for restraints, and bedsprings squeaked in complaint. Bed - he was in a bed
enclosed with plastic curtains; his left arm was free, shifting with his body. He tested his right, found
his wrist cuffed to the bed's rail. The bare skin of his arm brushed over starched cotton sheets. He'd
been stripped down to his t-shirt.

He swallowed, with his left index finger picked at his gummed-up eyes. He was seeing clearer than
the last time he'd woken. Small mercies. He turned his head farther, saw a metal cart supporting a
metal tray and on the tray scalpels and syringes and other medical tools, shining glass and silver,
twisted and sharp. Medical was probably not the correct word for the use these things were intended
for...

"Don't worry, we won't have need to get to them all today." A mellow male voice, Midwestern. Sam
whipped his head back leftward, where the curtains had parted, saw a man in a white lab coat. A
doctor out of fifties type-casting, a sixtyish male with a pristine silver comb-over, a razor-straight little
mustache, an immaculate white coat, only missing the brass stethoscope. "Forgive me, I know how
this must seem." He circled around to the tray, selected an empty syringe with a needle, long and
bright. "But you really don't have anything to fear, at the moment."

Sam now had a use for that calm place, a quick calculation to perform. The man in the white coat
meant to take his blood. His blood was in many ways dangerous. He could resist. On the other hand,
now the only thing holding him down was one pair of handcuffs. He would place better odds on
himself if he wasn't chained to a bed.
He decided: don't fight. Wait him out.

The man tied a strip of terrycloth around Sam's right arm, said, "Make a fist for me, if you please." He traced the prominent veins with an index finger, tapped. Vampires, Alex had called them. Perhaps a connoisseur of unique (or contaminated) blood. Perhaps he wanted to use it for some magical purpose. Vampire-witches - wouldn't Dean love that.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Think of it as a routine physical, assessing your capabilities before they are put to more stringent test. It is only fair." He finished the extraction, taped up the puncture point. "Oh, thank you." He looked hungrily - but perhaps not with gustatory hunger - at the blood in the barrel. "A new frontier. So rare in this business."

The man unscrewed barrel from needle, dropped the contaminated needle on the tray, passed back behind the curtain. The smudge of his silhouette could still be seen a moment, then receded. Sam counted out thirty seconds before sitting up, doubling forward, reaching for the lock pick in his boot. Then he remembered that he had tried this the last time he'd come to, that they'd searched him while he was out. He pushed his hair back out of his eyes, peeled his surroundings: white curtains, white ceiling, white bed sheets and the tray of medical instruments, which were his only bet. The cart was parked a couple feet back from the bedside and he had to lean out a bit to reach the tray with his left hand. He fumbled with the clinking metal and glass instruments before he snagged the syringe's needle, which was what would have to do for a pin. He made satisfyingly short work on the cuff's lock -

Which begged the question: why leave one of his hands free? Might this be all part of the game? Going by his experience, that seemed likely. But it wasn't like he had any other option here.

He got out of the bed, a shock of cold tile under his feet. His hand hovered over the tray a precarious few more seconds before he decided on a bone saw for a weapon. The needle he slipped in his jeans pocket. He swept aside the white curtain, staggered forward a few steps, concentrating on getting his legs past the needling discomfort of normal active blood flow, before he risked a glance about his surroundings.

Operating theater, was his first thought, almost the size of the bunker's war room and with the ceiling of a good-sized chapel, three-hundred-and-sixty degree balcony seating behind glass panes. All white tile and white plaster. Other white plastic curtains draped around what objects he didn't much want to find out. An industrial-size freezer, such as would be found in a meat locker. The room was very cold.

Two doors, on opposite sides of the room. Based on which way he thought the man in the white coat had been going, he made his bet. The door had a simple brass knob, no obvious locking mechanism. His fingers were resting lightly on it when the sound of the opposite door opening carried faintly to him. Don't look back, he thought, and looked back anyway.

The man in the white coat gave him a cross between a salute and a wave. His Cheshire grin could've been lifted straight from the page of those *Alice In Wonderland* comics that had so haunted Sam's dreams as a child.

"Buck up, my dear young man," he said. "There's only two destinations in this place and only one of them is wrong. Here's a hint: choose life."

Sam fled.
The door led directly to an unlit stairwell, descending about twenty feet. Sam reached the bottom of the stairs, where by an old-fashioned brass light-fixture he could see a hallway - no, more like a tunnel - with walls and floors of limestone and cement. This was underground. He could feel it in his bones. Could have been tunneled under the mountain, but then how could that operating theater have been built? Magic?

He walked another twenty or so feet and passed out of range of the lamp; he raised the bone saw and his empty hand into a defensive stance, passing through the dark. He stepped under a new brass light-fixture and the first thing his eye caught on was movement, scurrying in a half shadow-blotted corner. He could take in at a glance that he had nothing to fear from it; the scurrying was happening behind bars, inside a cell that'd been set back in the tunnel wall. He looked to the wall opposite and saw another set of bars, and another set of bars beside that, and beside that - this tunnel was a cell block.

He dropped the bone saw to his side, rushed to the first cell he'd seen. Saw a man with the greasy-white skin and pitted eyes typical of having been underground a long time. But then, even a week without sunlight, even in the comfort of the bunker, could be a long time.

"Hey," Sam said. "I wanna help you, okay?"

The man bared nicotine-brown teeth, snarling a rebuttal that began with a demand to suck his dick and pretty much degenerated from there. So this was not an environment that fostered trust of new people. Okay. That told him something.

"Hiya, big guy." He turned, saw in a cell across from him a young woman doing her best to assume a casual lounge against the bars. Her hair was streaked with platinum highlights, jaggedly cropped at the ears, and since she didn't have the means to maintain a style like that in here he reasoned that she couldn't have been here long.

He crossed to stand before her cell, said, "Hi, I'm Sam, I'm here to help you."

She snorted derisively, clear eyes running a sweep of him, sizing him up, arching an eyebrow at the bone saw he was holding as non-threateningly as possible. He looked her over in turn, checking for signs of physical abuse, saw none. Bicycle boots, ripped jeans, her arms bare, had a spiky tattoo on her shoulder.

"That your best line?" she said. "The boy-scout routine? Everybody's so gallant lately. I shoulda got kidnapped years ago."

"Yeah," he said. "It can really get people's attention. You got a name?"

"July."

"Listen, I'm a cop. Help is coming, July, and we're all gonna get out of here." Overly optimistic, sure, and he was just running standard get-the-witness/victim-to-perk-up-and-cooperate lines, but needs must. "All I need from you is anything you can tell me about the routine around here. Is there a watch? When do they come by? How do they feed you? Which direction do they come from and which way do they go?"

"Hell if I know," she said. "Sometimes, I guess. There's no day and no night and no time in here. Maybe you've noticed that present company doesn't exactly have their shit together. They feed us enough that we don't ever go hungry. Makes it harder to tell time, too, when you can't even feel it pass in your stomach. They don't come from any direction, they just show up. Pop out of the fucking dark. Like magic." Her eyes flickered when she said magic, like she really was thinking it but was
afraid to spell it out. He'd seen that look a lot.

Her accent snagged his attention, distinct from anything he'd heard in Burnside.

"Where're you from?"

"Mississippi."

"That where you were taken from?"

She shrugged in a manner he was pretty sure meant yes but also why the fuck should you care, weirdo.

So the disappearances were happening on a wider scale than he'd researched. He'd badly underestimated the size of the operation. The enemy.

Because he hadn't cared that much about this case. Because he'd only been on it because Dean thought it was important. He'd seen it as a distraction, more than anything. Right.

"When you first got here, did you see a man in a white coat? Did he take a blood sample from you? Or anything else?"

"I woke up strapped to this bed and some motherfucker in a lab coat gave me a physical - not like a "physical" physical, just a physical. He said I was in "good condition" and I thought that meant. You know. He wanted to fucking sell me."

"So what happens to the people down here?"

"The bad guys come and take them and they don't fucking ever come back. What else?"

"Which way do they go when they take them?"

She jerked a thumb to her right, opposite direction from the tunnel leading back to the operating theater.

He examined the lock on her cell, which was ancient and industrial strength and resembled the locking mechanisms on the bunker's dungeon more than anything else he'd seen. He wouldn't make much headway with just a needle.

"You didn't see them bring in a dark-haired girl shortly before I came down?"

"What, she the little girlfriend you came looking for, hero?"

"She's not my - If you do see her can you try and tell her - just, not with anybody else listening in - but tell her - "

"Shut up." Gritted-teeth undertone, whipping her head in the direction he had come from. He had heard nothing but it made sense that her ears would be more cued to this place than his. "It's them"

"Sorry," he said, for the unlikelihood that he would actually be saving her.

He fled onward, was soon swallowed by darkness again. By the next light he saw the tunnel branch in two and he had to make a choice. This choice led him down another cell block, with more caged captives; some rushed to the bars, some shrank back, all of them manic-eyed and gaunt and desperate and really, whatever these people were being used for, it seemed needlessly cruel to make them wait around on their fate. It reminded him almost of looking for Bobby in Hell, until he pushed that
impression, and the chain of associations it brought, away as spectacularly unhelpful. Then the tunnel branched again.

There were no cells lining the next tunnel he chose and more light, additional lamps ensconced in the walls. This tunnel led him to another stairwell, ascending. Forty steps this time. The door was of polished pinewood with a brass knob. On the other side, he could find worse trouble. It was more than likely. There was no good reason to go through the door. But he couldn't go back. There were only two destinations in this place, the man in the white coat had said. Sam got that one of them was death.

He tried the door. It opened easily.
Chapter 14

As he stepped across the threshold Sam asked himself again if he was really making an escape or if he was only playing into some three-ring-circus mind game.

It was a question he had a bit of experience with. Enough to know that even if he could come to the right answer it wouldn't make much difference.

The door had opened to clear, comfortable light and open space and Sam took in a relieved breath, inhaled air that smelled faintly of chemicals, ammonia and bleach, the scent of a floor freshly scoured of blood. Once again he was in a place with similar dimensions to the bunker's war room, but all rugged, knotty pinewood, from floorboards to pillars to rafters to staircase ascending to a balcony-walkway. One of those luxury hunting lodges, Sam thought, complete with another surreal and disgusting display of animal heads and skins.

No, surreal didn't cover it - within five steps he had made out that every taxidermied corpse was a supernatural creature of some kind. The body of a werewolf, somehow preserved in its turned state, stuffed and posed on a dais. The hands of a kitsune with claws extended, nailed to a plaque. The taloned and crow-feathered wings of what he thought might've been a harpy, hanging from the wall like ornamental fans. On a long sideboard a series of glass cases and inside the cases fangs and teeth set like jewels or butterflies on midnight velvet, labelled: vampire, vetala, wendigo, werecat, weredragon, werehare -

He tore his eyes away, resumed scanning his surroundings: also mounted on the walls were black and white photos that he glanced over in favor of examining an array of weapons displayed in glass cases, scimitars and katanas and machetes and long bows and rifles and pistols and a set of hunting knives. All he would have to do was break the glass - he was within three feet of it when a voice that sent fear crawling down the back of his neck like the touch of a scalpel, said -

"You really must work on your tunnel vision, my boy." Was it his own caution or the power of the voice that made Sam halt his foot in midair and glance down to see the runes finely etched into the wood grain in a half-moon perimeter?

Sam turned. The Alpha Vampire had been lurking in an alcove at the far side of the room. He was lounged deep into a velvet sofa, the color of the fabric a dead ringer for blood. The decor was shameless: crimson taffeta drapery, oriental carpet underneath, all red and rust, monochrome ornate pattern. There were a couple metal candelabras balancing long red tapers, lit, on a mahogany side table and on a mahogany desk, behind which was a chair carved with pretensions to a throne. Backdrop to that, floor to ceiling windows and impenetrable black night.

"And step on your big entrance?" Sam said. It rang shabby, of course. Sam could adopt many guises with deadly accuracy but he could never quite match Dean's bravado.

"As if you could," the Alpha said. His tone was gently ribbing, voice urbane and polished, ages-old brute force tightly leashed behind that polish. It was that silk glove over iron fist that touched the most fearful places inside Sam, reminding him of Lucifer.

"This is disgusting," Sam said, pointing to the mounted corpse of the werewolf with his left hand. The bone saw still dangled from his right. "Even for what I've seen your kind capable of, this is just -"

"Ah, yes," the Alpha said. "I was hoping you would remark on that. You see, this house was built
by your kind, not mine. It was your people that established this charming gallery. Congratulations, son, on uncovering your true legacy."

He paused, a let-that-sink-in pause, and Sam tried not to give him the reaction he wanted, tried not to let it show on his face.

"You're saying this was a Men of Letters installation?"

"You look, but you don't see. Try again." His eyes fixed on a spot over Sam's right shoulder and he nodded.

Sam couldn't resist obeying him, taking a half-turn on his heel and a second look at the photos on the walls. He saw men dressed like dawn of the twentieth-century colonial adventurers, complete with droopy mustaches and sun helmets, armed with long bows and blow-dart guns and machetes or katanas. Once he started looking he couldn't stop even at the cost of that instinct screaming at him not to comply and not to put his back to the enemy. He wandered down the room, scrutinizing more photos, and soon he was seeing the subjects posing with their kills, wolf grins on the faces of men dragging werecat corpses. Skinning black dogs. Chopping off kitsune hands. Stringing fangs on fishing lines. Taking trophies.

"Does it turn that sensitive stomach of yours now?"

"What the hell is this?"

"One of the few advances of the Men of Letters to impress even me. A research installation. A safe house. A little shop of horrors. Take your pick. Tell me honestly, son: does it impress you, intrigue you, or disgust you more?"

He paused. Sam had turned back to him. Saw him rise, the still line of him blurring into the night out the windows. His head tilted and his eyes glittered, sharp as icicles.

"You shouldn't be disturbed. Pride in your lineage and all their works is only natural. I wouldn't hold it against you."

"You still haven't shown me exactly where we are," His tone matched the Alpha's for level and reasonable and it sounded to his stunned mind like it was coming from somebody else. "How am I supposed to react when I don't know the whole story?"

Sliver of a smile as the Alpha strolled toward him. "Yes, that is what I appreciate about you. That cool analytic mind. Pity it's been so handicapped, compared to the well-oiled machine you were when we first met - but no matter. Come."

He walked past Sam and down the room until he came to a large mahogany-carved table. Sam followed and saw that it was a map table, another thing to compare to the bunker's war room. He walked around to the side opposite the Alpha, looked down. Took in at a glance that it wasn't a world map or a map of the United States or a county in the Appalachians. There was nothing to it but mountains and rivers and craters or canyons of measurements that didn't match any densely wooded region in the USA he'd memorized. The features of this terrain were labelled with names such as Edward T. Robinson and Elijah Hyde and Alexander J. Crichton in burnished gold. In black ink there was a different set of labels, latinate names such as sanguisuga (the general category of bloodsuckers) and versipellis (the general category of shapeshifters) and monstra aqua (aquatic monsters) with their territory marked out in dashed or dotted lines.

"Shit," Sam said, then bit his tongue. So many questions battering at the hatch of his jaw and he
feared losing perspective and control to his own curiosity. He met the Alpha's eyes and they seemed
to be prompting him and he couldn't help but respond. "This is Purgatory. The Men of Letters sent
an expedition into Purgatory."

"Oh, more than an expedition. They settled territory, they colonized, they made some small corner of
this brave old world their own. Or so, of course - " Sam saw the wide wedge of his teeth, a genuine
grin - "they thought. Most of the menagerie of death you see around you is their work, their last
testament, but not all. I can lay ownership to a few new additions. Such as this one - you might
recognize it." He spread both his arms with a theatrical flourish that made his presence seem to
enlarge and he rounded on his heel to indicate another corpse mounted on a dais.

It was a phoenix, a true avian phoenix whose substance was the gaseous fires of stars only half-
translated into life-renewing rays, in all the uncanny splendor usually found only in storybooks, and
so Sam thought first of Harry Potter and only after a few moments did he think of the person his
brother had killed so his ashes could be used as a weapon to kill the mother of the being beside him.

"You hunted him down, you killed him again, and you desecrated his corpse because he was used in
something he didn't even know about?"

"All symbolism, of course. A tribute of mourning. Who else was around to take the blame for her
most untimely death?"

The question sounded klaxon alarms in Sam's head. The Alpha seemed to read his reaction and
spoke before Sam could.

"Oh, really, my dear boy, if this were only about revenge it would've been over many seasons ago.
No. This is about the long war. Or hadn't you noticed? It's a matter of survival for all our kind."

Our kind, Sam thought, then pushed it away. "You want to use me to get to my brother."

"Elementary, my boy. I mean to use you to get to him and I mean to use you for so many other
exciting things. Do you ever intend to use that sharp object in your hand? If not yet, then come, like a
good intrepid detective: get the enemy to spill as many secrets in your hearing as you can before you
try to make your escape. Come with me" - pitch dropping, for the first time, to that well of brute
menace - "I will not ask again."

The Alpha returned to the alcove where he had been seated, went to a door curtained in shadow.
Sam followed. If he was honest with himself, he followed as much out of curiosity as to avoid a
battle he would surely lose.

The door opened to a hallway also paneled with pine and lit by brass light-fixtures. More
impenetrable deep night flashing past through the windows to the left, Sam having to walk very
quickly to keep up with the Alpha's stride. A few doors to his right and these had locking
mechanisms, keyholes, Sam took note. The door at the end of the hallway had no lock but it did have
a brass plaque with lettering that had flaked off. Sam followed the Alpha through it.

He found himself on the glass-fronted balcony which ran around the room that he had thought of as
the operating theater. The ground floor was about twenty feet below them. There was an upholstered
bench and the Alpha took a seat upon it. Sam remained standing.

The theater was in use. The man in the white coat now had a companion, a woman with black hair
sleekly coiled on top of her head, fixed by long ivory pins. They stood within a metal frame from
which the plastic curtains had been drawn back. There was a stainless steel table, an autopsy table,
and on the table was a man, unconscious and stripped to the waist. He had taken some damage, most
of it half-healed scrapes, but then there was deep purple bruising on his right-hand ribcage, blood blossoming from so deep, suggesting a cracked rib might have torn the aorta. He was hooked to a monitor displaying his vital signs but it was turned at an angle where Sam couldn't read them. Next to the table was a rack suspending four blood bags with attached intravenous lines.

Sam's stomach lurched when he saw the blood. He slammed his hand against the glass. Felt how thick it was, reinforced, bullet proof. Monster proof.

"Don't trouble yourself on that one's account," the Alpha said. "Like all our subjects, he practically volunteered."

"Practically."

"The subjects are chosen because they had become alienated, lost, they could not be part of the society they were born into. Practically begging for a second life, a way to shed their skins - "So death doth touch the resurrection"."

He said this as the man in the white coat inserted a canula into the man's vein, in the crook of his elbow, then another into his forearm, then into the forearm on the opposite side, then another into his neck.

Sam tightened his fist around the bone saw, swung it at the glass with as much force as he could pull out of the pivot of his body. The glass was barely scratched by the blade's teeth. The Alpha was undisturbed. Sam slammed both hands against the glass, yelled.

The woman, meanwhile. She had been drawing on their victim's hands and forehead with a quill, dipped in a dark substance, ink or blood, writing indecipherable letters or runes. She had her own tray of instruments. A smoking censer. A boline knife. A pendulum. Witchcraft. His vampire-witches supposition hadn't been that far off.

"What is she doing?"

"A stabilizing spell. Ensuring that the subject's system doesn't go into shock."

Stable throughout the infusion of presumably multiple foreign blood types. That would be a handy spell to learn, Sam had to admit.

Most turnings involved the human ingesting some part of the monster's body but Sam knew of nothing like this procedure. He thought of Doc Benton and of Frankenstein's monster and of some necromancers with a taste for blood. His mind finally tripped backwards to the last time he'd encountered monsters engineered outside the 'natural' process, when they'd been hunting Eve and she had turned a town into monster-hybrids that Dean had designated Jefferson Starships because they were horrible and hard to kill. (It was a little bit funny until it wasn't).

A family business.

Hands still pressed against the glass, he looked over his shoulder at the Alpha, spat, "So this is it? This is the big plan, you trying to finish what Eve started? Because your kind has proved too weak to survive on their own?"

The Alpha smiled at him, smug, indulgent, as you smile at a dog that's learned to beg on its hind legs.

"I don't have Mother's natural gift for generating new life, I admit, so I had to turn to your kind's science and magics. I think you'll find that we have done very well here."
"How about the bodies you dump?"

"Ah, them. I'm afraid they couldn't adapt here, either. Still, they serve a purpose: winnowing the field for the worthy subjects, and their corpses act like chum in the water, drawing in hunters. You might find this difficult to believe but I do like hunters. They are uniquely suited to my purpose here, and then they provide me with such sweet irony when I turn them."

"That sounds a lot like base revenge to me."

"Whatever would I need revenge for?"

Sam let his hands drop to his sides, that numbness like cold, cold water filling him up again. "Well, for starters, we nearly wiped out your entire race."

"Hardly. It's true that in certain regions our populations have waned, for a time, but an epoch is an eye blink, to me. What I see is a world atlas to your county road map. Now, that doesn't mean I haven't been a little impressed by the scale of your predation. Your bloodline's, in particular. That is why you are here, after all."

"To take part in your cobbled-together master race?"

"Perhaps. Your destiny hasn't been decided yet."

"So this is a test?"

The Alpha didn't answer.

"Is this the part where you tell me your endgame or not?"

"That - " the Alpha looked reprovingly at him "- would be cheating."

The man and woman in white drew the plastic curtains and exited, wheeling away their trays of instruments. The Alpha rose.

"Come. I would like you to watch the rising but I'm afraid we would be waiting on it for hours and I appreciate how short the human mind is on patience."

The Alpha led him back through the door, back down the hall and back into the gallery. Sam's mind was racing now, calculating possibilities with a comprehensive clarity he had not found for a while, trying to empty his thoughts of everything but tactical considerations.

The end result: he paced about the room, trying to project as much agitation and anxiety as he could, trying to make the pattern of his steps appear erratic, up to the point when he was between the Alpha and one of those display cases with long blades inside it.

Then the calculated risk: he stepped over the perimeter of rune-wards, placing his bets that the Men of Letters had been the ones to draw them and wouldn't have done so to keep other humans out. He smashed his elbow - bare, he was only wearing a t-shirt - into the glass. Shards sliced his arm in several places while he reached for the hilt of a long machete. He dropped the bone saw so as to take the machete in both hands, its hilt being on the long side.

"This is what I meant," the Alpha said, sighing a very human-like sigh, disappointed and resigned, standing again a still line by the windows, "when I said that that analytic intellect of yours was handicapped - you let your outrage and fear drive you to this - impulsive stupidity."
Sam remained standing within the runes, thinking: if he kills me now he can't use me for anything. He couldn't have said for sure if he was thinking about that in the light of a best-case scenario or not.

"Smart enough to see the consequences coming and yet still you disregard them." He was close again, he was right beside the runes and how he had got there was not quite discernible to the naked human eye. He raised a hand, palm down, and his features became utterly rigid, a stone mask, a hollowness in his eyes that ran unfathomably far back, like tunnels. He said something very quietly. Sam recognized it as an incantation and was not surprised when the runes at his feet lit up, flickered like embers, then vanished in a whiff of smoke. He filed that away as going a ways towards explaining how the Men of Letters had lost this place even as he swung the machete in a tight arc aiming for the Alpha's outstretched arm.

That arm twisted backward and the hand grabbed the machete, long, taloned fingers wrapping around the broad blade. Loose enough that Sam could draw the machete back and swing again, this time a strike aiming for his neck, which he simply ducked. Then he had slipped under the range of the blade and of Sam's arms and he was at Sam's back, he was holding Sam tight against him, in one of those cliche vampiric poses on the cover of a thousand books.

Sam had a moment of pure blind panic in which he could hear his own heart hammering like a pile driver and he remembered what it was like for that sound to set off an avalanche of insatiable hunger inside you. Then the Alpha threw him bodily forward so fast that he crashed to the ground, first slamming on his knees with an agonizing crack of bone, then slumping forward, fumbling with the machete's hilt as he tried to shift the blade into a safe position should he fall, trying to get himself back up on his screaming knees and flopping onto his hip and elbow instead.

The Alpha towered over him, shaking his head. The Alpha had his long nails, the color of moldering bones, fully extended and they were dripping blood which Sam for a second thought meant he'd been clawed without feeling it. Then he saw that the palm of the Alpha's other hand had a gash across it and he was using that blood to draw a sigil on one of the portraits hanging on the wall.

"I really did hope we'd have a bit more time together," the Alpha said. Another put-upon sigh, then, "As the rules of fair play are still extant, despite your foolishness, you may have this." In what Sam could only liken to a magician's trick (and their was a childhood corner of his mind that still liked stage magic enough to resent the comparison), he drew Sam's jacket from thin air and dropped it at Sam's feet. Sam had a bad feeling about that.

Sam had scrambled up on his elbows, had only got one of his knees under him, had flung his hand out and got a handful of the jacket by the time the Alpha pressed his bleeding palm to the sigil. Sam felt his very being compress even as the fabric of everything around him, from oxygen to floorboards to gravity, ripped open, disintegrated.

He landed on both knees, machete's hilt still grasped by his right hand and his left having snagged his jacket, so much for the good news. He tipped his head back, staring up at branches that were bare and skeletal and limned by a mist the color of cigarette smoke under the canopy of black night.

He climbed to his feet. There was a moment of oppressive, ominous silence broken by the crackle and snap of feet over the forest floor, only slightly louder than the pounding of his heart, his harshly drawn breaths. Figures in motion broke up the dark, flitted between the trees, faster than human, faster than his eyes could track and pin down. His level of panic was no longer stable, no longer permitted a totally clear head. And still there was a part of him that felt outside of all this, observing this mess he'd gotten himself into with a cool, critical eye. The Alpha had stranded him in Purgatory. Served him right.
He pulled the jacket on, swung the machete into a safer hold under his arm, and set off running.

He was running blind, adrenaline surging through him, twitchy and frantic, so it was only a matter of time before his head snapped around at a rustle beside him, and he clipped his shoulder against a low branch. At the speed he'd been going, the collision spun him off balance and he crashed onto his back, feeling a wrenching pain in his shoulder, a sharp muscle stitch under his ribs.

Then he saw the dragon. He didn't recognize it right away, only that the night had gotten blacker by the black shadow of its wings, blotting out the spectral shine of the mist. Then the crackle of branches snapping off the tree tops, and he looked up and up; it was like he as staring up from the bottom of a terrifyingly deep well, and then he saw its eyes. They weren't anything like what he remembered from his one previous encounter with a dragon, but he recognized it all the same. Like the phoenix, it had all the uncanny, imponderable power of a storybook, of myth. Eyes like fire would be an understatement, eyes like a storm on Jupiter might be better. The most important point, however, was that they were red-hot hungry and looking right at him, where he lay prone on his back, gawking like an idiot.

He rolled fast to one side, under the rotten-hollow remains of a fallen log. Oh, very clever, he thought to himself, no way it finds you under this crumbling shell of wood. He lay like that for a couple minutes wondering why he wasn't dead yet.

The thump on top of the log above him brought his concentration back to a fine-point focus. Couldn't be the dragon, he would've heard it crash down through the trees.

The head that swung over the edge of the log was only visible by a sheen of amphibious green skin but the eyes were yellow headlamps glowing in deep-set sockets, snake-slit pupils dilating into diamonds. Sam swung the machete over his head without a clear sight-line to track what he was doing, but he could feel the machete chip the bone socket and slide into the eye, slicing through jelly tissue and into the brain behind it. Sam rolled out from under the log, adrenaline surge drowning out the kink in his shoulder, the stitch in his side. He climbed to his feet, caught the thing by the - antennae? - and yanked the head back, pulled the machete's blade from the skull. Then he hacked through the neck and threw the head into the trees. Blood the consistency and temperature of freezing mud sprayed from the severed neck, splattered his skin, and he turned his head, squeezed eyes and mouth shut, and tossed the head away from him. Snapped his eyes open a second later, looking up and up but he didn't see the dragon's eyes anymore. The night had paled, no more shadow from its wings. He listened to more crackling, snapping branches and the sound gave him his first tactical idea. Remembering asking Dean, once, on one of their longest nights of mutual insomnia how he'd ever slept in Purgatory. The only thing Dean had told him was that most monster souls were afraid of fire.

Yes, he understood that that likely did not apply to a dragon. But if the dragon had really wanted him at least parts of him would be being digested right now.

He fumbled in his jacket's pockets for the Zippo, found it, along with most of the weapons he'd been packing when he'd been taken. He pulled it out, held down the ignition and was comforted by the sound of the strike against the sparkwheel, a sound that said: you made something effective happen. Then he ran the flame over the dry undergrowth beside the log: twigs and bark caught first, smoke and heat curling into the air, sparks soon shooting out. Growing flames painted the saplings and bushes pale orange-gold. The crackling and rustling around him increased as the lurking souls drew back from the spreading fire.

He reached forward, ignored the blistering heat to thrust his hand into the fire, and pulled out a long burning branch. He tossed it behind him, a glance over his shoulder to check that it caught dry
branch and brush. Then he checked overhead and again did not see the dragon.

The fire fed upon the dry woodland brush, starting to blacken the bark of a sapling, but there was too thick a carpet of damp leaf litter and moss and mud for it to race out of control. Enough smoke though to soon have him coughing, his eyes watering. He backed up against a tree trunk with the width of a Douglas-fir, watching the darkness at the limits of the firelight, every sense stretched taut to give him warning if he'd have to use the machete again, or for if the fire would close in on his tree.

He still had his back to the tree when he noticed that it was getting lighter, or more precisely, paler and greyer. The fires burned tepidly, charring the green wood more than consuming it, the dry branches almost gone, the forest floor's stretches of bare mud and rock quenching even the glowing embers before they could make it to the major trees, the kind that would take the whole forest down with them.

The light had paled to the point where Sam could see a little ways through the trees now. It would be mistake to think that because the darkness had passed he was in any less danger, he reminded himself, feeling exhaustion and the heavy hangover of the adrenaline pressing at his skull as if it meant to shatter bone. He needed to get moving, needed to find someplace that was protected enough to let him sleep, if only for a few hours. With eyes and ears he scanned the forest again. He couldn't see any sign of movement, couldn't hear any other noise in the woods other than the slowing pop and hiss and crackle of the fire. He paid a moment of attention to his bodily needs and found that he was thirsty. His throat clicked when he swallowed, painfully dry. If he was dehydrated water would clear the wooziness from his head. He rubbed his hand over his face, his palm coming away darkened by grime and blood.

Downhill, he thought, water still has to obey the laws of gravity. Setting off, he walked downwards along a narrow path between the remains of the smoldering fire and a row of towering trees.

He did not have very far to go and nothing waylaid him. The bright movement of a tiny creek caught his eye as it wound through the undergrowth and he hurried toward it, hearing the faint sighs and chuckles and splashes as he got close. He crouched by the edge, watching the water as it fell over the bare tree roots, over the rocks, widening here and there into pools dark with decomposing forest detritus. Where it raced over rock, he cupped his hand beneath the flow and lifted it to his face, sniffed warily, then dipped his tongue into it. Clean water. Ground water, maybe. He put both hands under the little waterfall and filled them, drinking, then splashing the water over his face, scrubbing at the dried blood and sweat that coated it, running wet fingers through his hair, tucking it behind his ears.

The forest was silent. He got up and looked downstream, seeing the ground drop away only a few dozen yards farther on. Here, near the life-giving water, the trees all resembled the firs of the Cascades. Perhaps they were the same species or at least genus, evolving simultaneously on separate worlds. He looked up into the canopy. If he could get up there, he might be hidden. If not, at least he couldn't be taken by surprise. By the time he focused enough to push himself onto his knees he could hear something moving toward him, scratching through the undergrowth. Ahead and to his left the bushes parted and a black leopard werecat slunk out, eyes flashing silver in the moonlight. Sam consulted the bestiary that took prominent place in his head and found nothing specific on how to kill the African werecat but it was a were and that generally meant silver. He had a silver knife, in a pocket in his jacket's inner lining: could he possibly draw out the knife and sink it into the werecat's heart before it sunk its teeth into his throat?

Instead he raised the machete, two-hand grip, level with its chest. When it pounced he swung the machete to meet where he expected its neck to be.
He missed. So did the werecat, in dodging his blade. Claws that had been extended towards his head
hooked through his right bicep, yanking his jacket down off his shoulder, which did make reaching
for the silver knife in his inside pocket a little easier. Its jaws were snapping at his face at the same
time that he was stabbing between its ribs and it was a matter of chance which of them struck the
proverbial gold first. He only knew he had succeeded when he heard an anguished cat's cry, an
unnerving yowl that had him tempted to drop machete and knife so he could cover his ears.
The werecat dropped like a stone, with its claws still sunk in his tightly contracted muscle. He
couldn't bite back his own howl of pain as deeper wounds were scored in his arm before he tore it
free.
He stood stunned, looking down at the werecat's corpse, those pictures of Men of Letters with their
trophies flashing before his inner eye. It took a moment before he could make himself look clearly at
his injured arm. Three puncture wounds. His jacket sleeve was fast drenched in blood. His legs were
a little shaky. Easier prey.
He walked down in the direction of where the ground dropped away, picking his way slowly
through the mess of fallen timber and thorny underbrush. Sprain his ankle and it was all over. He had
pulled his jacket off his left side and wrapped it around his injured arm so at least he wasn't leaving a
trail of blood spatter.
He got to the drop off and found he was at a two-hundred-foot elevation, could now survey the
forest for miles. The sky was the color of dampened newspaper, a diffused light bleeding the color
from everything. There was a ribbon of silver mist snaking around the hillside below him, and
beyond that the trees were largely formless dark masses, great blocks of shadow blurring their peaks
into their valleys. Made it all the more striking what he saw bisecting them, a line running through
the forest as far as his eyes could track of something that glinted sharply, glassy or metallic, perhaps a
dozen miles out from where he was.
It was a wall or a fence with either curls of barbed wire or glass shards at the top. He thought of the
map and he thought of those dotted lines and of territory marked sanguisuga. Of course. He hadn't
just been thrown out into the wilderness. This was a test, this was a controlled environment. This was
an arena.
What could he do with that knowledge? He shook himself down for an answer and it only made him
more exhausted. He couldn't think about climbing a tree right now, not while carrying a machete, not
with his right arm bleeding out. He had to do something about that first. He had to do something.
What could he do that wouldn't be playing into the Alpha's game?
He was so damn tired of having to ask questions like that.
He leaned back against another broad tree, the ache in his shoulder and the stitch in his side making
themselves known again. He shifted against the trunk, easing the sore muscle under his shoulder off
the abrasive, knobbly bark.
He felt his eyelids drop and let them stay closed.
Chapter 15

He scraped his eyes open, which took more effort than it should, and the world was a wash of pre-dawn grey, cut only by inky shadow and the muted brown of old stones and husky moss.

He didn't know where he was, only knew that he ached dully all over and that sharper pain was needling up his neck from his shoulders and right arm, right into his frontal lobe. He raised his eyes and saw a dense canopy of fir branches; he groaned, pushed himself up on his knees, felt his stomach frantically trying to flip like a fish in an eagle's talons. He winced, reached his left hand across to rub at his deltoid because his right shoulder felt seized-up and heavy, like something was dragging on it. Chains? No - the details came slithering back into his conscious mind. It was his arm that was dragging, again, having lost blood and mobility and feeling since he hadn't patched it up after the werecat hooked claws into his bicep. He'd made a clumsy attempt to bind the wound with his jacket but then sometime while sleeping he must've pulled the jacket around to cover his torso instead.

He remembered the night before had been black, but red in tooth and claw and licking flames, and then there'd come a watery grey dawn and the light hadn't changed since and he didn't know how much time might've passed.

He saw black dirt beneath his fingernails, dirt and probably blood, black half-moons. For a few seconds the only thing he wanted was to get back to the stream so he could wash off the grime again.

He tore a strip out of his jacket's lining using the machete propped between his knees and one hand; with that hand and his teeth he bound the strip around the punctures in his upper arm from which blood was now only sluggishly seeping. Could be worse. The state he'd passed out in, he would've made the easiest of pickings. He could've woken up dead. Would he then have gotten stuck in the Veil between realms? Could he be a ghost in Purgatory?

His body was stiff, his stomach hollow and aching. His mouth was dry again. He groaned as he climbed to his feet, legs wobbly as he walked again to the edge of the drop off - not quite a sheer cliff but until his arm healed he wouldn't have a hope of climbing down, if he wanted to.

Where was he to go? Rolling hills covered in forest all around, rich, dense undulations of mossy brown and dark green, fading out to grey and melting into the grey horizon. The jagged-edged wall, glinting sharp even through the smoky haze and half-light, cutting through it, stretching as far as his eye could track, reminding him that this wasn't random, he was here for a purpose. Somebody else's purpose that he would have to subvert, somehow.

_The river ends at the source_, he thought, and was irritated that that voice had popped into his head, of all the voices. But there was something there, lurking behind the echo, and he had to entertain it. He had to get out of here. He had come in via rogue-reaper-for-hire, he was pretty sure, and short of testing his what-happens-to-a-human-that-dies-in-Purgatory question he didn't have means to get in touch with a reaper. Not with his present materials, anyway. But the source, the place he'd come in, the Men of Letters compound - the Men of Letters would've had to have had means of getting in and out, wouldn't they? They had magic. They might have controlled access to a portal, another one that only humans could pass through. They would have a library with maps and journaled histories and grimoires; the Alpha had taken an interest in magic, in innovation, he wouldn't have destroyed all that knowledge.

So all he would have to do was simply stroll back into Mordor, raid its archives, and sidle out the back door. While he was setting unrealistic goals, why not make a mental note to rescue all the people in those tunnels which, please god, would include Alex. Or he could die trying and take
himself off the gameboard that way. The one thing he must not do was end up on the table back in that operating theater with something else's blood being pumped inside him. Or be used as bait to lure Dean here because Dean did not need to be back in this place, in the clutches of another megalomaniac monster who wanted to use him as a warhead. After what it had done to him the last time -

Best not think about Dean right now, he told himself.

Yeah, he had great luck with that.

Sam took a deep breath, cold muddy air filling his lungs. Then he began to walk, three feet back from the edge, skirting along the drop off so he'd be going in some particular direction and because he was hoping that he'd look out across the valley and there the roof of the compound would be. His boots squelched on mud and moss in a steady rhythm, his legs not as shaky as they'd felt when he'd first stood up. There was something howling like a lonely, dying thing in the distance.

He swallowed against the aching thirst winding through his body, clawing at the back of his throat. Hard hungry ache in his stomach. He still needed food, was forced to consider what he might have to resort to to get it. He wandered into the woods a few yards and again found a ground-water stream which he staked out for what felt like roughly an hour. It was of all things a relief to see a rodent the size of a rat terrier, hairless and ghostly pale and not quite as fearsome as the one Wesley and Buttercup had had to fight, come to drink. Sam briefly fantasized about making a bow and arrows but he didn't have the dexterity in his injured state. Catching the rat meant sneaking up, leaping and landing almost crouched on top of it, and hacking it nearly in half with his machete. His jeans got splattered with cold blood to the knee, but it provided him with a couple of days' worth of meat. He made his jacket into a sling for carrying the carcass on his back.

Sam walked and walked and walked and walked. His feet started to feel raw, chafing inside his damp boots and socks. It was cold but after a few hours the exertion from shouldering the rodent carcass and the blood loss made his t-shirt and jeans stick to his body. Sweat clung under his arms, slid down the vee between his shoulder blades.

He came to a place where the trees thinned out and boulders took their place, the landscape became barren, a rocky hillside dotted with dry, brittle bushes. A gradual slope that offered a manageable descent to the valley below on one side, or a steeper climb on the other. He looked up, eyed the grey sky barely distinguishable from the slanting shelves of grey rock, then down at the wide path of rough brown and black dirt and pebbles, broken up by large craggy outcroppings, nine-foot standing stones. He listened: there was only the sound of the wind, whistling between stones. He found a place to camp, between two standing stones with an overhang. He stripped one of those dry little bushes, started a small fire, then skinned, gutted, sliced into strips, skewered and started cooking the rodent meat. He hoped the fire would keep away whatever might be living among the rocks. He hadn't seen any large caves, at least. He hadn't seen anything. He had gone a day in Purgatory walking wounded and exposed without anything trying to kill him. So now part of him was worrying about having gone so long without a brush against death. Great.

Evening came slowly, which was to say the grey bled down a few shades. The shadows stretched and mutated and it was easy to mentally turn rocks into monsters, gap-toothed mouths. That wasn't what made it hard to sleep. What made it hard was when he curled up on himself and tried not to think of the last time he felt this alone, so cut off from everything and everyone he knew and loved –

When Dean had vanished. Which time? Well, of course, every time. When Dean had been in Purgatory and Sam hadn't looked for him came back with particular intensity, for obvious reasons. The possible rationalizations - *I didn't know what had happened/I should've known because I*
shouldn't have rested until we were together again - that had been warring in his conscience ever since. Would Dean look for him now? Of course he would. Dean was true and loyal and good and would never let him go.

The next day, he decided to descend. The path would only be getting steeper, the tall rocks crowding closer around him, their peaks carving further into the grey sky, deeper caverns between them. He figured this was about as gradual as the slope was going to get. By what he gauged to be midday by how worn-out he was, he'd made his way halfway to the valley and he had a glimpse of what might be a rocky road miles down below, snaking surreptitiously though the forest. He was pinning his nebulous hopes on that road.

Sam stumbled frequently, tired and thirsty and sore. His boots caught in the cracks between chunks of gravel and dry, chalky dirt. He avoided the steepest, most jagged crags but still he tripped time and time again. His body wanted to give out, to stay down with each stumble.

Once he saw a dragon fly by several miles out, wings black as the vacuum of space against the smoky grey atmosphere, and he watched it circle a couple times before swooping under cover of the woods, and even miles out he could see rings of trees swaying outward from the impact.

By dark he still wasn't down in the valley and he had to stop to rest, hunkering down on a patch of barren dirt between another two stones in preparation for another long night. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. His throat was swelling with the need for water.

There was still nothing out here as far as he could see, just the whistling wind. He hadn't seen enough brush to start a fire, hoped the figure he cut would be indistinguishable from the stones. He curled his body as tight as he could while still gripping the machete and tried to sleep, but all the while he was acutely feeling the absence of Dean snoring in the bed at his side. He had passed plenty of nights in the bunker without him but this was not the bunker. The fear of failing Dean again raced through his mind, leaving him cold and restless, bone-tired and soul-weary.

Sam was awakened in the paling hours by a howl that he did not for one second confuse with the wind. Fear rose like bile in his throat, and he shivered, climbing to his feet and leveling the machete in a defensive stance.

The world was still half-shadow, shifting rapidly with the changing light. Somewhere close by, another howl shuddered through the stillness and sent Sam whirling around, swinging the machete.

Breathing hard, he scaled farther down the rocky slope before pressing himself up along the side of a hollow grooved deep into a five-feet-wide and twice-as-tall standing stone. He felt too exposed, the dawn bleaching out everything grey so he and his bloodstains would stand in stark contrast, his back against a wall, but there was no better place for him to duck behind, to take cover.

Sam froze, catching a movement to his right, a spiky shadow shifting faster than the ones changing with the dawn.

Then the sound of scraping, nails on rock, came from above him. He sucked in a deep breath and whipped around, backed away from the stone. There was another movement down the slope a ways, a set of shadows dancing in the night. He cautiously skirted away from the stone, boots crunching, crunching.

A long shadow slid over him and Sam twisted his body around in time to see burning, bloody eyes and wide jaws snapping in front of his face. He swung his machete but met no resistance, missing the
thing as it pulled away, leaping back into the shadows.

Shit, shit, shit, whatever this thing was, it was fast and it was big—

—and it was right behind him. Sam spun around, his machete coming up to glance off something meaty and massive enough to make the machete feel like a pocket knife, grazing a scaly armored shoulder. The thing surged full-bodily forward and Sam found himself crumpling under the immense weight of hard flesh, his own body crushed between this beast and the stone. Sam kept hold of the machete, managed to turn it one handed and slash again between the beast's ribs, this time the blade biting into flesh but catching on something, not going deep enough.

It howled, wrenching its body back but not before pushing out with its arms so that Sam was thrown to the ground, rocks cutting into his back with the hard impact. The pain immobilized him for a moment, knocked the breath out of his lungs, and he tasted blood in his mouth from where he bit down on his tongue.

Sam shuddered, aches marching up his spine as he moved his head slowly, trying to locate the beast in the shadows around him. He reached out with his hand and his fingers closed around nothing but dirt and rocks. He fanned his arms out farther, needing to figure out where his machete fell. He located it just as he saw the beast slinking out from behind another standing stone that should've been too narrow to conceal it. Sam threw himself upright, boots hitting the ground as he crouched for the fight.

The thing shifting closer, Sam could make out more identifying markers now. It stood on its hind legs, almost man-shaped. Its body was covered in patches of black fur and blackish-green scales, except for a ridge of bony quills running down its back. This feature was what marked it down as a chupacabra, a species with several variants: grunches, peuchin, sigbin. At least this one didn't have wings, just the ability to leap like a kangaroo. Its mouth was a canine's, with a wide curving jaw, almost a grin, baring yellow wolfish teeth. When it growled, it dripped saliva and what looked like tobacco juice but was probably a backwash of blood onto its already blood-matted ruff. Its eyes were red, traffic-stop lights. It smelled of death, old blood and decayed flesh, so pungently that it nearly triggered even his jaded gag reflex.

Sam shifted to the side as the chupacabra made its move. He flashed the machete again and again, swinging in wide arcs, both hands on the hilt. The thing didn't back down: it ran right into the blade and reared up at the last minute so the blade glanced off a breastplate of scales on its chest, then crashed down on him in an offensive tackle that sent him falling backwards again, his arms taking the impact and snapping aside, the machete clattering to the ground. Sam kicked out, bucking hard against the full bulk of the beast's body, pushing out with arms and legs to throw it off.

When the chupacabra was finished crushing Sam with its weight alone, the blows came, jabbing against Sam's shoulders and chest, trying to stifle Sam's scrambling for another weapon. Pain ricocheted throughout Sam's body, but it was not until the beast opened its jaw that flight-instinct took over and he slipped out from under its hold, which had recoiled as it prepared to pounce anew, like a cat toying with prey. Then Sam drew his knife and leaped forward, wrapping one arm and both legs around the beast's scaly middle and gouging at its scales with his knife, trying to find a fleshy place that would also afford access to something vital.

He was clinging as hard as he could, expecting it to buck and shake, but instead it spun and slammed its massive body against the standing stone. Sam felt the blow in every single part of his own body, his head bouncing so hard against the rock that he saw an explosion of white. He fell from the beast with a wet gasp, blood spilling from his mouth as he sank to the ground.

Sam's breath was gone from his lungs. His brain was shocked into momentary blankness, the pain
skewering his back, his chest, and his legs. Sam tried to inhale but his lungs couldn't hack it, he might as well have tried to breathe dirt. Closing his eyes, he thought - get up, get up, get up. Just as he made to sit up, he slid his hand across the ground and felt the slick edge of a blade under his fingers. His knife.

Sam fumbled the hilt into his palm and started to get up just as the beast pounced again, pinning his body. Sam gasped, fighting with what strength he had left to heave his body upward, trying to buck the beast off-kilter. Its meaty hands circled Sam's head, and it growled in Sam's face, its breath smelling of fresh dead things.

Sam's fingers clenched on the knife's hilt. He twisted his arm the best he could in the slim space between their bodies. Just as the beast's jaws were coming for his throat, Sam thrust as low as he could, where he remembered seeing a dense patch of fur, feeling the full length of the knife sink into the beast's belly. The chupacabra jerked back, snarling as it forced itself to its feet. Sam scrambled to his own feet and thrust up with the knife again, this time hitting the chupacabra just under its lowest rib, in a gap between rows of scales. He stabbed again and again until the beast slumped against the stone, twitching and gurgling blood, before finally crashing to the ground.

The chupacabra looked up at him, lights out in its red eyes, huge mouth gaping open and reptilian tongue lolling out. Sam pulled the knife from its belly, swaying on his feet as he did so. He was only two steps away before his legs folded underneath him. He fell to the ground, his back scraping against a low boulder. His lungs burned with every breath and he was shaking all over but he held onto his knife.

Sam coughed, wiping blood from his cracked lips. He tried to push down the fatigue and nausea slithering through his body and stared at the dead beast. There was something happening now, and he blinked, trying to clear the blurry image before his eyes. But the change continued: the creature began transforming, dark fur and scales disappearing and leaving human flesh behind.

Bones crunched and cracked as the skeleton shifted and remolded itself, its massive hide sloughing off and dissolving into mucus-y, nearly translucent tissue. Sam watched the beast's face cave in, muzzle sinking and teeth receding, only to be left with the smooth lines of a human nose and jawline. He'd seen that happen plenty of times before and it always made him a little sick.

It was worse than that now. His heart twisted in a baffled wind as he looked on and on, at a human stomach that had been gored by his knife, eyes eventually locking on the face of the man who would be lying dead at his feet if only he had the strength to get back on his feet. It was his own face. So that was what he looked like dead. He had wondered.

It was just a shapeshifter, he told himself, that had borrowed the skin of the biggest bad around for protection. His knife had been silver. He'd gotten lucky. Somehow, in its dying moment it had managed to steal his form and show it to him. Why?

He slumped sideways on the sharp pebbles, closed his eyes, and passed out.

Get up.

It was an order, barked inside Sam's head, forcing him to pull in a shallow breath. He gagged slightly on the stench of death and blood, thick in the air around him, shuddering in revulsion. Gooseflesh rippled along his skin, more out of horror than cold. Sam clenched his jaw, his next breath skipping across his teeth on its way in.
His shoulders burned, muscles quaking with effort, stretched beyond their limit. He was so tired, his body thrumming with exhaustion. He yearned to give in, just one moment of relief, but the second he did, the ropes binding his wrists to the hooks above his head slacked and the rope around his neck tightened, choking him and reducing his air intake to a thread.

The skin of his throat was raw inside and out. His wrists were raw and ached from taking the weight of his body. His calf muscles shook from the effort of pushing himself upright. His head pounded – a pulsing pain behind his left eye, ratcheting up as he strained to see something, hell, anything. It was no good. He might as well have been buried six feet deep.

But he could hear them moving: the sound of claws skittering along the crumbling rock wall, the hiss of what he assumed was language as they encountered one another. He felt them, the slight shift of air as one passed by him.

They were biding their time, drawing it out, making him wait.

This had to be a cave. He'd probably stumbled blindly past it last night. What had happened came back in flashes of blind sensation. The creatures had found him lying wounded and exposed, had bound him and dragged him here, yanked him by his rope tether and strung him up from something, all in complete darkness. His ropes were pulled tight, his arms raised above his head, his body suspended until he was precariously balanced on the balls of his feet.

Fabric ripped, a neat tear. As slick scales brushed against the taut muscles of his abdomen, he tried to pull away without strangling himself. He tensed, his body trembling, awaiting the sharp sting and burn of the cuts he knew would come his way.

Sam swallowed a rush of bile, burning the tender skin of his abused throat. No-one knew where he was, no-one was coming for him. And the hell of it was, he'd done it to himself. He'd allowed this to happen because he hadn't done the smart thing, whatever that was. No, because he'd let Dean out of his sight. Let him down -

Don't think about that right now. Don't think at all.

Get up.

He tried twisting his hands against his bindings, searching for a weakness that would give him an advantage.

He heard one of those things - the chupacabra, no, the shifter, no, maybe the chupacabra the shifter had stolen the skin from - chatter and hiss in his direction, the stench of death nearly overpowering as it pressed closer.

Sam cried out, his voice hoarse and foreign in his ears, as the skin above his twisting guts was split with the scalpel-like edge of the creature's claw. He felt a mouth follow the path of the slice. Cold lips on his burning skin, a wet tongue sliding along the cut. He instinctively tried to pull away from the sensation, another all the more horrible for its familiarity, but the ropes at his wrists tightened the rope around his neck and he choked, forced to hold still.

He could feel the lips vacuumed to his side, the tug of his flesh into a mouth as it swallowed the blood pulled from him. He wanted to scream, to thrash, to wrap his fingers around the thing's throat and rip its head off with his bare hands. His body shook with the need to fight back, resisting this invasion. Something halfway between a groan and a whimper caught at the back of his throat.

He closed his eyes, trying to take himself away from this moment, away from this cage, to an empty,
empty whited-out place. He tried to be quiet.

He groaned, ragged and nearly shrilling into a scream as he felt another slice along his other side, another mouth on him, another tug.

Part of him thinking rationally, even now: they likely wouldn't kill him – not yet. Food was scarce here and if he had killed one of their kin, well, all the more reason to make him suffer. They could feed on him for weeks.

He could still get away, get free. Kill them all.

Sam felt the mouths leave his body. Fatigue swept over him. He felt his knees give, the muscles in his legs seeking relief. And then the rope at his neck pulled taut, snapping his head up and back. He began choking.

Again the order: get up.

He forced his eyes open, no matter that the dark around him matched the dark behind his lids. It was the act that mattered, the effort of awareness that had sometimes saved his life. He straightened his trembling legs, swallowing roughly.

Told you, you always gotta assume the bad guy's got a posse, man.

Sam shot his head to the right in shock. Dean's voice.

He regretted the motion immediately as the coarse rope rasped along his skin. Of course it wasn't Dean. His brother was gone. He wasn't coming.

You always gotta play the hero, dontcha?

"Shut up," Sam whispered, willing the voice away.

He felt the creatures stirring closer to him once more; he tensed up as he tried to figure out how to stop them from cutting him again. He wanted to grab the rope – the rope they'd used to haul him in here – and leverage himself up, get his legs around a throat, rip it out, kill them. Rip them to shreds. But his hands were numb, and he knew the minute he messed with the ropes binding his arms he'd end up strangling himself.

Get up, Sam.

"I'm trying."

Sam blinked wide into the darkness, a dimly backlit shadow moving before his eyes. A shadow cut an awful lot like Dean.

He told himself no in his head and it came out as a moan. It couldn't be Dean, he couldn't stand to think that it was and be wrong. But Sam could see him.

And then he felt them again – this time along his back. A slice, a mouth, the pull of blood causing his belly to sink and his heart to shake. Two, then three. Sam released a weak scream from the pain of it - worse, from the helplessness.

He choked on, "Please."

The mouths left his burning skin and he froze, listening as the creatures scraped and clawed their way - oh god, hopefully not to someone else. He waited for what came next.
The scratch of claws over stone stopped.

The darkness and silence exploded: everything was frenetic motion, violence and hard, bright light.

He was blinded by light again and listening to the sound of his brother fighting the screeching - enraged, panicky, outgunned - monsters and all this had a numbing familiarity. He didn't much care to see what was going on around him. He closed his eyes and waited for it to be over.

Dean was cutting him down. Dean had an arm around him, strong enough to hold his useless, near-dead weight up. He opened his eyes and Dean was carrying him into the violent blinding light that reminded him of Lucifer, of Gadreel, of possession, and somehow this was all as it should be. The light dimmed, coalesced into lines and shapes and colors and recognizable things.

He was back in the library, in the bunker, with Dean. How wonderful. He didn't feel much of anything at first but he reached for *wonderful* to put a label on what he was supposed to be feeling. He must be relieved and grateful. He was bleeding out on everything, all over Dean and the floorboards and the chair that Dean was easing him onto. He put out his hands to steady himself, stay seated upright, and now there were bloody handprints pressed into the tabletop. He was making such a mess. Blood makes up seven percent of the human body. Five quarts inside each person on average. Hearts could create enough pressure as they pumped to squirt blood ten feet away and that was called arterial spray. There was a trail of blood splatter and bloody footprints across the library floor and he thought tiredly about how he would have to mop it up. Tiredly - he was so tired, that was what he was really feeling.

There was blood spotting Dean's face and in his hair and down his shirtfront and coating his hands and down his jeans.

"Hey buddy," he was saying, "Just hold on for me," and other such soothing nonsense words. He was opening a first-aid kit, taking out the cotton balls and gauze and the iodine and the tweezers and the sterile needles in an airtight bag and the spool of medical thread and he hadn't left the room so he must have been prepared for this. Never any doubt that he would get Sam back.

"I missed you," Sam said to him. "Even when you're here, I still..."

"I got you out," Dean said. "You understand that, right? You're not cracking up on me again?"

Sam was shivering, his teeth weakly chattering. The library was very warm and he was very cold even though he'd been burning a few minutes ago.

"No," Sam said. "I mean - yes. Un - understood." He looked around again, traced the definitive lines of shelves and books and cabinets and phonograph and laptop and lamps and a bottle of Johnny Drum, one shot glass. Dean, sitting level with him in another chair and somehow seeming to loom over him. "Where's Cas?"

"Cas?" A vacancy, in how he said the name. A question underlying the obvious.

"Yeah, he - I prayed to him. Did he let you know - "

"Course he did, but man, you sound like you just smoked two packs and guzzled gasoline, maybe you could lay off the questions for, like, half an hour."

It sank into him like an iron spike through the brain. This couldn't be real.

Sam nodded, took his hands off the table, wrapped his arms around himself, pressed against where he was bleeding the most copiously. Of course Dean couldn't allow that, he had to be cleaning and
suturaing Sam's wounds. He didn't say anything, just reached out and grabbed Sam's forearm, pulled. Laid an immovable hand on Sam's shoulder.

Sam couldn't find a weapon on himself anyway.

"You got off lucky," Dean said. "Usually the chupacabra'll drain you bone-dry in one go."

"Think they were shifters, actually, camouflaged as - "

"Buddy, what did I say about talking?"

"You said hold off the questions. I was giving you answers."

Dean snorted, mouth compressing as his nostrils flared, contained derisive anger. He had picked up the cotton pads and iodine and he was peeling blood-tacky material and scabs off Sam's upper right arm so he could get at the holes punched in the bicep by the werecat's claws and he shouldn't know those holes were there because every inch of Sam was covered in blood and dirt. Fresh blood was spurting from the slices across his abdomen and Sam's free hand was pressed to that wound. Dean had knives on him, of course, and Dean was half off his chair and leaning over him, very close, showering him with the smell of more blood, warm and heady.

"I missed you so much," Sam said, and leaned against him with his good shoulder, his hand ceasing to staunch his stomach's bleeding and snaking under the hem of Dean's jacket. Careful fingertips feeling for the edge of a knife.

"Sure you did," Dean said. "Just like you missed me while I was the one in the hurt locker."

Dean slid his hand up from bicep to deltoid, flexed his hand and twisted, hard enough that Sam's shoulder nearly slipped its socket. He bit down on his tongue. His mouth flooded with blood again. Blood was all he could taste and smell and see. Dean's blood, he was seeing Dean, dead again. The event horizon of it, beyond which he knew was impossible devastation and waste, and what the hell did he think he was going to do with that knife?

Then Dean backhanded him, a crack ringing in his ears. Stood up, over him. Sam didn't dare look him in the eye.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Sammy? You think you need a fucking weapon? You think I turned again, is that it?"

Sam shook his head. Made himself look up. Dean's eyes were green and human and held nothing but cold contempt.

"Oh, really? Then what in the goddamn hell came back wrong up here this time?" He raised his pointed forefinger to the side of his head, turned it like a screw.

Sam spat out blood.

"You. You're not really him."

Dean's lip curled. "Is that right? Or is that just want you want to think because that's this year's big excuse?"

Sam got up from his chair too, backing away. Dean stalked towards him, but slow, coiled. Four steps between them and a tear in the fabric of their universe.
"Oh, yeah, right, you're gonna run from me again. Whatever happened to yanking my ass out of the fire? That's what you wanted, wasn't it? You still think I need to be fixed, huh Sammy, so how 'bout you fucking do something about it."

"I'm trying," Sam couldn't resist saying, even knowing there was no point. "You're not exactly making it easy."

"What, am I supposed to just roll over? Play the obedient little bitch-in-distress while you play the big hero with some fresh dumbass plan?" His fingers wrapped around the neck of the Johnny Drum, lifted it. Sam flinched. Dean's sneer dropped a few degrees deeper into subzero temperature. "Like that's worked out so awesome before. Do we need another rundown of Sammy's greatest hits?"

It all felt familiar enough that Sam faltered on the words he meant to say, the affirmation, the plea: *this isn't real.*

"I never wanted to handle this by myself," he said instead, stopping his retreat. "We were supposed to be dealing with it together. Then you chose to check out because you were, what, tired of not calling the shots?"

"So maybe I was. You honestly gonna come at me with that? Glass houses, bro." He dropped the bottle and it smashed on the floor and now there were glass shards and spilled bourbon mixing with the blood. "It ain't like I decided to lay down and die, not like I'm not still fighting - please note how I haven't ripped your ungrateful throat out yet."

"What's stopping you?" burst out of him, unanticipated and instantly regretted.

"Years of shit Dad drilled into my head? Even dragging your whiny, lying, selfish ass around is better than being stuck with my own company? Force of habit? Damned if I know anymore." With that, Dean let rip a right hook that slammed into the side of Sam's face, sending him reeling. The blow was followed by an uppercut to the ribs that lifted him half a foot off the ground, wiped his feet out from under him, which was what he'd been waiting for. He rolled onto his side, reached for a chair seat and then the tabletop to pull himself back onto his feet - praying that Dean wouldn't stop him - and under cover of doing that he reached for the gun strapped under the table. He stood with the gun in his hand, safety off, watching the contempt written in block letters on Dean's face fading slightly to something else, cautious calculation, concern.

"We both know what all that'd do to me, even if you could nut up and pull the trigger. Which, in case you're just tuning in, you can't."

"Won't ever be a problem. I swear."

Sam raised the gun to his own head. Drank in Dean's face one last time. Pulled the trigger.

He hadn't calculated the odds of his getting this right beforehand but by how surprised he was to regain consciousness he'd say he'd been about seventy-percent sure. Scraping heavy eyes open again, he was not in the least surprised by where he came to.

Back in the dark.
Chapter 16

Sam had come round to bible black again, cold again. His throat was still burning and constricting, refusing to swallow properly, and he reached to rub it into submission and to his belated surprise his hands came up and completed the act, his wrists bound but his arms no longer hooked over his head. His ankles were also now tied together and he was on his side, back pressed against stone, half-curled fetal.

Sam found he could piece together what had happened while he'd been inside that illusion. He was experienced with asphyxiation, knew the blindly consuming panic that came from it, when air couldn't go past his throat and the world started to get fuzzy at the edges, everything softer, even him, dissolving with each failed breath, lungs spasming violently, the sensation more and more foreign as consciousness slipped away. He was familiar with the after-effects, could pick over the physical evidence and put together a reenactment in his head. He'd convulsed inside the grip of the ropes - and he could feel their texture, its particular abrasions, guessed that they'd been woven from tough old vines. Pain had exploded inside his chest and head but in his panic he couldn't seem to care. The ropes gave a shudder and tightened faster around him and he had continued to convulse and so they must have had to take him off the hook, take the noose from around his neck before he strangled himself.

There was a moment in which he felt how strange that was, to be in the care of captors who cared if he killed himself, who wouldn't just reassemble him afterwards. Then he told himself to lock that thought down before it could further take him apart.

Long moments passed when the only noise Sam heard was his heartbeat, rhythm gone awry, each pump loud and strained. A fast inventory of the rest of his body made aches and pain stand to attention like good soldiers: the dulling throb from the gouges to his bicep, the repeatedly strained muscle of his right shoulder, a burning sensation coursing through his flesh, skin prickling against the icy air, maybe a fever. He tried not to think about possible implications that he could do nothing about but sepsis buzzed like an inconveniently timed text in his head anyway. On the other hand, he couldn't feel the slices across his stomach or back anymore, couldn't feel the fresh blood sticking tattered fabric to his skin. Fuck, he'd lost his jacket. Sharpest knife of pain was of course stuck in his throat, whenever he tried to swallow.

He made himself consider the place he was in. Solid black, made of rock, damp and cold. He was in a cave. He'd been dragged pretty far inside. The ground was covered in a viscid substance that smelled fouler than sulfur, along with a number of jagged rocks, jabbing some part of him however he wriggled. Rocks and, hearing a crunch, bones. Think. He was in the den of shifters or chupacabras or something that could cast illusions. Djinns lived in caves. No, he'd fought a shifter just moments before - shifters in the shape of djinns. That would be his working hypothesis. Nothing was as it really was, like a clown's painted-on face - and oh, fuck, why would he think of that now.

Steps reverberated hollow on the stone when his captor got closer. Hands gripped him under his armpits and Sam could only let himself be manhandled into a sitting position against the rough and damp wall and he could feel every knob of his spine shudder. Strange the way serious injury could make you more sensitive to minor discomfort. Then a light drew near; a high red torch in the hand of a second captor. The one who'd manhandled him was a woman. She had a djinn's intricate inky markings accentuating the sharp bones of her lean and hungry face. Her hair was a long greasy black tangle. Her eyes were hooded, looking down on him in bitter disdain. The second, it took him a little while to discern, was an adolescent boy whose gaunt, hollow-eyed features were mostly hidden by an even wilder thicket of muddy-colored hair.
"Better?" she asked.

"Fuck you," Sam choked out, syllables sticking like gristle between teeth, clenching his jaw around the pain of talking. He got a hard slap to his face for his trouble that left his right ear ringing and his cheek burning. He didn't fall sideways only because her other hand held him upright.

Echo of Dean backhanding him, and Dean's face again flashed so vivid in Sam's mind's eye: the cut of Dean's eyes like a blade, the threat of a bottle-edge to his throat, a roman-candle flash; twinned with the promise of a presence at his back, armed and dangerous and ready to kill the first person who even so much looked at Sam funny.

"You mind your mouth, boy." Her voice was slow molasses, sticky in his ear. "You're gettin' off so much easier than you deserve, you'd best not make me regret it more than I do already."

"Who are you?"

"What's it to you, Winchester?"

Silence, an expectant quality to it. Blood pooled inside his mouth where a tooth had broken the inside of his cheek and Sam spat the blood in her general direction - his vision was wobbly, he was well off the mark.

Hands seized his throat in a loose circle, not meant to hurt, only to immobilize. Sam held his breath, the djinn breathing wet and frantic against his cheek - then something wet and soft on the corner of his lips. A tongue lapping tentatively at the blood, kitten-like.

"You taste good," the djinn said, and her voice was a controlled choke, flimsy covering for the nearly rabid want. "Y'know, baby, you made this so much harder on yourself than it had to be. I was gonna hand you over right quick, finally get my pay day, but you - what you've done - you got no idea what you've done to me and mine."

The hands hadn't let go of his throat yet, but Sam dared to speak anyway.

"Who are you?" It came out weak and shredded and quickly regretted; her hands tightened slightly and his throat convulsed as the burning worsened.

"Wife of the good man you killed. Not that I'd expect that'd mean much to you."

The mate, Sam thought, the shifter's mate. Djinn or shifter disguised as a djinn or some hybrid of the two. It was djinns that drained their victims. If a shifter took the form of another monster did it take on that monster's proclivities? It was a question that, under slightly different circumstance, he would love to dig around in more.

The djinn pressed her fingertips to the gouges on Sam's arm. Her nails dug into the wounds so fresh blood spilled out. Pain flared briefly, then, and Sam was nearly glad for it: a reminder that he was still alive, that this, at least, was real. She sucked on her fingers. Then she stood and extended a finger to the other one - the adolescent boy, lover or sibling or son, best not think about that too closely - and he sucked the blood off her finger. It was obscene. It gave Sam a small ache of remembered want for that phantom taste of power.

"Nothin' tastes half so good as human blood," she said in breathy rapture. "But yours has a little somethin' special."

Sam's gut clenched. He averted his eyes from the woman, took in the other details of his surroundings. There wasn't a lot to see by that single torch's light: a makeshift bed inside a small
niche in the rock, made of skins, something that looked like a makeshift table, a rough slab of wood in the center of the cavern with an assortment of weapons stacked on it. He could see their spiky shadows slanted long on the wall - blades and guns and even a crossbow, must've been taken off other prey...

"Guess some of what they say's true. Too bad you're so weak, but hey, where we're goin' we ain't ever gonna be hungry again." Turning to the boy - "I gotta go get a litter together. You watch him. Don't let him talk to ya. He'll try and get in your head."

"Why can't you just send up a flare for the dragons?" the boy asked, and behind the alarm Sam felt a further piquing of curiosity. What the hell was going on here?

"Cause we need them to let us in. We show up to the front door with him and they have to let us in."

Her expression and voice had turned steely, cutting, and she made a slashing motion with one hand that brooked no more argument.

Sam watched for the reaction on the boy's face as carefully as he could behind that rag-rug of hair. His mouth compressed, jaw jutting out, and he half-rolled his eyes behind her back, while she grabbed the machete off the wood slab and left.

Sam had been feeling around the pocket of his jeans. He still had the needle and the Zippo. The needle would take a long, long while to weaken his bonds. The Zippo would be better - burn his wrists as well but it wasn't like he hadn't had worse.

The boy had sunk to a crouch, torch tilted at a near horizontal angle, so the flame went askew and the darkness reclaimed territory. He peered sharply at Sam. Curious-sharp not hungry sharp, at least.

"You're really nothin' like in the stories," the boy said in a burst. Pointedly defying the woman. He could use that, maybe. "We caught others before but never a real hunter. Not one of you - they tell all kindsa stories 'bout your family, if you believe 'em. Gotta say, you ain't measuring up so far. Don't see why you should be worth more to 'em than any other."

"I'm not," Sam said. It seemed the right answer. The boy got a vindicated jut to his chin.

"She thinks you're the golden ticket outta this dump. There's a price on your head - there's a price on the head of any human they cut loose out here - and she thinks if we catch you and serve you up that means we get to move into the big house."

"What happens in the big house? Do you know? Where is it?" He squeezed his eyes shut, struggled to shove down the pain of spitting out so many words.

"The vampires don't want our kind. Just you humans. Cause you're pure and he - their chief, or whatever - can twist you however he likes. We're tainted. He just wants to harvest us for parts. Drain us dry. Make us fight to the death while he watches. I talked to somebody who escaped once. But she doesn't believe that. Before they came - her and the one you killed - I was looking for a way outta the wall."

He fell silent, absorbed in whatever nightmarish memories he was reliving, staring at the rock between his feet.

Sam tried swallowing a couple times, stealing himself for further speech. "Well, the Alpha, he had me. He let me loose out here. So what makes you think he's so eager to have me back?"

"It's a game, don't you get it? Like the ones in the book - "
"Hunger Games?"

"Nyah, what? *Battle Royale*, that Japanese book. That one was great, that was really great, god, I miss readin'." He looked wistful and very young for a moment, even just that red lit slice of his face under the curtain of hair. He picked at his nose.

"I don't see how - "

"We hunt each other cause the ones in the big house get off on it."

"You've done this before, right?" He jerked his head in the direction of the collected weapons.

"Two others. One of 'em died. One of 'em we gave to the dragons and they never came back. Good, if you ask me cause if they took us, y'know, I think he'd just harvest us for parts. There was this pack in the woods that said they'd eaten the slops that they throw in the river..."

"You don't have to take me to him."

The boy stood up sharp and started pacing in short rotations, the hand not holding the torch balling into a fist then slackening again, agitated and distracted. Good. He was lonely and resentful and confused and would be so easy to play, if only Sam were feeling a bit more up to it.

"I can't talk her out of it. I tried. She's outta her fuckin' mind about this. I want to prove her wrong, y'know? I've been wanting to prove her wrong for a long time."

"Let me go then."

"Yeah, and the first thing you'd do would be to kill me. I know what your kind are. You kill us just for sport."

"I don't have a weapon. I lost a lot of blood, banged up my head out there. Don't think I could - "

Bitter chuckle. "Doesn't matter. Either you'd die out here or I would."

Silence elapsed. The boy sank into a crouch again, torch still held askew, chin dropping to his chest and eyes hooded, lost in his petulant hopelessness. Sam moved slowly, turning over, clamping down on a groan with his teeth and tongue when his body protested. Sam had the lighter in his hand, made sure he'd angled it right, his body curled against the wall to hide what he was doing - at least for a few seconds. He had luck on the sparkwheel, but whatever vines the ropes had been woven from did not catch easy. A slowly building smolder and he tried to cover the rising wisps of smoke with his body while the fibers were incrementally seared through. After what seemed like a workable weakening of the rope he started fumbling for one of the jagged stones.

Sam was notified that the boy had smelled the burning with an outraged "Hey!" - and Sam dropped the lighter and brought the charred segment of rope down on the rock's sharpest ridge with all the strength he could dredge out of his arms. He bruised his hands against the stone floor but the rope split.

The boy was going for a stomp between his shoulder blades just as Sam was rolling towards him, rolling under his foot. He flung out an arm, wrapped it around the boy's standing leg, and yanked. Caught him enough off guard that it worked, a precarious second in which he wobbled, and then he came crashing down on his back on the stone. Ankles still bound, Sam scrambled on hands and knees to get on top of him. The torch had dropped, rolled away, sputtered and hissed and the light went down. Sam saw the boy's eyes flash shifter-silver, no camera lens needed.
He and the boy scuffled, and the boy wasn't much of a fighter, he must've only survived by cleaving to stronger protectors because he fought like he was a teenage boy trying to be a man, forgoing close jabbing and biting for a loose impression of western action-hero moves, trying to swing wild haymakers while rolling across the floor. But he had the advantage of unbound legs and used them to get on top, straddling Sam, wrapped fingers around his throat. It might easily have been over then, but Sam had a rock in his hand and before the boy could apply much pressure beyond reigniting the burning bruises he smashed it into the boy's skull. The boy toppled sideways, off Sam's chest. Sam rolled up onto his knees, fighting vertigo, and continued bashing the boy's skull in. The sound of cracking bone and spurting blood and pulping brain matter were all the sensory input he had to go on and it became the whole world for a few long moments. Then he crawled in the direction the torch had rolled, grabbed it, and crawled to the wood slab where they'd stashed the weapons taken from him and others. His jacket was there and he felt under it and found his silver knife, cut the ropes off his legs, then stumbled back to where the boy lay making pathetic groans and whimpers that reminded him of the sounds he had made inside the illusion, while he was being fed from. Knife in heart, he put the boy out of his misery. He got his jacket back on him and what weapons he could fumble back into his pockets, plus a rifle with a thin strap woven from bark that he shouldered. The torch was now guttering low so he walked with one arm stretched against the rock. When he got to the cave's mouth and peered out he saw a small clearing, the smoldering remains of a pyre, where presumably they had given the other shifter a funeral. There was an unsettled twisting in his guts, seeing that, but really it wasn't like he didn't know that monsters mourned their dead as much as anyone. Beyond, he found no landmark he recognized: woods again, dark-leaved trees that nearly blocked out the dark sky, branches utterly still, no more wind. He lurked just inside the cave until the djinn woman came back, dragging her burden of wood and more split-and-braided vine rope for the litter she meant to drag him on, and he knifed her too, in the back, one arm curled around her neck, small flare of satisfaction when he heard her wet gasping last breaths. Her hands scrabbled for purchase against him, sparking electric blue, djinn magic. A dying curse. Violent hallucinatory images flashed across his mind's eye for a few seconds, nothing worse than what he could conjure up on his own, then flickered out. He watched her body, after it dropped, to see if it would change shape. It didn't. He collected the machete from where she'd dropped it, picked no clear direction, and started walking. His own pained and labored breathing was the only sound inside a silence that was only worming deeper under his skin the longer he was in it. Sam had spent a lot of time in the woods over the years and he had all these unconscious expectations that were being baffled now. Purgatory was it and not it. Uncanny valley effect, he supposed, like why people were freaked out by humanoid-but-not-quite robots. There were no insect choirs or twittering birds, no wild things bustling about their lives in the rustling canopy. He hadn't given much thought to how much presence those little things had in the world until they weren't there. An entire concert of movement and sound was absent. It was like when some big predator crept through the underbrush and everything hushed, trembling in fear. Everything suspended, waiting to see where the chips might fall. When he first heard the low roar of the river he questioned if he wasn't mistaking something else - even the roar of blood in his ear canals - for what he so badly desired. He didn't quite believe it until he saw it, broad and turgid and the color of iron, perhaps what he had mistaken at the misty distance while descending that rocky slope for a road. Kneeling on a rocky mud bank, he drank from his cupped hands, washed the blood and sweat off his skin, peeling his sticky clothes away as best he could. Checked out the puncture wounds to his bicep that the shifter/djinn had scratched open again, wiped away the fresh blood to see reddened skin, but so far not a sure sign of sepsis. He washed it
with the questionably hygienic river water and bound it with another strip cut from his jacket.

When he started walking again he followed the river's course.

He walked and walked.

When next he stopped it was because another long, agonized howling had him nearly jolting out of his skin, it was so close. Up ahead - no, it was over his head. He looked up. Black and grey paws and snout were most of what he could see poking out from a cocoon of dense white webbing, suspended over the forest floor from between three trees. A werewolf in a giant spider's trap. He forced himself to think about that in small increments of logic. The spider must have spun a web trap on the forest floor and the werewolf had stepped in and sprung it. The spider hadn't fed yet. The spider must be on its way. He knew where the spider was going to be so he could be ready for it.

The howling lapsed down to whimpers, painfully dog-like.

Sam skirted back, crouched in the deepest shadow between two trees, and took the rifle in his hands. It was a Mauser bolt-action, good for precision but he'd best not miss; after he'd ejected the round from the breech he checked the magazine and found eight rounds. He pushed the bolt forward, locked the butt into his shoulder.

That uncanny silence outside the werewolf's whimpers made it possible for him to pick out the thread of leaves disturbed in the canopy. The spider was so pale he could see its insides, which made it an easier target to pick out against the black-barked trees. He shot it once, hit the abdomen, which exploded like a bloody pinata, and it fell to the forest floor. He jacked another round in, approached slowly, thinking, hey, it could be the size of Shelob or Aragog and it's not quite and that was lucky if you graded on the curve of how life had been going for him lately.

He had to climb the tree while carrying the machete, trading off free hands, so he could cut down the werewolf. It swung from the two trees that the webbing was still attached to but the strands were long enough that it crashed to the forest floor, still swaddled in its cocoon. Teeth snapping, paws curling in so it could claw at the webbing. Stabbing it in the heart would be - he allowed himself the pun because he'd had a very tiring day - a sticky proposition. So he left it there to claw itself free, or not.

Stumbling away from that scene, he had a dizzy spell that immobilized him for just enough minutes that he could've gotten himself killed. His stomach cramping, aching. Of course, he'd nearly forgotten, he was starving. Not starving enough to try werewolf meat but enough so that the idea did slither across his mind and left him feeling even sicker.

The next time he went down to the river bank, he encountered a kelpie, a sleek black colt inviting him to take a ride. He didn't have a cross-embossed halter, unfortunately, or he might have secured transportation, but he did have his silver knife still and the kelpie was yet another shapeshifter felled by silver. Afterwards, he harvested its meat, made another fire, skewered and roasted and ate it. Why kelpie was better than werewolf meat he couldn't have formed a logically sound argument for, but he had never formed an intimate relationship with a kelpie or even spoken with one in human form and instinct said that made all the difference.

He walked and walked. Remembered this one winter in Boston when he must've been six - he was already in school but he remembered being very small and having no idea about hunting, about why he didn't have a mom, about any of it, but just old enough to know that that was wrong, that something was wrong with him. Anyway, one day he lost his boots...no, some other kid must've
taken them. He'd changed into his sneakers for gym and left them in the coat closet and some kid
must've taken them because he remembered being angry to find them gone but more scared than
angry. He'd been scared to tell Dean because Dean might be mad at him. Look after your stuff cause
it's on you if you lose it, was one of the first rules of their itinerant life Sam had had drilled into him.
But Dean hadn't been mad. He'd stayed after school and tore that coat closet apart and Sam had said
maybe we should tell a teacher. Dean had said nothing but they hadn't told a teacher. That was the
start of Sam, without any understanding of why, learning the rules concerning asking the authorities
for help and why you never should. So by then it was four o'clock and they'd missed the bus and in a
Massachusetts winter at four o'clock it was practically night dark out already. So Dean said they'd
have to walk home. It had been...a mile, maybe. Dean would've given him his boots but Dean
couldn't have fit in his sneakers and never would've made it back in his socks with all that snow on
the ground. Air frozen so solid it was like if you had a pick you could break chunks off.

Halfway home and he was limping and leaning on Dean, tucked under his arm for support, his feet
hurt so bad. Dean tried to carry him but Sam had his whole backpack with him and all these books in
it and why he should feel a stab of guilt about that now really made no sense. So Dean carried his
backpack instead and with an arm around his shoulders was dragging him along. Cars must've
passed them but no-one stopped. The whole way. They got home, home meaning they were staying
on the second story of this high-rise motel, meaning he had to climb a flight of ice-slick steps to get
inside. His feet were all swelled up and Dean could barely get his sneakers off. He was crying
helplessly, the worst of it not even the pain but the fear of what his feet would look like and if they'd
have to be cut off. He was imagining it being done right here in the motel room, with an axe they'd
have to get out of the car trunk when Dad got home. He dreamed about that off-and-on for a long
time, about chopping off frozen pieces of himself. Dean got his sneakers off and his socks and his
feet were beet red, the tips of his toes white. Luckily they had a space heater and Dean dragged it in
front of the corduroy sofa (he distinctly remembered it being upholstered in corduroy) where Sam
was sitting, watching TV. There had been a movie on though he couldn't remember what it was.
And then Dean started rubbing his feet with a towel he'd heated up in the microwave and maybe that
was the point of this reminiscing, Dean rubbing his feet back to life and getting a lot of mileage out
of ever more hyperbolic complaining about how stinky they were until Sam stopped crying. Later,
eating warm, gooey toasted-cheese sandwiches - though maybe that was from some other time. The
point. The point was, as ever, that he missed his brother. The point was that he was walking so that
he could get back to him, preferably before he did something crazy to get to Sam first.

And yes, he knew that the Dean he would be coming home to was not the same Dean he was
remembering. There were bigger things at stake than all this tender nostalgia. Like the terror that he'd
be met with the same icy contempt, the same didn't you ask yourself why I got as far away from you
as I could that he remembered from their last reunion. But no, that was selfish, selfish. He should be
thinking about how Dean might get hurt looking for him, and how others might get hurt if he...

The woods thinned out and the canopy receded and then the river descended through a gorge, on
either side of it the ground rising into twin hills, their slopes naked rock, a grey that mirrored and
melted into the grey sky, impossible to guess how high they were; there were slicks of moss and
sickly green vines snaking down the hills, the slopes pockmarked with cave mouths and with the
sinuous shadows of what could be trails worn in the rock. To continue cleaving to the river he would
have to pass beneath them, through this pass just made for an ambush. He could double back, try to
skirt the other side of the hills. But what reason did he have to think it would be any better on the
other side? He didn't know how long the gorge stretched, how long he'd have to go without access to
water, without following the river's current which had become his raison d'etre

He walked on.
A few more cycles of dimness and darkness found him still alive and still stuck in the gorge. He was lying in a ditch up a steep portion of the slope, amid a dense copse of trees, covered in vines and leaves and sheaves of black bark and river mud. He was waiting patiently. The ghouls had taken him by surprise the other day, only two, wearing the faces of the werewolves they must've eaten. He'd tried the silver knife and that had nearly been game over for him; but he'd retained the rifle, he'd tried a head shot and done for one but for the other he'd taken too long levering another round into the chamber and it had fled. He knew the pack had been stalking him ever since.

He heard a faint snap up river and tightened his grip on the thin, twined rope of split vines and reeds in his hands, trying to be conscious of and to stifle any possible muscle twitch as the ghouls passed in front of him. Three, silhouetted against the iron-grey river, looking human but for the dog-like way they canted their necks and scented the air. Only seconds until they sensed him. He jerked on his string as the last stepped over the trap-line. The green boughs, bent back and held tightly, snapped free. Along their lengths, sharpened stakes, hardened in fire and bound tightly into splits along the branches, swung forward and into the ghouls, and the gorge echoed with screaming and snarling. Sam rose from the ditch, scattering his camouflage, raced down beside the trap in a second. The ghouls were in a helpless panic in the thorn cage; the stakes had penetrated their legs and arms, gone through their chests and torsos and the more they struggled, the deeper they became enmeshed.

He shouldered the rifle, took aim at the first mark's head, fired.

Fired again, and the crack of the second shot covered the crack of the branch as the third ghoul pulled free of the trap - and now it was shifting, wearing the pelt of a black and grey werewolf, like the one Sam had left behind. The stakes dragged through the long muscles of its legs, leaving bloody holes in its stomach and chest. He ducked under the long reach of a powerfully muscled arm, feeling the claws rake through his hair, rolling backwards to give himself more space. It came after him fast and he'd barely made his feet when the blow hit him, claws ripping down his sternum and across his pectorals, the impact knocking him backward into a tree, rifle flying from his grip. The werewolf-ghoul leaped at him again and Sam went for his knife, raised it on automatic, had enough presence of mind to bypass the heart and go for the eyeball. He felt the blade nick socket bone as it slid in, the werewolf-ghoul's weight crushing him against the unyielding trunk of the tree. For a moment, his vision greyed, once again the smell of fresh corpses enveloping him. Then he shoved while the ghoul screamed and flailed, clawing at its own face, trying to get the knife out.

Sagging back against the tree, Sam's chest heaved as he tried to get air into his lungs with shallow wheezing inhalations. The wounds on his chest - shallow, had to be counted as shallow or he'd be covered in blood and dying from a punctured lung, so that was fine - and arm and the back of his head throbbed in time with his heart beat. He dropped to his knees, crawled to where the rifle had landed, rolled over and made the last shot from his back. The ghoul's agonizing howls rang in his ears a long time.

On his feet, Sam wiped his face with his arm, spitting out the blood he could taste in his mouth. Shaking legs and every bone aching, that pressure building and building in his skull so that he felt like it could crack at any moment. He retrieved the knife from the ghoul's eye socket, its shattered skull, wiped blood and brain matter off on his jeans.

The stink of corpses still filled his nostrils, was all over him, and he didn't want to smell it anymore. He stumbled down the slope, looking up river and down before he stepped out of the cover of the treeline and walked slowly across the pebbled bank. He dropped to his knees at the water's edge, a still pool on the outskirts of the slow current, and did a better job cleaning the knife, drying it on his shirt and sliding it back into his jacket pocket. He checked the rounds left in the magazine and swore at the result.
He felt an intense irritation at chupacabras and djinns that were actually shifters and werewolves that were actually ghouls.

Pure, Dean had said. This place, this condition. Yeah, he wasn't feeling it yet.

He walked on.

He was out of the gorge before the darkness could claim it again. He was again in dense woods, in their hush that now felt thicker than the hush of the gorge, muffling, darker with the canopy of dark branches overhead, and that was all that had changed besides that he had gone through the last of the kelpie meat.

When he saw what he'd been searching for, rising up over the river mere yards directly before him, he froze, not in disbelief but in doubt as the realization swamped him: what the hell did he think he was doing? There was the square-boxed top of a guard tower, peaking over a wall that stretched across the broad river. It had to be part of the Men of Letters compound. He walked those few more yards to where the treeline cut off and he peeked out from behind the last man-concealing trunk. He saw that the wall stretched as far as he could see to either side of the river, saw more rooftops, more guard towers. The lower half of the wall was made of great slabs of rough stone, above that erect logs secured with pitch and tipped with bristling iron spikes, which gave it a look similar to a fort in colonial America. The river continued up to this wall and passed under. So you could swim under it, the wall couldn't be too thick. If it were that easy, which of course it couldn't be. There must be a reason the Men of Letters would build their fort directly over a river, some magical property to it.

He waited for darkness to investigate. No light was coming from the the guard towers. The river was a deeper dark than the dark shore, a smooth black ribbon.

He left the rifle and machete wrapped in sheaves of bark and cradled by a forked branch up a tree. He found the steepest bank and he plunged into the river, letting it take him all at once, body reacting with a violent chatter of teeth and spasm of lungs, heartbeat speeding then slowing, sluggish after those few minutes while he floated along with the turgid current until he was at the mouth where the river passed under the wall. It wasn't until he was right on top of it that he saw the grate, just peeking above the river's surface. Iron bars, thick and close. No rusted-out give to them when he gave a desperate wrench.

His head bobbed under with a sudden strong surge of current and when his head bobbed up again he saw a woman. He knew at once that she must be the spirit of this river. Her hair was copper red and her eyes cornflower blue, her shoulders and face and neck had a sinuous pre-Raphaelite beauty, shimmering like dappled sunlight on the water, and he thought of kelpies and morgans and nymphs and nix and rusalki. She touched his face with warm and rosy fingertips and said, "I can take you through to what you seek. For a price."

"What?" he said, not considering it, only thinking that he had to know what this creature preyed on.

She smiled and said, "Let me show you," and her palm was firmly cupping his jaw and giving a tug before he could do anything but fill his lungs.

Everything has been washed away, even him, the person he once was. The only thing that exists now is that Jessica is in the kitchen of their apartment, and she's wearing one of his shirts. It falls to mid-thigh so he can see long, sleek, coltish legs that travel down and end with perfect pink polished toenails, and she must be fresh out of the shower because her hair is wet, pinned up in a haphazard bun with damp tendrils trickling down. She spoons out batter onto a tiny griddle and he's thinking about how the batter's going to overflow onto the burner when he should be thinking about nothing but her. She glances over her shoulder at him and smiles, and that dimple in her cheek is as gorgeous
as he remembers it.

He's reading *Crime and Punishment* for fun during break, and she smiles, calls him a pretentious emo-kid who should really be wearing a pair of black-rimmed spectacles and a turtleneck, no really, you'd look hot. She takes the book from his hands, sliding herself onto his lap instead. He grins at her, leaning back a little, and lets his hands come to rest on her hips. The batter has spilled, dripping under the burner, near the gas flame. He rubs teasing circles with the pads of his thumbs across her hip bones and she twines her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in the hair at his nape, and kisses him. He grunts a little in surprise when she thrusts her tongue into his mouth.

Wanna take a break, she says, moving from his lips to kiss down his neck and nibble along his collarbone.

Well - he gasps a little when she uses teeth. I was just getting to the part where Petrovich comes in - god, Jess - she grinds herself down against him and he can feel her lips stretch into a smirk when she can feel him hard against her thigh.

The pancakes are burning.

I want this, she says and it's not Jess, it's her eyes and her dimple and her voice and her hair slipping through his fingers, coming out of its knot, but it's not her, not her, not her. This piece of you.

No, he says.

She says, Just this moment. You won't even miss it.

That's worse, he says. To lose a piece of yourself and not even know what you're missing.

She smiles at him. And -

(He was back in the river, he was being held under the surface, his eyes were open but he couldn't see and he couldn't breathe and he couldn't struggle, he was drowning in a suspended moment in time, frozen under her spell.)

You'll die, she says.

A garish motel room. One of the worst he's seen, nausea and horror hitting him even before he consciously recognizes it. The radio is blaring. Dean leans through a doorway, toothbrush in hand. I know, no Asia. This station sucks.

He feels an ironic longing to stop time right here. It's Wednesday.

Yeah. Which usually follows Tuesday.

He wants to cling and never let go.

(He was drowning in a river in Purgatory and he might be forever frozen in the moment of dying and he might never see Dean again.)

He is seeing his mother's face, alive and in the flesh, for the first time in memory. His father's open, kindly face beside her on the sofa of their house in Lawrence. Dean is beside him. His only memory of his whole family, together.

I'll only let you go for my price, Mary's mouth says. You'll die in my river if you don't and your soul will be trapped forever and you'll lose them, you'll lose all of them, you'll lose yourself.
He can't bear to look at her and he can't bear to look away from Mary's face.

I can't, he thinks.

When you drown, she says, I'll crack open your chest and eat your heart and fillet your every bone and suck the marrow out and it still won't fill me up. I'm so empty. She says this with such aching sadness in his mother's eyes he almost wants to comfort her. You have so much inside you, so much piled up on this soul of yours, why won't you give me something?

(He considered, staring into black water, into nothing again. He had so much inside him. She wanted the bright, the living, the beautiful. There wasn't so much of that.)

He's looking at his mother's beautiful, beloved face and knowing she's going to burn because of him.

Yes, he says. He lets her crawl on her knees across the coffee table and kiss him lightly, lingeringly on the lips, and he doesn't think that this is his mother's touch, wrong and yearned for, doesn't feel anything for a moment, a deliberate lock-down, in preparation for what has to be done.

It wasn't the first time he'd experienced too many memories rocketing along the hippocampus and crash-landing on his prefrontal cortex, splintering like driftwood caught in a breaker wave. Ironically enough, it felt like drowning, that first shocked-breathless going under. But he had taken a metaphorical breath, had steeled himself, and he got past the first plunge, the first dizzying suspicion that he had made a terrible mistake. Then he found a thread to pull on, which was the scent of burning hair, and he began to unravel those threads of indelible sensation: hot blood dripping on his face, his skin reddening, blistering, cracking and peeling; and screaming, smelling burning meat, his own and others. Pin those moments of beauty and life and comfort like butterflies, and twist them, like a wanton schoolboy or a god plucking the appendages off an insect, deliberate and cruel. It was both foreign and familiar and came so easily to him, once again, like drowning.

He could feel her - Lorelei came floating across their connection - distress as if it was his own because it was his own. He could feel her weakening. He wasn't. He was in control and that was all he needed - what he felt didn't matter, only that he could control it, that he was in the driver's seat, that he had the power to brake when he damn well wanted to brake.

Beg, he thought.

She did. She was trapped in his head and she was begging him to let her go. It felt good, an electric thrill of vindictive pleasure, and he wondered if that was sadism or masochism, looking at his own pain mirrored in another.

He said yes, on this condition, that she let him through the grate. He was the one making the deals now.

She said yes, and kissed him again, tasting sharply of salt. He opened his eyes and they were dry and looking at the empty dark sky, his body still submerged in the deadly cold river to the neck, aching down to his shivering bones, and he turned his head back and saw the iron grate was behind him. He was inside.
Chapter 17

He was driving, breakneck speed, under a heavy black sky that had cracked open and started dumping down snow. Both hands on the wheel. White knuckled, braced for impact. The fact that he was still behind the wheel was better than he'd expected, honestly. He had thought he'd get waylaid by now, overtaken, blockaded, run off the road, some climactic crash and burn and spilling of blood by the side of the interstate. Haunted by the dream of that old Bolivian army ending, again. (Except for how the whole goddamn point of that ending was that Butch and Sundance were together till the last gasp). He'd never expected to make it outside town limits. To be on the interstate, hugging the foothills, seeing their shadow smudging the sickly yellow headlights and billowing sheets of snow, like smog smearing the atmosphere.

He turned his head a couple times to passenger side and it was amazing how disorienting it was, like seeing a stranger's face in the mirror, to see some bleeding-heart civilian old guy (a liability, why had he picked him up again? oh yeah, it was the right thing to do) in Sam's place. Never mind that it wasn't strictly speaking Sam's place because it wasn't the Impala's cabin and that was all wrong too, another question sledgehammering at his brain, like he could beat the answers out of himself: where was his baby, where was his brother and on and on and on.

Minutes ticked by. They were still on the road, driving through this long, long night, and it was still snowing heavy and grey and blinding. He had slowed down when the Chevy's engine whined, the tires scraping ice, fighting for traction. He was remembering that he'd killed a deer his last time behind the wheel. There'd been a long shard of glass stuck in its eye. There was an uneasy turn to his stomach whenever he pictured the dead deer and he decided that was good, a good indicator: he still didn't want to kill Bambi's mother so how out of his mind could he be, really.

"With him tied up back there, in this weather," Jed said in the strange brittle voice of somebody who'd passed hours in petrified silence, "he might get hypothermia, or somethin'."

Oh, right. The prisoner. He had a prisoner and that meant he had an idea of what he should do next. Sort of.

"Don't worry about it," Dean said. "We got bigger problems right now."

"He's my brother."

"Yeah, I got that."

Jed swallowed thickly. "They - that gang - they were comin' after you. They wanted you. The rest of us in there just happened to be in their way."

"Yeah, you got that right," he said, flat. He was so not in the mood to be explaining this shit.

"We can't go back to Caroline's, can't bring more trouble down on her head, she doesn't deserve - "

"Hey, no. Not the plan."

"There's a plan?"

"Yeah, the plan is get the hell outta Dodge and don't die. Don't worry, it's worked for me a ton of times. At least nine out of ten. Nine point five."

"Who the hell are you?"
"Yeah, there's really no answer I can give to that that's gonna make you feel any better. Sorry."

"I don't wanna be made to feel better, you bastard. I wanna know what in the goddamn hell's happened to my brother and my town and my - oh god, Susie - " He choked off.

Dean played another round of if-Sam-were-here-what-would-he-say-to-the-freaked-out-witness, which really just served to drill in again the inconvenient truth that Sam wasn't here and there was somebody else where Sam was supposed to be by his side, and if he couldn't have Sam back he might as well floor it across the ice, spinning out on these long-past-retirement-age tires, until he swooped over the river bank or wrapped around a tree, or hell, plummeted down an old mineshaft and cut to the inevitable crash and burn and black-eyed resurrection, so much for fucking free will, because there was just no way he could hold on to whatever glass shards of control, human feeling, goodness, whatever, on his own.

But it hadn't come to that yet so he managed to dredge up the relevant words in an order that made sense. "They're like a gang," he said. "Makes the baddest coke runners you ever heard of look like cuddly pussies by comparison, and that's because they're, well, they're monsters. I mean, literally. You saw what they did back there, with the teeth and the tearing folks limb from limb and the walking through a hail of bullets...So, yeah, they moved in and they're takin' over cause that's what they do. They either wanna turn you or eat you or tear you apart just for the fun of it."

"Okay," Jed said. "Okay. So what kinda monster? Like in Frankenstein or X-Files or - "

"A new kind. An experiment, I guess. But based on the old folktales, cause those are real too. Yet another example of the remake being shittier than the original."

"So you're sayin' some lab cooked this disease up. Private or government?" Like he might write a congressman or file a lawsuit or something.

So Dean took a stab at explaining the big daddy vampire thing. Once he got started, he found he was telling far more of the underlying story than he'd intended, rambling on and on like he was trying to make a confession or turn this into a foxhole bonding experience. It served to take him outside of his head, funnily enough, wallowing in all that history, for all that it sucked out loud and was littered with emotional landmines that made him want to put his fist through a wall. Or, so long as he was being honest, through somebody's ribcage. Landmines like: my brother watched smirking while somebody beat me in an alley and forced me to choke down monster blood. My brother let me slip away and nearly rip the throats out of the woman and kid who were my last hope that I could be something other than a killer. My brother made me into a weapon and let me off the leash like an attack dog and turns out there's still remnants of that experience screwing up my head. But the real bitch is, I can't even righteously hate him for it because none of it was his fault, he wasn't even there. He was off being the bigger martyr at the time, he was off getting hatebanged in some hole so this sad ungrateful little world could keep on ticking, and it wasn't his fault that he abandoned me, that he left me with this sick shell of himself, he couldn't help it, he could never help it, he had to jump in that hole because it was the right and smart and grown-up thing to do.

When he ground to a pause in the narrative all Jed came back with was, "Maybe it's somethin' in the water, whadya call it - LSD - a contamination that's makin' everybody around here go insane, you and me included."

"If it makes you feel better, imagining that, sure," Dean said. "Whatever you need to think to hold it together. It's fine. That Breck Eisner movie was pretty lame, though."

A big stark shadow out the window to his right, silhouette drawn behind sheets of snow, the outline dimly marking it as a man-made structure. He swerved towards it, took a right off the interstate and
now he was crunching and jostling over muddy road, choppy with ice and gravel, driving in the
direction of what he hoped was an abandoned building, which in this part of old mining country
wasn't too shaky a bet.

He'd gotten it right. He saw the stark outstretched arms of a railway crossing sign right before he was
jolting over the rails. Could just see by the headlights that it was a long clapboard building with a
long overhanging roof and a coal company sign and a tin stovepipe. Pulled the truck's grill around
and shone the headlights across the shapes of other buildings, all dead dark and quiet and probably
long abandoned. Old mining outpost which in the broad light of day would be merely dreary, but
shadowed by the winter storm had a skeletal, blighted, post-apocalyptic gloom.

He let the engine run so he had some light to see by when he got out and went around to the truck's
bed. He found his captive wedged in a seated position in the corner against the cab's rear wall, still
bound by the cables, covered in a light blanket of snow. His eyes were bruised eggplant, sunken
slits, but blisteringly alert. Not afraid. Not yet. Dean pulled out the machete, held it to his throat while
he freed his feet, then said, "Get up."

He marched him at the edge of the machete into the first building he'd seen. Jed trailed behind. The
roof and siding and porch had gone silvery gray with age and neglect; the windows were broken. He
kicked the front door in. The darkness pressed tight like a blindfold over his eyes in this enclosed
space. He had to use his left hand, the right still brandishing the machete, to fumble his lighter out
and ignite it. Had to keep enough of his awareness trained on his prisoner while at the same time
scoping his surroundings by the barest flicker of light. The front room was an office, with big filing
and general storage cabinets and a big desk with an ancient rotary phone on it. Cracked and
yellowed pull shades on the windows. Through an open door on the back wall he saw a sitting room
with a moldering green couch and a tiny television with rabbit-ear antennas sitting on a cart. Behind
the sofa there was a grey discoloration warping the wall, a rip in the plaster. Like something huge -
maybe an animal's pelt - had hung there for a long time and then been pulled violently down. The
place had that derelict smell of mildew and rot with an additional something, maybe coal dust, that
rasped harsh in the nostrils and throat.

He tied his prisoner hand and foot to a desk chair with the cables. Looked at the desk, went
rummaging for what office supplies had been left behind. Went through drawers lined with rat
droppings and dead spiders before he found a letter opener and some brass tacks. He checked the
filing cabinets, hacked away at cobweb thickets, but it paid off - he found a gallon of kerosene and
some rags that the moths had left mostly intact. Lighter, kerosene, rags. Sharp objects. He could
work with that.

The hitch was, Jed was standing between him and the prisoner, an awkward, anxious hover,
twitching when Dean glanced his way. His eyes were tracking the blood still dripping off Dean's
machete. Dean turned to face him squarely. Thought with a little more clarity about what exactly he
was going to do, what it would mean.

"You should leave," he said.

"What?" Jed said.

"Take your truck and get the hell outta Dodge and leave me and him here."

Jed shook his head, eyes hard as pebbles, backbone and jaw stiffening up.

Shit. Another complication.

The prisoner told him, "No, Jed, he's right," his voice low and rough and pained. "Nothin' more you
can do here. Get out. Get as far out as you can."

"You got no right to tell me what to do," Jed said.

"I'm telling you what your only option here is," Dean said. "If you don't do it you are not going to like what happens next."

"I know what you're makin' to do," Jed said, "though I don't know why and I - I can't let you. He's still my brother and you're, well, you're..."

"No, he's not, don't you get that yet - " burst out of Dean at the same time the brother in question said -

"Well that sentiment's just heart-tuggin', if a little late in comin'. Seriously, though. Don't get in the way a this."

He could be cutting out answers right now, answers that would take him to Sam before it was too late. He didn't have time to be making a case or explaining himself. He didn't have time for other people's problems.

"You wanna watch, fine," he spat. Striding over to the man in the chair, sidestepping Jed, pulling a knife and plunging it into the prisoner's thigh. Bitten-off scream, and he twisted the knife just so, nestled right on the line between femur and muscle, steel scraping bone, got another harsh shredded sound. Had been hoping for something more, something teeth-baring vicious, bestial, inhuman, so he could point and say: this isn't your brother anymore, and you should learn to cut your goddamn losses already.

He straightened up, heard the cock of a gun. Jed had pulled a gun on him. He had the dead-eyed look of someone who didn't want to but had already resigned himself to having to use it. But he didn't have the instinct that walked into conflict and saw killing as the first and best option. Without that instinct he'd never be fast enough, would never do what had to be done.

He remembered his father saying something just like that to him, once. After the first time he'd killed -

Dean stepped up to him, grabbed him by the wrist, cranked his hand to the right, snap of trigger finger cracking open the ghost town's hush, and he yanked the gun away, and it should've been that easy. If Jed had just given it up there. Instead he lunged at Dean with a left hook that somehow landed. Followed it up by grabbing Dean's jacket collar, getting up in his face, and he was spitting mad, teeth bared in his fear-blanchéd face. Jabbing at Dean's ribs and the bruised meat packed around them, and fuck, that hurt. This time he hadn't even realized how numb he'd been, how cut off from what his body should be feeling, those long hours while he'd been driving.

It sparked something awake in him - but this time there was no red hot rush, no vicious volcanic energy. It was just training taking over, so automatic it flashed by with no conscious intent behind it. He was slamming Jed against the door of the storage cupboard, hard enough to crack the plywood, forearm cutting across his throat. Thinking that it would be so easy to break his neck. It didn't feel like a temptation, nothing like desire; it felt like the obvious and correct thing to do.

It wasn't any still small voice of conscience that stopped him. It was a surge of self-disgust so fetid and thick he was choking on it.

He dropped his arm, backed away fast. Dimly heard the prisoner yelling something like outrage at him, saw Jed's eyes blown wide, an expression in them that had been there before and was now
stripped raw. He reeled away from it and went back out the front door.

He stood in the snow, noticed that the Chevy's lights were still on, the engine running, burning up fuel to no purpose. He was cold and aching and his bloody fingers were sticking to the barrel of the gun. At some point, he'd dropped the machete. That was probably good.

Within a minute he had an idea of what he would do next, and it only took a few moments to line up the concrete blocks of reason for it. To tell himself it was the only way forward and start to feel that that was true. Once he had the idea, it made like a germ, divided and multiplied, exponential growth until it was an infection raging through him.

He went to the truck, pulled open the passenger-side door and tossed the gun on the driver's seat. He popped the glovebox, rummaged until he found a flashlight whose battery still had some wattage. Then he shut off the engine and the lights and sat in the cold cabin, shakily revealed by the flashlight's pallid yellow beam, but that was fine. His cell was getting a couple bars and that was fine too. Better than he had expected. He made the call. He picked with his fingernail at paint flaking off the dashboard, waiting. The right words this time polished and ready to slide off his tongue. It was what he had to do.

Jed bent over, clenched hands braced on his knees, getting his breath back. He'd been struggling to do that all night, only now it was a physical fight and that brought a strange clarity. He looked at Jonah, tied by jumper cables to an ancient rickety office chair, a knife sticking in his thigh, his bruised eyes shuttered and a grimace on his face that looked more like distaste than any great pain.

"Tell me I should let you go." Jed was pleading, rambling all out of joint, starting to sound as crazy as anybody here, and he knew it. "Tell me there's a reason for this. Tell me you never really meant to hurt anybody and that man out there's crazy and everything he says about you is crazy. This is all just one goddamn unending bad trip. A nightmare. We're all just gone crazy." He had to say these things, had to get them out and hear them hanging in the air and rattling hollow as tin cans so that he could admit to himself that he didn't really believe them. Then the despairing realization swamping him, something like it must feel to watch the home you've lived in and taken for granted all your life torn off its foundations and swept away when the river swells and swells and overflows beyond the mark you thought was possible.

"Maybe you shouldn't," Jonah said. His eyes opened, lids peeling so far back the bloodshot eyeballs were bulging, clear and burning. Cold fire. The fervor of the fanatic - Jed had seen it in the eyes of some officers of the law, some judges, some soldiers going off to war, some Pentecostal preachers when they were making a big show of handling their snakes. "Maybe my time's up. Had a good run, I guess. I finally found my cause, my purpose. It's what you always wanted for me, right?"

"No," Jed said. Ache in his chest, like lungs filling up with cold river water, so horrible the pain in his neck and spine receded to nothing. "I wanted you to be happy. And safe. I wanted you not to hurt anyone, not yourself, not - "

Blood still spurring out of that torn-up flesh, where the blade had twisted.

"For what it's worth I'm sorry it had to end this way between us," Jonah said. "Wish we'd had more time. But I ain't sorry I left. Or for any of the rest of it. Had to be done."

"He's gonna kill you."

"Oh, he'll do a helluva lot worse first. But that's alright cause there's nothin’ he can take from me that
won't shake out in our favor."

"Our?" he said. Disdain covering the hurt he was feeling and he wasn't even glad about that. He didn't want to put on a proud front; he was pretty sure that that was a big part of what had landed them here.

Remembering that night they'd spent in jail. All the things he hadn't said. The mere facts of geography and divergent career tracks and petty crimes that he'd let come between them.

"Yeah, weren't you listening when I told you I found a cause? Somethin' so much bigger than myself to belong to? Laying down my life for it - well, that's kinda the inevitable consummation of that, ain't it? I'll be comin' home a hero. I wish I could explain it all, but - "

"And that means more to you than me? All that's so much better than what you walked away from and never once took an honest look back at?"

"Oh, I looked back. I looked back so damn much it was killing me. It's why I'm telling you to book it out now. Maybe you won't see it now or ever - but I wouldn't if I didn't still - "

"Don't," he said. Swallowed, pressed his eyes shut. Prayed with no more hope to wake up.

Dean's stomach was a stagnant, leaden pool of nausea and dread, and he got out of the truck and paced, six steps left, six steps right, tried to walk it off. The snow falling and falling and the flashlight's feeble beam was diffused by it but he could make out on the other side of the railroad tracks the looming latticework stilts and cylinder tank of a water tower, the domed roof and the wide arms of a big cross that'd been nailed to it. The snow piled heavy on the arms of the cross, so it looked like it was struggling to shoulder the weight.

Dean tried to think of something that would calm him down. Present and future were teetering on a knife-edge, so, he grasped at a memory. He was seven years old and shooting bottles on a fence. He was twenty-seven and telling Jo about this moment when he made his dad happy for a single shining second and she was taking it to heart like a lesson in how to bring back the beloved dead. It's my way of being close to him.

He was twelve the first time he killed a man. He was nineteen and reading all that his dad had recorded about the event. My oldest son is blooded. The man, a hunter, had come after Sam. He wouldn't understand why for decades to come. If I didn't know you I would want to -

Dad had been wrecked, after it happened. Dean had meant to tell his dad that it was okay, but he couldn't, he couldn't say a thing. Dad had taken them to Bobby's, driving through that night. Dean spent the next morning making an imaginary jungle out of the junkyard, getting lost on purpose. Like the colonial explorers in those classics-illustrated comics. Around midday he followed the chattering sounds of a junkyard cat, stalking a squirrel. A fox squirrel, Bobby had taught him to recognize, they made for good hunting in late winter. Now a fat yellow cat was doing the hunting and the squirrel was torn and bleeding because the cat didn't understand that it was not an equal participant in the game of catch-me-if-you-can. The squirrel hadn't made a sound the whole time. Or maybe the cat didn't care, maybe the cat was just doing what came naturally to it: tearing the thing limb from tail until its innards dangled between blood-spattered teeth. And maybe the squirrel should've done its winter foraging in some other goddamned yard.

It was only when the squirrel was completely limp that the cat paused to consider why its toy no longer worked. Licked its chops and walked away, tail in the air. Dean stayed.
Sammy found him there, crouched in the blood-streaked dirt, still watching. What remained of the squirrel was already covered in a swarm of black ants. The ants were damn good at their job. If they had their own ant colony, maybe he and his dad wouldn't need to set bodies on fire. Dean bent down to get a closer look.

"Dean," that high, tight Sammy-voice. "What are you doing?"

He looked up, brushed dirty hands off on his dirty jeans. Put on his face, the face he could show to Sammy. Found his voice again, like he'd just slipped it in his back pocket for safekeeping. "Nothin," he said. "I'm not doin' anything. Let's go see what Bobby's got for lunch."

Dean brushed his hands on his snow-damp jeans, remembering. How Sam's voice could still get high and tight, pleading with him. Drop the blade, Dean. Come home with me, Dean. Tuck the darkness away when you're done walking around inside of it, dealing with the death and decay and ugliness that I never want to see.

When Crowley materialized out of the dark and the snow and the mist off the railroad tracks, like the smoke-and-mirrors apparition of a black-and-white movie villain, he had three minions with him. He was wearing a red cashmere scarf and a poker face that dropped just a hint of a go-fuck-yourself-and-the-horse-you-rode-in-on sneer.

Again, this was better than Dean had expected. Set your expectations low enough and you can always feel like you're coming out on top, was the lesson of the night.

"Don't waste your breath if you only have information to barter," Crowley said. "Let's see if I have it covered: Another Middle-American backwater long past the expiration date, another big baddy with a posse of black hats and some zany scheme, and you and your arrested-development fantasies about some epic moral struggle..."

"I'm not looking to barter here. I'm tellin' you, you should try and be consistent, act in your own interest. Which just happens to rub up against mine. You really gonna let some interloper muscle in on your territory - again?"

"I think I can withstand the loss of a town full of bitter ex-coal-miner souls somehow. They aren't worth that much, especially in Hell's current economy. Sin's in the boom years, hadn't you noticed?"

"These are the Jefferson Star - they're like what Eve made, remember, from that first time you tried to take over the world and got your ass kicked? Super-predators. There must've been a bunch of experiments that've gone wrong or we'd be crawling in them. But as soon as the Alpha's got his formula right they're gonna go viral. This is the one shot we've got to contain this shit."

"We," Crowley said with an arched brow and a snarl starting to stretch his lips back.

Dean ploughed on, pushed away his awareness of what that wounded fury on Crowley's face was about.

"You mop up the town," he said. "Or your expendables thirty-nine through a hundred-and-ten do, whatever. I'll let 'em at it. But you'd better do it before more feds show up and blow your so profitable status quo apart. C'mon. Think about what an operation like this will do for your approval ratings, giving your people an enemy to rally against and a chance to cut loose. Look like a king. I think we both know you need it, after you nearly lost Hell to that red-headed cunt. And then there's, oh yeah, what happened between us last summer."

"Sometimes," Crowley said, "Well, oftentimes I think you're exactly as dumb as I've always said you
are. But occasionally I think Niccolo Machiavelli would return from the dead just to high-five you."

"So which time's this?" His voice was drawling and insolent and he was playing his role, a part of him looking on in surprise that he could muster the patience for it.

"Jury's still out," he said. A smirk, a shade darker than the usual smugness. "But very well, I'm in. On this condition - "

"Go fuck yourself."

"No kisses if you keep dirtying that pretty mouth. Can you even stand to listen to yourself? It's always what can you do for me, me, me. I'll admit, there was a perverse fascination in that, at first, watching you pull everything into your oh, so turbulent orbit, like washed-up sailors to Circe, but it withered somewhat around the last time you repaid me for carrying your water with - if not quite a knife in the back at least a fairly annoying prick."

He pursed his lips, rolled his shoulders, an exaggerated impression of thinking about it. Glanced over at the minions, saw the blank minion-mask on one crack a bit and disbelief and contempt for the proceedings flicker out. Out of habit, he made a mental note to kill that one sometime.

"Yeah, y'know, fair's fair. There is another thing you can do for me too. So fine: I'll take your condition. If you meet mine."

"Without even hearing what it is? You must be desperate. Luckily desperate-you, I almost like. That note was the only reason I took your call, in fact. Very well. This is what I want (shameless pause for theatrical effect): admit that you liked it."

"Liked what?"

He stepped closer. Too close. And why was he wearing that stupid scarf?

"Our time together, as kin and kind. You liked being that thing that so disgusts you now that you tell yourself you'd rather die than go back to it."

He breathed, if not quite in relief, at least holding steady.

"Yeah," Dean said. "Sure, I liked it. That's who I am. I like fuckin' around and I like fucking people up and I like slaughtering at the karaoke bar. My deepest, darkest desire unleashed was to be the Keith Moon of a Midwest roadhouse. I liked blowing off my job and my family and every damn thing that's supposed to make me who I am. Good enough?"

Didn't much like you, he resisted the temptation to say, for which he gave himself a mental pat on the back.

"And didn't you resent them just the tiniest bit for bringing you back?"

A loaded pause before he could muster an angry scoff, which was, of course, damning.

"A baby step, but I'll make allowances for your extremely limited capacity for self-reflection."

"So here's mine: there's two dudes in there and one of 'em's getting sent home, unharmed. One of them's one of the enemy and you leave him to me."

"Oh, let me guess: so you can root around in his innards for answers about where your moose has been damseled away to this Thursday? Fine by me." He did his best devil-may-care shrug, which
was pretty good, Dean had to admit. "In fact, I think I'd like to watch this time."

Dean kept his game-face on with only a slight uptick in effort, thinking: you can always kill him later.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't really an option. It still made him feel better to think it.

"Buckle in then," Dean said, then turned on his heel, led the way into the building.

Jed was crouched opposite the chair where his brother was tied, talking to him. Jed looked up with the expression of somebody who'd probably thought they were beyond being shocked and had just been proved wrong. He bolted upright, spat out, "Who the hell are they?" and Dean had to admire him a bit for not being cowed, for glancing to the machete on the floor like he was wondering if he could get to it first.

Crowley's goons went to Jed and grabbed him by the arms, and he tried to take a swing at them, and they overpowered him none too gently, unless you took into account that they were demons, in which case, at least there were no broken bones.

"Sorry, buddy, but it's time to go," Dean said.

"You lying sack of shit," Jed said. He barked out a harsh and desolate laugh. "I saved your life. I took a chance on you when every bone in my body was tellin' me it was crazy."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Now I'm returnin' the favor."

The prisoner said, "Brother, you have to," in a weary drawl.

"Brother," Crowley said. "What an amusing instance of symmetry. Or at least it would be if I weren't sick beyond death of brotherly would-be martyrdom by now. Say? What if for once we leave no loose ends and dispose of them both?"

Dean drew his Colt, aimed it at Crowley's head. Cocked it, hungry curl of his finger on the trigger. It would be so easy. Funny, how this exhausting fight against how easy things could be was threatening to make his whole body buckle. Crowley had no idea what edge Dean was on, for all that he had played such a part in doing this to him.

"Yes, that would smart and mar my noble brow," Crowley said. "But it might be worth it just to see what happens if you couldn't even save this one good townsman as you so obviously desperately want to. What is it? An image thing? You save this one and that makes you a savior which overbalances the killer?"

"Devil's-trap bullets," Dean said. "And what I'd do to you while you're immobile would do a hell of a lot worse than smart. But hey, you wanted to see it up close - "

Crowley stepped forward, pressed his forehead against the barrel, and smiled, teeth a vicious gleam in the low light.

"I don't doubt it," he said. "In fact, I can taste it all over you. You reek of desperation and cruelty. But never you mind. I was only speaking in hypotheticals."

To the minions: "Please: remove the lucky man to whatever his homestead, and not a hair on his head to be harmed on pain of, oh, use your bloody imaginations for once."

They dragged Jed out, and Jed went mutely, eyes spitting horror and betrayal at both his brother and
Dean. They left the door open and Dean could hear the Chevy's engine coughing back to life, could see the taillights, leaving. The civilian he'd put in the hands of demons so he could torture his brother undisturbed.

Undisturbed if Crowley could curtail the monologuing, anyway.

He shut the door.
Chapter 18

Crowley pulled up the one other chair, straddled it backwards, rested his chin on his folded arms. Dean could feel Crowley's gaze tracking him as he set out his makeshift tools on the desk. Habit made him straighten them, lining them up just so, as if in some other life he could've been a board-certified surgeon.

It occurred to him that Sam wouldn't want him doing this. Sam had these ideas about torturing under the influence (caffeine, alcohol, whatever else you're taking) and about what exacerbated the Mark, and if Sam were here he'd surely be saying stop, let me take over for a while. He'd say get some sleep, like that was totally going to happen.

Sam wasn't here right now.

He was fully conscious that this wasn't the Mark, driving. It was just in the passenger's seat, humming along. Driver picks the music. Yes, it sang when he picked up the knife - he could tell by that particular electric bodily thrill, sharpening his senses to that razor-edge, highlighting the vital points in the body before him: jugular, carotid, femoral, kidneys, solar plexus. The map of nerves, gaps in the skeleton by which to reach the critical organs - but then again, it would have been just as sated if he'd hacked the prisoner's head off, open and shut. The Mark lived and hungered for the final act, wasn't too particular about the build up. No - holding himself back, even while he was slashing and bashung, burning and turning knives in wounds as if trying to uncork the body like a bottle of wine - that was all him. He knew this. He knew it as he opened his mind to welcome the familiar chorus: the screaming, the distant humming, the long road-song of destruction and bloodlust.

"Where's my brother," he asked again, leaving a long score mark along the muscle over the prisoner's ribs. It barely made him shudder. His eyes were smug and it wasn't bravado, was something curled deep inside, an ace in the hole. This would take a while.

He broke a leg off the desk, smashed it into splinters, touched them to his lighter, flicked them like matches. This wasn't getting him anywhere fast. It was just that fire was fun: skin reddening, blistering, cracking, peeling. The smell of burning flesh touched something deep inside, always had. It just couldn't hurt him anymore.

Fast wasn't the point. The point was to stay in control.

He gripped the man's short hair, nails digging into scalp, and slid the tip of the knife under the skin at the point of his jaw, a slight catch from the dulling blade as he started to separate skin from muscle.

Made himself stop before he went too far.

Crowley was keeping his mouth shut and that should've been good. But it just left the feel of his eyes, peeling away the skin of things and assessing what lay underneath every act, and calculating, putting a new picture together from the component parts. It was all sickeningly familiar, what it reminded him of.

Alastair, of course. The Alpha, most recently.

Uriel, Zachariah, Michael, Cain.

Dad too.

And then, those were not Sam's worrying, red-rimmed eyes watching his back and he wanted to
claw them out of their sockets and stomp them under his heel, just for that.

He let go of the hair, drove the knife into the cluster of nerves under the right shoulder, twisted.

"Why not give it up?" he asked at one point. "What exactly do you think you're fighting for here? Some big picture, some greater good? A promised land you're never gonna see?"

The prisoner answered, voice barreling through the silence like a goddamned steam roller. "I've got all the answers you need and are never gonna find. What are you? Who are you? Do you believe in anything? Do you love anyone?"

So maybe that provocation, insultingly blunt and obvious as it was, got under his skin a little. Maybe he went a little crazy after that.

He drove the tip of the blade into the abdomen, in the cradle of the pelvis and dragged it upward, slicing a straight line through skin and muscle and organs up the center of the body. Pulled it out where the arch of ribs peaked, just before the cartilage that held the two sides together. He didn't hear what sound the monster's bleeding, teeth-bristling 'o' of a mouth made, or feel the blood that flowed over the hilt of the knife and his hand. Made a second incision perpendicular to the first, from one side of the chest to the other. A cross.

If only he'd had pliers, he could've peeled back this monster's skin like peeling back a discarded suit jacket. Excised the flesh back from the cavity, an asymmetrical four-pointed flower.

He asked again. Didn't get the answer he wanted. He was pretty sure.

He inserted the blade above the solar plexus, angling it to make a shallow incision up the breastbone. He could see the blood-spattered chest vibrating like an unbalanced washing machine, watched the Adam's apple working furiously in the throat. Screaming, most likely, howling and scraping. The thought drifted in and out of his mind as he excoriated the thin layer of muscle back from the bones.

The Mark was belting along the whole time, turning his pulse into a drumbeat, his blood a white heat storm, static crackling so loud in his head that he nearly didn't hear when the prisoner finally croaked out the words he needed.

Which meant he could finally give in to it, heft the machete, find its perfect balance against his palm. He'd done this a hundred times or thereabouts, it was only the Mark that made this, the executioner's role, feel momentous, like it meant something grand in the scheme of things. Like he meant something.

But after, that sense of consummation didn't quite come. He was an open circuit waiting to be closed, a bleeding wound being oh, so slowly sutured. He could feel the part of himself that was raw and bleeding and gaping open, the shame and disgust of exposed insides, intestines slithering through his hands, and he thought he was going to vomit, blood and acid. His hands shook. His head throbbed.

There was a head rolling, painting a broad blood stripe on the floor, and he didn't feel triumphant or powerful or remotely in control.

He'd been banking on feeling better, after.

"I realize that this might be a precarious moment to draw your attention, squirrel," Crowley said. "But - "

"I'm fine," he said. Wasn't altogether sure why he was bothering with the pretense. On Crowley's behalf, of all people.
"We are, as you mortals say, burning daylight."

Mortals. Was he digging at something with that? He was right though. It was daylight, pale and cold, the blood shining dark red on the dusty grey floorboards. He had no idea what time it was. How long he’d been standing there, after.

"There's a washroom through that door."

"So?"

Crowley sighed, all drawn-out and exaggerated. "Not this teenage-rebellion disdain for hygiene again. I really thought you might be over this particular brand of angst."

Dean honestly had no idea what he was talking about. Idly wondered: wasn't scrubbing his hands after the terrible bloody act the cliched expression of angst, here? He should know. Sam had tried out for a ninth-grade production of Macbeth. He'd brought home the script, had somehow cajoled Dean into reading it and helping him rehearse. It'd been fun, too much fun for him to hold the favor over Sam's head like he'd intended. Hell, he could probably quote it now if he was the kind of person who did that sort of thing.

"We have work to get to," he said. His voice was raspy, grinding. He hated the sound of it. "Work which is gonna involve getting elbow-deep in blood again."

"Yes, but for the in-between moments a clean, controlled appearance goes a long way. Really, squirrel, for all your appallingly lazy, loutish ways you did seem to understand occasion once."

There was something close to affection in Crowley's exasperated drawl and it was what got Dean snapping alert, tense and rubbed raw, rounding on him. Crowley was still straddling a chair, chin cushioned on his forearms, still wearing that stupid red scarf. Dean wanted to stuff it down his throat, of all the violent acts to fantasize about.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Oh, so we are still stuck in that phase."

"This - how we even got here - is your fault." He wanted to know if saying it would make him feel better. It didn't.

"I'd sputter an outraged rebuttal if only I thought you really believed that. We both know that even I can only lead the horse to water..."

He let that hang. Dean fought the urge to scrub his bloodied, shaking hand down his blood-spattered face.

Crowley swung his leg off the chair, stood up, arms still crossed. Funny twitch to his upper lip as it curled against his teeth, like it couldn't decide whether to smirk or snarl. "Say, I think I've figured it out. Why you were so easy "kill the bitch" was all it took to hook you to the lead. You saw in Abaddon a monster, cut from your own kind of cloth."

"Abaddon was my responsibility. She was only banging around topside because I couldn't let Sam...You sonofabitch. I'm not explaining myself to you. I'm not your goddamn buddy and I don't need you to..."

"Approve? Give you a "heckuva job, son," or whatever your dear ol' dad would ever disdain to say? No. I don't suppose you do."
He had to get away and if that meant doing what Crowley had told him, so be it. He stomped off, shut himself in the tiny bathroom with its peeling brown wall paper and ancient fixtures and one narrow bar of a window so high he couldn't see out of it, like in a jail cell. A mirror, dirty and warped, his reflection easily avoided. He turned the faucet's knob and long shut-off pipes gave an exhausted groan, gurgled, and the water came on, spurted from the tap. Crowley's doing, he supposed. Telekinesis, demonic or witchy or whatever.

He washed his hands and face and he watched the blood swirl down the drain, and it was dim enough that it looked like engine oil, almost, and he let the water run and run and stood there, watching.

When he went back into the front office, Crowley was gone. Had up and left him alone with a mutilated corpse and no car. He had a moment when he thought he was going to start smashing whatever furnishings were still left to smash, and then maybe set everything on fire, but the desire drained away and left him once more feeling shaky and empty, a rattling husk. The world closing down to this one empty office for a failed coal-mining operation, cracked shades letting in the winter day, pale and bleak and dim with snow. He backed up against the wall. He sank down on his ass, drew his legs up and leaned his forehead against his knees.

Slumped there for far too long. Long enough to watch the blood dry and for the sense of failure to settle in, make itself at home. He thought *get up* and *Sammy needs you* and *what the fuck is wrong with you* and these things usually worked, spurred him to get off the ground for a literal last stand when he was bleeding out, to get out of bed on the 'bad days' (fuck, now he was thinking like Sam) and so it was terrifying when they didn't.

And then like a lightning-strike revelation the front door swung open and Castiel was standing there, snow dusting his shoulders and hair, dripping from the hem of his coat.

Dean pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. Dropped his hands and Cas was still distinctly present, now shutting the door.

"What are you doing here?" He pulled himself to his feet, shivers wracking his body. Pull it together, he thought. His own voice in his head, not his father's, though they sounded a lot alike, harsh and bitter and disappointed in him.

"You called me, to begin with," Cas said. "Are you -" He ditched the question. Stared at the corpse, hacked in pieces. Blood spilled all over the place. Tracked by Dean's boot prints, to the bathroom and back. "Crowley, he contacted me. Again. He gave me your current location, said I should come straight here. That you would need me. I don't know what his angle is, but that aside, you..."

"I'm doing great here, thanks," he said.

"Clearly," Cas said. Dry but not derisive, his eyes kind.

Dean looked away and swallowed; his hands, clenched into fists at his sides, loosened. "Sorry 'bout cutting off that winning streak in Jersey. But this isn't about me, this is about Sam. Also, we're at war again. Sort of. You remember those Jefferson Starships?"

"I've had all their works dropped into my consciousness, thanks to Metatron."

"Wow. That makes U2 not seem so douchey. But no..."

"I thought *Blows Against the Empire* had its good points."

"What. No. Not what I was talking about, anyway."
"I know what you were talking about, I was attempting banter. The hybrid monsters that the Mother of All was bio-engineering. You believe the Alpha Vampire is trying to carry on his mother's work. Crowley told me. He also told me that this Alpha is after you - said he has a hold on you that could be not incomparable to the hold Naomi had on me."

"How the hell would he know that?"

"You can ask him. I'm sure you'll be seeing him again." His mouth pinched, close to pissily spitting out the words. Then he took a breath, one of those reassuringly human breaths, and his face relaxed back to gentle impassivity. "Right now, I'd like to know more about the nature of this mental connection. There's a lot of lore about the vampire's thrall. Unfortunately, most of what I'm familiar with is from works of narrative fiction. Have you read Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*?"

"No."

"You should. It's excellent."

"Cas, are you -" He blinked, rubbed his face with the heel of his hand, pressing at his eyes again " - are you trying to soothe me with the small talk?"

"I'm practicing my bedside manner." His mouth quirked up at the corner; his eyebrows drew slightly together, affection and concern. Out of place in this dismal-office cum impromptu-torture-chamber. "I want to do an examination..."

"This isn't going to involve probing or prodding of any kind, is it?"

"Not necessarily. Not with this grace, stolen and failing, I can't...I don't know that I have the power to peer deep enough to where the connection lies, whether it is only burned into your synapses or into your very soul. But I will try to trace what has been imprinted on your conscious mind."

He chuckled, dry and pained. "My mind's really not a pretty place to be right now."

Cas sighed, roughened and weary. "I saw you in Hell."

"Fair enough." He'd left his back braced against the wall and regretted it as Cas stalked towards him. He felt cornered. Cas raised a hand, touched his face with an open palm. Cas had healed him like this once, after beating him until his bones splintered.

"Try not to fight it," Cas said. Dean didn't know what trying meant outside of fighting.

This is for Sam, he told himself, because that had always been the fastest means to get him to surrender.

Cold white light, searing. Images burned nightmare-vivid behind his eyes, flickering past like a glitching film reel. He saw himself, turned. His brother's wolfish smirk, watching. He saw twinned girls in white dresses, teeth like bone needles. He saw those ancient calculating eyes looking at him from the other side of the mirror. He saw the cover of *Alice In Wonderland*, classics-illustrated edition. He saw Sam's red-rimmed eyes flinching when he grabbed a bottle by the neck. He saw blood spurting from the jugular of a waitress name-tagged Mary. He saw a bottle-red woman with a smile like a knife, mirroring his own.

Cas dropped his hand, let it rest a moment on Dean's shoulder, then took it away. He shook his head. "Only echoes," he said.

"The hell does that mean?"
He paused, considering. "There can't be a full psychic link - a thrall - between you and the Alpha, or he would have tracked you down by now."

"Yeah, and?"

"He wants you, for much the same reason that Crowley - "

"Crowley's over it." He bit out the denial, too quick. Embarrassing how transparent it was. "He gets that he bit off more than he could chew with this one - with me. He tries again and he'll choke on me. And yeah, that sounded wrong the moment I said it. Whatever. I'm a prize. Everyone wants me. Everyone's always wanting something..."

"Then why does Crowley seem to come whenever you call?"

"You really gonna get on me about this? You, of all people?"

Cas stared at him, eyes dark and shadowed and Dean felt something creep at the back of his mind, because stares like that meant something coming, something bad, that you should run while you still could. Except that this was Cas, here to help him, friend and brother, and anyway, he was pretty sure he could take him down now, if he had to.

But no. No, that wasn't how it was supposed to go. He'd gotten it turned around because it was Cas who was supposed to take him down, who he was depending on to do it, when the time came round. Cas, who had to be capable of it.

"The vampire-bat signal. These visions," Dean said. "They could really screw me over if I got hit with one at the wrong moment. Can you do anything about them?"

"I can try," Cas said. "With spellwork, Enochian. A general protection sigil, to prevent outside psychic interference"

"That'd be great. There gonna be anything sticky involved?"

Cas glanced down at the blood tracked under their feet. "No."

"Then let's get the hell on with it. Sam doesn't have...Let's just stop burning daylight, okay?"

"You still haven't told me - "

"He's in Purgatory. The Alpha. Everything. We have to go back."

"Oh." Cas looked away a moment, eyes shuttered. "You'll have to remove at least two layers."

"Course I do." He stripped off jacket and overshirt and tossed them on the chair Crowley had straddled. More shivers were wracking his body, cold and exposure from a late winter's day and a building with no heating and broken windows - that was all. Whiskey would help.

"And roll up your sleeve."

He did. Cas pressed two fingers to his left shoulder, under the edge of his t-shirt, touching lightly where his hand had once burned and scarred. He was tracing letters and murmuring along with it, Enochian. The tips of his fingers seared like flame, like holy water, but maybe that was only bodily memory of that first touch, the one in Hell when Castiel'd had hands that could crush cities and demons and bones with their grip. How could he be sure of anything he felt? His body didn't even know if it was in pain or not. He could feel Cas trace a circle, a binding ring, the pentagram inside it,
four Enochian letters at the four cardinal directions, and the fifth point was left to the sanctity of the spirit, whatever the hell that meant. Could it really be that simple to sort out some of the mess in his head?

"When's the last time you slept?" Cas asked.

"I've pushed through longer."

"You do realize that is in no way reassuring."

His fingers had stilled but he hadn't taken them away. Was pressing the heel of his hand against Dean's shoulder as if to brace him.

"Did'ya get it done?"

"Yes."

"Hand off, then."

Cas dropped his hand. Dean couldn't resist rubbing his shoulder.

"We have to go," he said. "Sammy, he's -" 

Cut off by his phone, he gave an embarrassing shuddery jerk at the loud buzz. He reached in his jeans, pulled it out, looked at the screen. Expecting Crowley, futilely and stupidly hoping for Sam. What he got was Jody Mills.

Uneasy twist to his stomach before he'd processed why, he answered.

Her voice was tripwire taut, snapping, "There a little something about this town you forgot to mention, Dean?"

He got the sit rep out of Jody, hung up, and marched outside while tossing a half-assed explanation over his shoulder to Cas, who trailed him. There was the '78 Lincoln Continental, up to its armpits in muddy sleet and with a heavy hood of snow. Dean made for the driver's-side door before realizing he didn't have the keys or any leverage to get Cas to toss them over. Loitered there like an idiot while Cas cut in front of him, got in.

Cas was driving. Dean was in the passenger's seat of somebody else's car, again. Nothing to distract him from haranguing himself for forgetting Jody and letting her drive blind and straight into enemy-occupied territory.

Cas had the radio tuned to jazz. Jazz and Jefferson Starship, that couldn't really be Cas' taste in music, could it? He'd fucked up that whole role-model thing even worse than he'd thought if it was.

The snow had stopped and they were driving through fallow fields, evenly blanketed in white, foothills receding but the mountain silhouettes brooding around them, fog-wreathed white peaks merging into the low white clouds. An arc of pale blue high over their heads. It was just past two 'o clock and they were driving west and the sun's cold light was searing his eyes. He rifled through the glovebox for sunglasses, didn't find any.

"You have to tell me," Cas said, out of the blue and twenty minutes down the interstate. "How bad is it, really."
Dean pressed his stinging eyes shut, rubbed them with his index fingers. Still had to squint at the pale daylight. "I can't worry about that right now. Not when Sam's depending on me and I can't be falling apart. I can't think about it. We'll - we'll do what we always do, take it one fubar at a time. I can't be the crisis today."

"So it's bad, then?"

"Yeah, it's bad." He looked at Cas' hands on the wheel, calmly resting at ten and two. "You meant it, right? What you promised."

"What did I promise?"

"Dude, really? Me going darkside, you tossin' me into the sun. This ding any bells?"

"I never gave you my word."

He swallowed, took that in a moment. Looked at Cas' profile, the tense line of his mouth. Couldn't read any damn feeling off him. "Great. So that's a hard "no" then?"

"I didn't say that either. We'll - we'll cross that bridge if it comes to it."

"So you're just gonna go off how you feel about me on the day it happens? C'mon, man. Would it help if I brought up that time I tried to gank you when you went all Jim Jones on us?"

"You tried to compel Death to kill me."

"Yeah, and?"

"He didn't appreciate being made your instrument. Neither do I."

"What the hell are you talkin' about? I'm askin' you for help because you're my friend and I don't want to...Cas, I can't count on anyone else. You're the only one who can do it. If not for me, then do it for Sam and for all the bodies that are gonna drop...You saw what Cain was doing. Cain, who was a fuckload more experienced with self-restraint than I am. You think you could play bystander to - "

"Yes, and need I remind you that I couldn't stop Cain? He would have killed me."

"Well, better be sure and get the drop on me before I hit that level, okay."

Cas said nothing in reply. Dean's mind was thrown jarringly back to lying, beaten, in a hospital bed, Cas' presence dark and solid and, for reasons he had no desire to explore, comforting, even while confirming what had been his worst fears at the time. *It's not blame that falls on you, it's fate.* Remembering telling him *I can't do it. I'm not all here. I'm not strong enough.* It was that same sense he had now that inescapable fingers were slowly closing around his throat.
One long sticky stretch of time had passed and it wasn't good that she was still in this place, she
knew that much, with every instinct screaming for her to make a break for the getaway car and put
this town in the rearview as she'd done so many times before. Luther - he'd be telling her to run. He
had always been the cautious one. Revenge isn't worth much it you end up dead, he'd said. But then
he'd had to go and teach her something else by up and dying on her, teach her that everyone had to
go sometime, and what was anything worth then?

There was all this broken glass, all these smashed bottles and shot glasses and jugs and mirrors and
lamps and windows, and the shards were all jumbled up together, glittering silver and amber and
green and smeared crimson with blood. Beautiful. It all smelled of alcohol and blood, and every
brand and blood type had its own signature and the scents were running riot together, swamping her
senses, tickling her nostrils and the back of her throat and dripping down her fingers and beating in
her ears, her head swimming with it. The bar's wood and plaster and Formica were all smashed up
too, bullet riddled and cracked and splintered. All these bodies heaped together in little piles, like
they'd been dragged into place, but they hadn't been, they'd just somehow all stampeded into each
other and died on each other's necks.

Blood, blood everywhere and all of it dead. A survivor or two had lingered after the thick of it was
over, but barely long enough for her to have a sip, and now it was all toxic corpse blood, not a drop
to drink. She was sitting on one of three structurally sound bar stools, drinking from one of the few
un-smashed bottles of Wild Turkey, and not running. Not yet.

Glimpse of the grey glow of early, early morning as the front door was kicked in again and the Chief
came waltzing in, her eyes peeling this place foot-by-foot and her nose looking sniffily down on it
all, her thin slash of a mouth sharply downturned. This was what she'd been waiting for, she thought
dimly, another of those honey-and-vinegar lectures the Chief seemed to get off on more than killing,
which was just perverse - she preferred sadism to sanctimony - although maybe this time the Chief
had come to try and kill her, which would be less aggravating. If this was a movie this would be right
about the time the boss would try and dispatch her, his wayward femme fatale for hire, but she wasn't
the kind who'd go down without a fight, and as for who would win, well, that would depend on who
had their name over the title, wouldn't it? She slid her eyes about under lowered lids, scanning for
something with a long sharp edge, hadn't anyone thought to bring an ax to the party?

The Chief said, "I've got a message from the boss."

The boss, Kate thought. Not 'our father' and not even a touch reverent. She wondered sometimes
about the loyalties of these strange new creatures. In theory, they had the same psychic connection to
the Alpha, who was also their creator, albeit in some secular Frankenstein sense, as her kind did. But
sometimes she wondered. She knew how Frankenstein turned out after all. "He says don't bother
your pretty little head anymore 'bout hunting the Winchester. We've got him where we want him
now."

"Is he really?" Kate drawled, taking another swig from the bottle. Letting it burn slow down her
slack throat. Her face was on fire and she had that jittery feeling, like her blood was restless under
her skin. "Because I'm pretty sure that should be dead and burned."

"Oh, sister." Her curls bounced like Shirley Temple's, shaking her head. "You are at risk of turning
into yet another sad little cautionary tale about revenge."

"And how about your rhyme and reason? What has your ambition gotten you? You're still little more
regarded than the clean-up crew of this sorryass town, with nothing to call your own."

The Chief flashed her ruby-painted claws, studied them by the light of one of the few hanging lamps that hadn't been blown out. This was how she geared up for most of her lectures. Shouldn't have backtalked her, that just set the bitch up. "I'm looting this town for the road show, darlin'. That show you could've been a star in. What are you makin' to be now?" She paused. Kate refused her the satisfaction of trying to answer, which just threw the woman back on her favorite subject - herself. "You know, I've been fightin' the dark since I was fifteen and had to put down my daddy when he had a code black case of the DTs on top of a red hot temper. I've been fightin' ever since against men who'll never concede this is a job for a woman, against the methheads and the wifebeaters, against the kids who came back from the war and men who got laid off when plants and factories closed, no fault of their own, but they're a menace to the public all the same. I've been fightin' and fightin' until that's all there is. Until I didn't even know what...Until I was reborn. And now it doesn't even matter what - because I know fightin' was all I was born to do." She kicked a corpse's legs out of her path, pacing across the bar like a preacher across the stage of the Tabernacle. "This is a gift. And to think that you're blowin' it by pining after your lost honey and rarin' after a man who'll be as good as dead soon anyway."

She tossed her head back, dropped the bottle to her side, a chokehold on its neck. "Don't you talk about him." The anger had started to ebb away, but she clung to it like the last glow of warmth on an arctic night.

"Revenge won't bring you peace, child. Only thing that will is givin' in to what you were made for."

"I wasn't made by him," she said. "And I'm not your goddamned sister."

"Then whatever are you doin' here, girl? The maker must've seen something in you to mark you as worth saving - oh, I know you were fixin' to up and die, drown yourself in the river of your grief for your lost love when he found you. He gave you a second chance, because that's what he does, ain't it? The resurrection and the life." She laughed, dry and barking, like this was a particularly cutting and original blasphemy. "Can't see why for the life of me - nothin' personal, honey, it's your kind. Old and hidebound to your instincts and sentimental as all get out..."

"And what in the hell is so special about you? You and your kind. You couldn't take down one man jacked up on one magic 'roid - the way I see it you're not our master race, you're mutts. And if you're so high and mighty over me, why are you stooping to giving me peptalks-"

"I asked him if I could kill you," she said. "He said 'not yet.' So this is the last chance you're gonna - "

Blasting out the ultimatum came the sound of the bar's few intact windows shattering. She whipped her head around, saw great ropes of black smoke shooting into the room, slithering down the walls and across the floor, then creeping into the nooks and crannies of the bodies, seeping under their skin - only the human ones, she noticed. Then the corpses were springing up, walking dead - no, blinking open solid black eyes, baring their teeth in kill-hungry grins.

Demons. She'd seen them only once before and so it took a moment to process. She thought of the smoky special effects on a couple TV shows first. Demons. the Alpha had mentioned the forces of Hell, once, being among their natural-born enemies, but she hadn't paid any mind because what he was talking about hadn't sounded any different to the bible thumpers threatening her with eternal fire if she wasn't ever vigilant.

"Run," the Chief said. "They can jack you but not me. If you don't want me puttin' you down after all - "
She swung off the bar stool, then picked up the stool and swung it into the face of the demon blocking her way. He crumpled, which was mighty anticlimactic for a first engagement with the forces of Hell. She ran past him, for the back exit, out the door into the alley, ran down until she was turning onto the blighted back street, running through the snow past a shut-down factory. Something in her chest squeezed and burned. A bleak clarity washed over her mind. She thought about the Winchester, thought about how if she went after him he'd be the death of her. She thought about dying and how she knew just where she'd be going and who she'd see when she got there. She thought about peace, illusive and unreal. She made her choice.

And to think, that he would ever be letting Cas drive him through the icy streets of some snow-bound mountain town, watching as Crowley's demons and the Alpha Vampire's GMO monsters fought a turf war over who got to exploit the currency of the human body and soul right in front of his eyes.

Fires burning up cars and trash bins and a store or two. Glass from windshields and storefront windows smashed and strewn all over the place. And then there was the hand-to-hand and tooth-and-claw fighting, which was messy and loud and probably had (hopefully blurred to hell) cellphone footage of it already uploaded to the internet, and though there weren't currently crowds of bystanders gawking at the fighting that probably just meant enough of them had gotten killed to scare off the rest.

And yeah, there was a part of him sickened by how many innocent lives were being cut short at the root as he watched. But Dean understood the immensity of what was going on: this wasn't some routine possession get-up, wasn't some punk band of demons raising a little Hell in some hick town. And it was hard to watch as both sides did such terrible things, no jus in belo, no squeamishness, no good side/bad side distinction for the ignorant bystander to know who to root for – the demons clawing and slashing their foes to pieces, the monsters biting into human flesh and tearing it off in wet stringy pieces, only for the demons to smoke out when one host wasn't worth shambling on with – but in something like this, something this big, sacrifices had to be made. Shame that these people, these stolen meatsuits, and these people who'd been seduced and entrapped and turned against their will, people that would never see their families again, would never sit down for a meal in a diner or go to work or watch TV or even sneeze again, had to be the ones to go down, but he couldn't not see that there was a big picture here.

He had to clean up this mess so that he could go after Sam.

Front Street, where the fighting had first broken out, was home to the worst of it. The street looked like it'd been hosed down with blood. There were armored trucks that'd been blasted to pieces and there were bullet holes riddling nearly every storefront, but no more firing because all the ATF agents were dead. But somebody had to have radioed for backup. That would mean choppers in the sky and national media coverage. Would mean casualty numbers beyond what he thought he could live with. Exposure, risking cracking the lock on that Pandora's box always in their keeping. But he couldn't think about that right now.

They drove to the police station, stopped once when a body hit the hood, rolled up almost to the windshield's fracture point, but Cas hadn't been going as fast as Dean had been yelling at him to, so it rolled off again and Cas swerved around it. The fighters pretty much left the Lincoln alone, the demons probably having been ordered to by Crowley and the monsters not recognizing that they were worth the trouble. They pulled up to the station, which had been under siege when he'd been talking to Jody but now there were only few demons stationed on the front steps, like look outs, not the besieging crowd he'd expected. That thought brought back memories from a time when he'd been
fighting alongside and in defense of humans and against demons and it had all been very simple.

Cas pulled into the station's lot, through a barbed-wire chain link gate that'd been smashed open, and parked.

In the second before he got out of the car, Dean indulged in a fantasy. Maybe, when they all got out of here, they could make their Vegas trip a bi-annual thing. Bring Cas with this time, since apparently he was game for it. They could scam some gullible douchebags at a bar with real showgirls and blow it all on poker and roulette, and Dean would probably be drunk and stupid by the time they ever made it to the blackjack table, but it would be fine because apparently Cas could take over now and make them a killing. The next day, nothing on the itinerary so they'd go another round: same douchebags and showgirls, same balls and cards and chips, red and black, tequila and Coke, day after day, like clockwork hedonism, comfortably routine. Yeah, he could do that.

He squeezed his eyes shut, forced in a breath.

He hacked a couple heads off on his way inside but was mostly met by black-eyed mooks who cowered away from him. One of the demons rounded a corner from a hall, nearly ran smack into Cas, recovered with a snarl and jab that knocked Cas into Dean. Dean shoved back against Cas, righting him, and all in the same motion Cas was drawing his blade and stabbing the demon - who was possessing what smelled like a wino, probably busted from the drunk tank - in the neck. He paused a moment, thinking that it was too bad drunk-tank guy had had to die just because the demon riding him was an idiot who thought he could get away with punching an angel.

"Can't you do the thing with the hand and the light and poof! all better now?" he asked. Cas shook his head. Dean didn't press for a full report on how shorted his powers were. This was not the moment for more bad news.

There were a lot of bodies, or pieces of them, and a lot of flimsy plywood desks and ancient bulky computers and file cabinets that had gotten overturned and he had to pick his way around the mess, and all of it was splashed red red red like somebody had pumped blood through the fire-alarm sprinklers. He was smelling burning flesh, like somebody must've brought a flame-thrower and he'd missed it.

He found Crowley and Jody by following the shouting down a side hall to an empty cell block, where they were backed by four gore-spattered demons dressed in the obligatory dull banker suits. They were face to face, within spitting distance. Jody was matching Crowley for volume, which did say impressive things about her lungs.

"I've got no reason to buy a word of this."

"Oh, how about because I rescued you!"

"You showed up to kill to kill a bunch of people when I happened to be in trouble! So thank you, Sir Galavant."

Jody had a machete in her hand, and she and the machete were splattered with blood, some of which was dripping from a razor-thin gash that ran from her hairline to her cheekbone, barely missing her eye. She had a blow-dart gun strapped to her back. Darts dipped in dead man's blood, Dean guessed. She had held the line at ground zero of a zombie outbreak so no, he wasn't totally surprised she'd gotten through this so far in one piece.

He said her name. She swung around from facing Crowley, turned her glare on him. Took him in and her face softened, new worry lines between her brows. He'd washed off the blood on his face
and hands but the bulk of it was still dripping from his clothes.

"Crowley," Cas growled, a dog guarding the yard. Did that make Dean the yard? Then, courteously, he said, "You must be Jody Mills. Sam and Dean - and Bobby Singer, once - have spoken highly of you."

"Castiel? Holy tax accountant?" she said, then blinked a couple times, her cheeks pinkening, and she rubbed them with the heel of her hand. Her other hand was twitchily swinging her machete by her thigh. "Sorry, that was... It's been a long day. Days. A week. I plead not enough caffeine and blood loss. Anyway, it's good to finally meet you, Castiel."

"He didn't lay a finger on you, did he?" Dean said, glaring at Crowley. Not because he actually thought Crowley might have, but to make clear where he stood on the matter. Whose side he was on here.

"Not lately," Jody said. "He did try to wriggle into my head and pull one over me again. Told me that he and his crew are only here because you called him in."

"Yeah," he said. "Well, that's."

She stared at him, paling, her lips tightening. That look again. "It's true."

"There was no other option," Dean said. "The monsters here, they would've bled this town dry before moving onto the next one over. And the next. What they are - it's a contagion, designed to spread. The demons we can keep a lid on."

"That doesn't square with anything you've told me about demons."

"Well, he's had a bit more of an up-close-and-personal experience with them since then," Crowley said, his mouth curved like a cutlass. He had blood on his teeth.

"Yeah, I know." Her glare swung back on Crowley. "Because of what you did to him. You poisoned him."

"Who told you that? Was he taller than a lamp post or just dumber than one? And were those his exact words, because that would be dreadfully ironic if - "

Looking back to Dean with desperate eyes, Jody said - "These demons, they're possessing people. People who're getting killed."

"Yeah, about that," Dean said, to Crowley. "Any reason your grunts couldn't just ride the Alpha's freaks out of here instead?"

"This Alpha of yours thought of that and warded them to the bone, literally. He saw this conflict coming - let us pray he didn't bank on you starting it tonight," Crowley said, and he was sidling away from Jody and towards Dean, looking sidelong at him. "My grunts - most of them will smoke out afterwards. The meat in these parts really isn't up to our dress code."

One of the demons who'd been blending with the scenery rolled his eyes before schooling his features back into a proper minion glower.

"Sometimes, there is no good option," Cas said. "I'm sure that Dean had reasons for what he did." Which wasn't exactly an unqualified endorsement, but he would take it, even cold comfort better than nothing. Everything, out there, spiraling out of control these days, and he couldn't stop it, couldn't do the right thing, couldn't consult the damn rule book because somebody had ripped the
damn pages out. He suspected that he had had something to do with that. He'd tried to save Sam, and he'd fucked his carefully pieced together personal universe inside out. He'd sewed together a demon to shut the doors of Hell and she'd broken loose and started another pointless territorial war. He'd done what he had to to fix it, made himself into another goddamn weapon, and look at what had happened - look at, well...

"It's not like I can really fight you on this, is it?" Jody said. Looking at him, standing between Crowley and Cas.

He didn't realize he was chewing on his lip until he tasted the iron tang of blood on his tongue. For some reason, something about the way Jody was looking at him now, his thoughts skittered to Lisa, to that night when he was half out of his head - out of human - shoving her against a wall and feeling the beat of blood in her throat, the sharp teeth slicing from his gums. Heat was rushing to his face, a sickly mixture of shame and rage. The long grey shadow of late afternoon and the cell bars and the walls were slanting in, pressing every one - every live wire of a living body - too close to him.

He took a breath and told her, the words unsteady, rasping, where Sam and Alex (not that he'd thought to ask about Alex) were now.

He watched her face, swallowing down every feeling but a resolute calm, as she asked, "So how the hell do we get there?"

So

She drove by the motel where she'd watched the girl snag prey with a sob story and a tragic hairdo, the roadhouse across the street and nothing beyond it but the deep spruce and pine woods, now mantled in snow, utility poles and crows on the wire. She idled in the parking lot in a stolen blue sedan with a sheen that reminded her just barely of the LaSalle, thinking that she'd kidnap the kid at the check in, stash him in the trunk so she could ration him out on her long drive. She got out, parking lot covered by a smooth blanket of snow, quiet. Air still and dry and clear. A scent hanging on it, thick as cotton.

It was the girl's, spiked more potently than usual with sweet tangy fear. So she must've checked in here, this last motel on the interstate before there was nothing but the occasional rest stop across state lines. She tracked the scent to room 18. She knocked on the door. The girl let her in. Her hair was lank, unwashed. Her face was milky and unmade. She was wearing a grey hoodie sweatshirt with a Disneyland logo, Minnie Mouse, of course. The room was dim, lit only by the television, on mute, some cooking show, manicured hands cracking an egg over a boiling pot.

"Way to go on the lam, Thelma - or are you more of a Louise?"

"I'm not," she said. "I'm just...just taking a little time out for myself."

"Ooh, rebel girl. " She paced around the room, bare but for one floral-patterned duffle bag, a greasy box of pizza and a Styrofoam cup of coffee. "So little miss brainwashed finally bought a clue. You get it now, what your daddy really thinks of you? You're nothing but an obedient little whore to him. He's been keeping you around because you can lure in even hunters with that oh so human heart. Other than that, you're past your use-by date. He's moved on to new blood. Virginal and clean." She didn't say this to be cruel, not even those last words; she was just curious, prodding and goading.

"Stop," she said. It wasn't a weak plea. Her eyes had a razor's glint, never mind that she had no real edge to back it up. She had backed up against the table, a defensive upward hunch to her bony shoulders. "You think you can say anything to me that I haven't already been screaming at myself? I know. I've known for months and months now. Ever since New Mexico..."
She smiled. "Oh honey, I'm here to admit that I underestimated you. I thought you were textbook stockholmgirl. Never thought you'd have the grit to try and run. Hell, I didn't think you even dreamed of getting out."

"Do I look out to you?" Those calf eyes of hers were so much older now, grey shadows cradled in their sockets. A child no more, except for in the sense that when you cut short someone's childhood before it can die a natural death a part of them will stay a child forever.

The air was thin, a wire stretched taut. The TV wasn't actually muted, the volume had just been downturned to indecipherable static. Frustrated bzzzing of a fly crawling the window.

She made up her mind.

What she said was: "There's some epic clash of civilizations going down next door, haven't you heard? Nobody's looking for little ol' you and me."

"What do you mean they're not looking for you?" There was real curiosity in her eyes, a dubious quirk to her mouth. "You were in on the plan. He trusted you. He loved you." Envy made her eyes shine, pretty and young again.

She almost laughed at that last bit, bit her tongue instead. "Honestly? I've never been much of a true believer. Except, of course, in love." She smiled again, genuine feeling behind it this time. "I was just chasing the storm. I thought it was a way to forget everything I knew. Turns out, the past gets more second lives than we do. So I'm hightailin' it away from this roulette round."

"He'll see you," she said, a tiny frown line drawn between her brows. "He'll see, and he will find you."

"For he is the lord? Maybe. But his eye's on other things at the moment, and I'm gonna head down to 'Orleans and find myself a conjure woman, see what can be done about those chains that bind us. There's more powers in this world, girl, besides his."

"Us?" the girl said, level and numb, but with tight-clenched jaw and upturned chin. "What, you wanna take me as a snack on the road? Well, you're right. I am tired of it. Tired enough to slit my own damn throat first."

"No," she said. "Not as a blood slave, sweetie. I've got other plans for you. I've been looking back, lately. And...I'm thinking it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to have a family of my own again."

She reached for the girl's neck, thumb to pulse. Whether it was due to weariness, habit, or desire, the girl leaned into the touch.

She detoured west, taking a switchback through the foothills so as to circumvent the town, while the girl slept sprawled on the back seat, her mouth parted, drooling blood. The kid from the check in was stuffed in the trunk. The girl would be hungry when she woke. Sunglasses on to shield her from the sinking pale sun, she smiled, remembering.
Alex was half-conscious for a while, some untrackable time. She just lay like a corpse on a slab, and by increments the discomfort nudged the edges of her consciousness, a tweak, a twinge.

Pretty soon it was a hard pinch, and it gradually started working up into a burn around her wrists and panic throbbed in her throat, the kind of panic she hadn't felt since Momma had looked at her like she knew what she was thinking of doing. Something was wrong inside her. She opened her mouth, gasping for air, gasping - "Please, somebody, come get me, this isn't right..."

She became aware that she was dreaming. In her dream, Momma was holding her, strong hands wrapped around her shoulders. Rachel was lying at her feet, eyes of glass and throat torn open. Her blood, thin and salty, was coating Alex's teeth, thick and tasting like iron where it lodged at the back of her throat. The blood was like a gag. She couldn't make a sound.

Good girl, Momma murmured in her ear, except it wasn't Momma's voice, it was deeper and older and a man's. Cold breath, slippery and visceral as a tongue, swept down her neck. Alex felt a gnawing openness inside her, like when she was hungry, except she felt a lot like throwing up. She opened her mouth and blood sprayed over Rachel and the kitchen linoleum.

She opened her eyes.

Her eyes were seared and blinded by artificial light, sterile and white, lapsing into surreal surroundings: she was on a table in a white room, both her wrists strapped to the barred railing of a bed. A hospital bed. Her blood was being drawn with a syringe. A prick, a sting. Cold metal, invasive. This wasn't what she had expected. Her face was wet.

A middle-aged man in a white lab coat, drawing her blood. Like she'd slipped through a tear in the fabric of reality (or sanity) and fallen into a hospital drama. But no, he wasn't sexy enough, not at all, and she...

He said, "I'm sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid we can't avoid causing some discomfort..." His voice droned like an insect's, coming from somewhere high on the ceiling. "I do thank you for your unique and invaluable contribution to my field."

"What do you mean?" she said. Her voice was a whisper, a scratch.

"Oh child, I think you know," he said and then his hand was nearing her cheek, was moving as if to smooth her hair away. She bared her teeth at him, a snap. He smiled, condescending and smug, but didn't touch her. "You're a very special girl. What you've passed through, crossing between two worlds... Perhaps it doesn't feel like it now, but it really is a gift."

"Fuck you," she said. His smile didn't waver.

When he was done drawing her blood and taping up the hole in her arm, he unstrapped Alex from the table and said, "You're free to go, my dear."

She blinked salt-stinging eyes at him. "Where?" she said.

"Wherever you can run," he said. "Your final destination is all in your hands. Do try not to die. Father would be disappointed. He has high hopes for you."

No option but to obey, she fled through the room, this huge and strange white room, with its large
plastic tarps and industrial-sized freezers and hospital beds. There were two doors. The first she tried was locked. The only other, forcing her to cross back to the opposite wall while the man in the lab coat watched her, amused, opened easily. A flight of stairs, polished hardwood lit by soft lamp light, going up. It lead to a hallway, also lit by brass lamps, broad pinewood beams, the look of a mountain lodge. Dim silhouette of mountains out the occasional window, dark sky slowly paling to grey.

Hours of wandering labyrinthine corridors, usually ending in locked doors. A bedroom or two. An old fashioned washroom, the water running. The windows were unbreakable (she couldn't say if she was trying to get out or to get a sharp edge) and the sky was iron and smoke.

She knew from the start she was being hunted.

It felt like hours before she saw them. Something, sometimes looking human, sometimes distinctly not. Each one was a jacked up hodgepodge of creatures cobbled together in ways that shouldn't be biologically possible. Scales and fangs, feathers and fur all on one body. They switched from crawling on all fours to running on two as easily as she breathed. But they all, always, had glowing red eyes.

When they caught her, she let them feed. It was a game to them and if she put up a struggle that would just be playing their game. They had excellent control. They never took so much that she couldn't run away afterwards. She was a delicacy to them, not necessary sustenance. She was something rare and strange, a girl who'd been a monster, a girl who'd come back. (Was that right?)

"Be good and you'll be one of us one day," they purred in her ear, voices of velvet sheathing razors. "But not yet."

Alex was familiar with this song and dance.

The funny thing was, they brought her something in exchange. Brought her food, charred meat of uncertain origin, and water, like this was a symbiotic relationship. I look after you, we look after each other, that's what kin means...

She was lonely and scared and overwhelmed. But it only half felt real. The other half of her felt like this was happening to somebody else, and not even a real person, a girl in a story, a fairy tale. Like how she'd been abducted once before. Kidnapped. Stolen. She could think clearly about that now and it still didn't feel real.

And then she found the journal. It was in one of the unlocked rooms that she had taken to sleeping in, though she tried not to sleep in one place for more than a few hours. Irrationally, above all else, she feared them taking her in her sleep. A desk with a scroll top concealing a typewriter, with a drawer that she opened, hoping for a letter opener. As it happened, she found one. Also a small vial of something dry and powdery. Blood perhaps. From a dead man? Probably. Little good as that would do her. A small leather bound book. A cracked pen, a big black stain from the ink.

She opened the book. The first word her eyes fell on was the header, in bold strokes of ink, long faded: Purgatory. Then the date: 1917.

"Shit," she said. She read the entry. Then the next. She got to the end in roughly three uninterrupted hours, by the internal clock she consulted to continue feeling sane.

Then she beat her fists bloody against the window, screaming.
Chapter 21

Dean dreamed of the woods again.

He woke up with a hard start and braced an arm on the door handle. The Impala's door handle. Against all odds, he'd gotten her back from the bar lot where Sam must've come looking for him when he...Yeah.

Circumstances had piled up pretty fast after that, a storm happening somewhere on his periphery, closing in around him, while he was working on keeping it together, on getting up a plan, on moving forward through the thick choking rush of minutes, hours, days.

Never enough time these days.

At the moment, as Crowley had been good enough to warn them with his parting shot, the real bona fide feds and emergency services would be pouring in, still occupied with securing the area, blockading all roads into town, containing the persistent fires triggered by ruptured gas lines and fallen transformers.

He could imagine it, a whole other storm going on somewhere around him. Burnside crackling with radio traffic, callsigns and ten-codes snapping across the airwaves as the first responders desperately theorized over what the hell had happened, got only impossible hallucinatory accounts from the shell-shocked witnesses. State troopers would be the first on the scene, the first to set up a barricade on the interstate. Choppers roaring overhead, silver and white streaks in the grey sky, the Red Cross.

He had to get out of these mountains before it was too late.

He had to get to Sam.

He was in the passenger's seat of his own damn car.

"Are you all right?" Cas asked.

"Yeah," Dean said.

"Would you rather be driving?"

Dean scrubbed a hand over his eyes. "Yeah, yeah." Then, grudgingly - "But better if I could get some caffeine in me first. Where are we?"

"A road with no name." And not much paving, from the feel of it. Mountain switchback, just hoping it wouldn't deadend at another abandoned mine, because they were sneaking out the backdoor. Right.

"Great," he said. He met Cas' eyes. He had a wrinkle of concern between his brows.

"What do you want to do?" Cas said, voice gruff, clipped to cover for bone-deep weariness. Human.

"We'll pull off in the next town, get some coffee, something to eat."

"Okay."

They drove without speaking against the sound of the Impala's wheels on the asphalt and the ice hitting the window and Dean's heart giving this weird hard stutter when he thought of the wrong
things. Sam. Purgatory. If Jed had made it home in one piece. The town on fire he was leaving in his wake. It was early evening but night dark in the mountain shadow; they passed one flatbed truck traveling in the opposite direction and then had the road to themselves. Themselves and Jody's car, which he kept checking on in the rearview. Half wishing it would just vanish and he'd have one less thing - one less person - to worry about.

Cas glanced at Dean and looked back at the road. "It's coming back, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"The Alpha's call. I heard you, dreaming."

Dean shook his head. "Purgatory," he said. "Or...I don't know." He watched sleet peel off the windshield and pit through the headlights and could feel Cas sitting there waiting for him to say something. After a while he said, "She'd be safer, Jody, if we could shake her... In our dust is the safest spot she could be right now, short of hightailin' it home which ain't happening." He was talking to himself, mostly. More brittle tenuous self-justification and he could feel Cas' eyes slipping right through his defenses. "And Crowley...screw him. He can make like a tree if he wants. I - we don't need him."

"From everything you've told me and what I've seen today, Jody Mills seems highly capable," Cas said, level, with only a thin edge of calling him on his bullshit.

"Yeah, but that ain't the..." He didn't have a comeback to that because he couldn't make the point that she'd be safer getting away from him and not just this fucked up situation, couldn't make that point without getting into how everyone would be safer getting away from him, which was an argument they were not having right now.

"Y'know what? Pull over now. I'll drive."

"I'll consult the map," Cas said, which may have been his finely honed passive-aggressive way of reminding Dean that he had no idea where he was going. Literally. Existentially. Whatever. He pulled over. Dean drove.

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In a hopeful sign that Cas' navigation skills were still something not of this world, they made it through those mountain switchbacks and across the border without running into a blockade or a single trooper vehicle.

It was close to three 'o clock the following morning when they pulled into a truckstop just west of Chattanooga, Jody went in for coffee and Cas accompanied her at Dean's suggestion, to watch her back. Sleet had stopped but cold wet wind sweeping down the river, the steel pulleys on the gas station flags smacking against the poles with a hollow rhythm; a lesser car than his baby would be rocking in the wind. Dean was dozing again until a sharp rap on the window jolted him awake. He looked out and saw a girl with a knife-thin face shivering there in a short skirt and a jean jacket with a ruff of ratty fur, her hair lashing around in the wind. Cracked cherry lips mouthing at him to roll down the window. He shook his head, waved her off with the hand that wasn't fingering a knife.

Louder, she said, "I just want to talk, that's all."

His hand tightened on the knife handle, eyes drawn to her jugular. Then he felt bad about it. He took out his wallet and pulled out a ten, rolled down the window and handed it to her. "Go and warm up. Get yourself a cup of coffee."
'I just wanna talk. Where you headed?'

"Why're you asking?"

"Why d'ya think mister? I gotta get out of here. There's some guys, they ain't right..."

"What guys?"

Gun, knife, machete. What could he use on them? On her?

Dean looked her up and down, looking for a tell, a reason, a justification. But she was just pathetic, skittish eyed, standing there hugging herself and bouncing from one foot to the other to stay warm. She tossed her head in some direction over her shoulder.

"Listen..."

"Alice, my name's Alice. C'mon, mister." His heart did another hard start, thinking of another girl, of playing bait.

Dean saw Jody coming back across the parking lot with two cups of coffee, Cas by her side. They were both giving him inquisitive looks and Dean held up one hand in a gesture of _never you mind, I got this_. He turned back to Alice and she wasn't looking at him anymore. She was facing Cas and her hand was under her jacket and Dean lunged for the door handle and shoved the Impala's heavy door into her side but she'd already fired. He heard a thin, flat crack in the wind.

"Cas!"

Cas had fallen between the parked cars. One of the coffee cups was rolling away on the asphalt, spewing its contents, because Jody had dropped it, going for her gun. She got a shot off at the girl that at least caused the girl's second shot to go wide. The girl spun around and grabbed Dean's leg and her eyes were two rounds of coal in her head. He kicked her and her head rapped off the pavement but she laughed, holding onto him, fingers like talons. He pulled out a hip flask of holy water and upended it on her so she stopped laughing and started screaming. She dropped the gun and Dean grabbed it and set off at a dead run across the parking lot.

"Cas...Cas..." Cas was lying on his side and he was conscious, of course he was, it was just a bullet and he was an angel and that was simple math. Dean turned him over and the front of his shirt was bright like new pennies under the parking lot's yellow arc lights, the pavement beneath him slicked with blood. Shit, Dean thought, what the fuck is wrong with him now?

"Dean..."

"Come on," Dean said and he got an arm under Cas and pulled him up. Cas groaned.

"This isn't good."

"I know, I know. Come on."

They made it to the car with Jody following and the demon called Alice was still there keening on her hands and knees. Dean kicked her out of the way and got Cas in the passenger seat. Jody got in the back.

"Two more," Cas wheezed and Dean looked up and saw two men running across the parking lot. Dean shot at their legs, got a couple hits, slowing them. He got behind the wheel and the men were back on their feet and the girl lunged in snarling through the open passenger window.
"Cas, down!" Dean said and he raised the knife and stabbed her in the face, blade sinking into eye socket with a squelch and another hot splash of blood spilling down his arm. She fell off the side of the car like roadkill and Dean pulled out and sawed the car around and made for the onramp; in the rearview the men or demons were still running across the parking lot.

"Cas, say something."

"Where did she come from?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know what happened."

Cas doubled over and caught his breath then said, "Where're you going?"

"We gotta get to a hospital," Jody said. "No - that's stupid they won't know how to treat an - " Dean glanced back and saw Jody bury her face in shaking hands, just for a second, and then she looked up and her eyes and her mouth were set and steady.

"Gonna go until we're sure we've shaken them," Dean said. "Get somewhere we can do triage. He'll be fine. It's all gonna be fine."

He drove along the river on the north side until he pulled into the shadows of a loading dock in an abandoned industrial park. A few stars were out shining.

"It's gonna be okay," Dean was still saying. "It'll be okay." He grabbed the med kit out of the trunk, and ran back, kneeling next to Cas - Jody'd got him turned around, legs spilling out of the open passenger door, and she was holding his arm and squeezing his hand - Dean emptied the reserve medicinal whiskey bottle over his hands to wash the demon's blood off them, then got out the tweezers and fished around between Cas upper abdominals and bottom rib for the bullet and thanked fuck it was below the lung and hadn't pierced an intestine. He got it. Dean then fished out a bottle of sterile saline solution, some iodine, a few packages of gauze. He added a few drops of the iodine to the saline and slowly poured it over Cas's wound, then cleaned as much of the blood off as he could because who the hell knew if Cas could fight an infection right now on top of everything, who the hell knew how bad it was, how big a liability... His hands were cold with fear. Still steady enough to thread a needle.

"It's gonna be fine."

"Yes," Cas said. "Of course."

"What the hell was that?" Jody said.

"Yeah, so it turns out not all demons are my biggest fans right now."

Jody muttered something about that being kinda reassuring.

"Crowley," Cas growled through clenched teeth.

"If he double-crossed us, this wouldn't be what it'd look like."

"No, but his subjects can't be pleased with him - coming when you call...They had bullets only he knows how to make."

"What kinda bullet? You mean this was made from an angel blade? Shit. Okay. Just hold on. We've
dealt with this before. We got it out that time and you were fine."

"I got it out," Cas said, peevish.

"Yeah, he did. He stabbed it in somebody's eye," Dean said to Jody. She looked suitably impressed.

His skin and shirt were still ripped, still permeable. Dean could sew the skin back together. He could do that much. Cas was expending what power he had to keep it together on the inside. Cas was white and sweating. Dean gave him a shot of Dilaudid because it couldn't hurt even though Cas insisted it wouldn't help him either. "I'll heal. There is nothing more you can do, Dean."

Dean really wanted to kill something, hearing that.

They got back in the car and drove.

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Dean had a lot of maps in his head marking down locations that weren't listed anywhere else, that would die with him. One was a map of condemned houses, isolated and forsaken, where he and Sam could crash if they were that strapped for funds.

It took him another three hours to get to one. In the gray and wet dawn after they had been driving for another three hours they found the house, set back into misty mountainous country and well hidden by the trees so that only one chimney was peeking through the fog, browning mossy brick camouflaged by trees of nearly the same color. It was large and rambling and all in shambles, built to grand size by some lumber baron with lordly pretensions and now wholly abandoned. Perfect setting for a Southern Gothic, Sam had called it. As far as off-the-grid accommodations went, it was a real winner.

In observance of the cold nights in these mountains the builder of the house had installed fireplaces in many of the rooms; and these weren't those decorative accents with the gas jets but great brick hearths for burning wood. There was a woodshed attached to the kitchen and Dean found that the wood he'd chopped the last time he and Sam had passed through was still there and hadn't all rotted in the wet season. He gathered the driest logs for kindling in the kitchen stove and Jody took the bellows from the iron stand and fanned the flames into a blaze while Dean dragged in a divan and got Cas settled on it.

Dean and Jody sat down at a foldout card table with whatever gas station food they still had in the cooler. Crumbly chips. A carton of limp browning salad. Two protein bars. A few cans of beer, small mercy. Cas, pale orange and sweatily glistening in the firelight, looked like he was sleeping or in a trance or...yeah, just sleeping. He'd be fine. He had to be fine. It'd be Dean's fault if he wasn't. Was his fault anyway.

"We have to talk about what we're going to do," Jody said. "But first...I'm sorry to pry, but you have to tell me what's going on with you. We're in this together now and that means that I need to know exactly what this is."

He gave her an only slightly abbreviated account of his history with the Alpha which she listened to him with the calm collected nodding patience of the practiced interrogator. It reminded him of Sam and it was that which made his throat tighten, made it a little more difficult to talk.

"And what about the Mark?" she said.

"Right, that," he said. "I mean, nothing you don't already know about. Sounded like Sam filled you in pretty good while I was...out."
"I got a thumbnail summary of the plot," she said. "I need to know how you're...holding it together. How is this...going to this Purgatory going to affect you? I'm sorry, but Sam said you were pretty messed up from the last time."

"I'm always pretty messed up," he said. "You should know, since Sammy likes to talk about it so much." He swallowed back that bitter lump. "Yeah, it's been actin' up with...with everything, but I'm dealing with it. Really."

"I'm sorry," she said again. Her face was weary, drawn, but her eyes were sharp and bright. That inquisitive light in them so like Sam when he was puzzling something out, prying oh so gently for answers.

He flinched from it, his throat constricting further.

"We can talk it out later. Right now, I'm doing a perimeter check," Dean said. "You can watch him."

She glanced at Cas and back at him, her mouth compressed and her eyes narrowed slightly. He stood up quickly, turning.

"Careful," she said, tense and tired and doubting him, as she should be. He was surprised by a small ache, an urge to explain himself further. But at the same time he didn't want to explain himself. He wanted her to retain some illusions about him, some blinkers. He didn't want her to look at him the way Sam and Cas had been looking at him more and more lately.

Of course, he'd lied about his intentions. He got some things out of the Impala's trunk and he walked into the woods, picking his way over rocks and soggy moss, fallen branches and exposed roots. Branches dripping icy needles, he hunched into his collar as far as he could. The morning chill burned deep in his bones.

Sam had recorded the Enochian word for reaper in a notebook he'd kept at the time of the Trials. Dean had thought about burning it, over Sam's strenuous objections about future generations (what generations?), but now he guessed score one for Sam, he was glad that he hadn't. No way to complete the summoning without it.

The reaper was a California business-casual type, all rolled sleeves and unbuttoned collar and hair falling in his eyes, blond and brown and glowing with an eerie radiance, the blandest ordinary dude of a reaper Dean had ever seen were it not for that glow which was nothing like the cool moon-like shine Tessa had about her. He grinned widely at Dean, his eyes bright and hollow and cold. The forest seemed darker with his presence than it had a moment ago.

Dean brandished an angel blade.

The reaper held his hands up and said, "Whoa, my man. We got ourselves a sticky enough situation, there's no need to make it gooier. We can work something out." His voice was a lazy drawl, with a mocking hint of laughter.

"What the hell's going on," Dean said, "that you can't even get an honest reaper in this town anymore?"

"Ask your oh so stubbornly undying friend," the reaper said. "He's the girl who kicked the hornet's nest. Hey, don't get offended. Me? I'm not complaining. You want one more taxi ride to the dark side, right? Guess what, that's like synergy between us."

"You got orders to take me in."
"Oh, I'm no soldier. I'm just betting I'll get a lot of kickback if I do."

"What the hell could a fang offer you that'd be worth goin' against your boss?"

His grin got more teeth and sharpness and more eerie white shine in it. "Riddle me this: what would it profit a man if he gained the world but lost his own...?" Dean could see it then, like he had x-ray vision searing through the skin of this reality: that glow about the reaper turned jagged and bloody and flaming, the shadow-image of mutilated souls.

"Souls. The souls of the folks the Alpha didn't turn, his rejects. You eat 'em?"

"Why the hell not? It's me and oblivion or it's the Veil or it's Hell. Which would you prefer? Or wait - I guess you'd prefer Purgatory. Tell me - you honestly got any plans to come back from this?"

Dean said nothing. He tipped the blade forward an inch.

"Hey hey, okay, okay. Said I'd do it. Jeez. You people." He spread his arms, flung them out in an outraged manner that reminded Dean of Sam, last time he'd seen him. His shark grin didn't waver. Dean so badly wanted to kill this creep, who was so transparently playing a part, all hollow ringing bullshit, insouciant attitude covering for how he was just a one-track mind junkie of a monster. He didn't.

The reaper shrugged, and the world went sideways or his mind went sideways, or hell, maybe that was one and the same, nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so, somebody had said to him once and he thought that was bullshit and so (ha ha) it was, but it didn't matter now because either way his mind or the world were sliding and sliding past each other into that goddamn endless grey nothing.
Chapter 22

He'd swum sideways against the strong but turgid current, clawed through mud, cut his palms on sharp gravel, and now Sam was standing on the river bank, shivering. His teeth clattered together once, twice, three times, then he bit down hard, tore a thread of skin off the edge of his tongue. His vision blurred, his eyes stinging, tearing. When his sight adjusted, he didn't have to look around. His eyes were immediately drawn to one thing. An immense water wheel churning in the river, joined to a tower that was broad and square and about three stories tall. He surmised that this wheel, same as the wheel on any water mill, must be a power generator. Must be channeling the kinetic energy of the river and that that energy would be a conductor for whatever other power ran through a river in Purgatory. He stared down at the river, the frothing spitting roaring surface and the black glass stillness that he now knew lurked under the surface, where the sprite had dragged him. The river roaring onward. His eyes tracked it to its vanishing point. The lodge, he now saw, was built around the river - two buildings, an arch connecting them, and the whole compound was even bigger than his mental picture of the place, still with the look of a rustic log lodge. There were lights on in the windows, far and faint and yellow.

His teeth clattered again. His numb fingers curled and bit into his palms. He felt an electric tingle, like the ion-charge before a storm. The magic. Water was a great conductor for power, for environmental detritus, for pollutants. A river running through Purgatory must have picked up so much, become a carrier for the elemental forces of this place, channeled into usable energy by the simple age-old human design of a wheel. It was brilliant. This must be what had made this outpost an impenetrable fortress for so long (until the monsters had gotten in anyway). If he could shut it all down...But no, no. He needed to get home. To get home, he would need a portal, he'd need the magic, a conductor for that kind of magic. The wheel was it, he was sure of that, he had to be. He had nothing better.

The library, he thought. Just thinking of the theoretical existence of a library made him feel a little calmer and more sure of himself. The colony, like any Men of Letters installation, would have kept records, records of their comings and goings, of how to operate their...machinery. All he had to do was get access to those records, then he could figure it out.

He had more to do than that. The people still trapped in those cells, until the Alpha could play whatever games he wanted to play with them, put them through whatever sadistic test this was...He had to get them out. And Alex. What was he doing with Alex? What might he want with Alex, a girl who had been a vampire until they had cured her, whose soul had belonged to this place and was perhaps forever touched by two worlds? What might that mean for her, for the general scheme of things?

Something changed forever in the blood, he thought, and shuddered hard, painful pricks in his palms again.

He was responsible for her. He had to find her.

He had to get home to Dean.

He looked up at the tower, black windows reflecting black sky but also a glint from the river water, the slippery quicksilver sheen, sharp points like the starlight that didn't exist here cresting the waves, churned up by the wheel's spokes.

He set off, skirting in the deepest shadow of the towering log wall, as swiftly as he could minutes after having all the breath forced out of his lungs by icy river water and wild magic. He was headed
for the building on his right, where he could see a low arched doorway. The sky was paling to grey again. He had hope.

He didn't hear wing-beats, only a soaring displacement of air. A new shadow fell over him, and it was black as night, as a closing coffin lid.

He knew it would be the dragon before he turned around.

She'd read the journal a second time, because it was a relief to hear someone's voice, a human voice other than her own in her head. Then she'd read two particular entries twice more. In that time, her bruised hands had healed faster than she'd expected, despite that she couldn't seem to stop prodding at them, making the blood vessels burst, brightly mottling her skin again. These entries were mundane. They detailed how the journal keeper, this Woman of Letters, had given reports 'to the mainland.'

"His shell-shock has worsened. We wanted to send the colonel home today, but couldn't, as they were doing maintenance on the wheel.'

The next entry said that the comms were still the only thing working in the command tower.

She obsessed over these sentences. The wheel, the tower. Going home. Her imagination caught fire: she pictured wormholes, a rip in the fabric of space/time, or a contraction, like a tesseract, and it was all very Meg Murray or Lucy in Narnia except that she wasn't those girls, she wasn't really the heroine of a fairy tale. Still, Alex had a faint and formless hope. She started working again on her escape. It was a dumb and cliched attempt, not even deserving of being called an escape plan. She'd seen it tried and failed in several movies, because it was too easy. She expected it would also fail her. There'd be complications and she wouldn't be prepared to deal with them.

She thought about the girl with the bronze hair and the katana, on the cover of the book Rachel had shown her, back when this had all started. That girl would have saved herself by now.

She wondered if Rachel was alive, if her family was alive, if everything she'd seen had been only in her head, had been somebody fucking with her. She wondered how she could be sure that anything was real now. Think about it. She was stuck in a parallel dimension for dead monsters, trying to save herself based on the words of a dead woman who'd been some kind of pioneer colonizer xenobiologist studying dead monsters and the physics of parallel reality planes or whatever.

She poked at the bruises on her forearm again, where a monster had grabbed her, held her down.

She didn't have a sword or the ability to execute a spinning back kick. She was protected only by a sense she'd developed that someone was coming, creeping up on her, that hunted-animal second sense. She stashed the evidence of what she was doing, went out into the hallway where the night out the windows was black and the flickering yellow lamplight unreliable, and she dropped to the floor, leaned her back against the wall, wrapped her arms around her knees.

I want to go home, Alex thought. She used to wish the same thing, curled up in Jody's spare bed late at night, listening to the loneliness inside her head. I just want to go home. She hadn't even known what she'd meant by it at the time but she knew now, flashing on Jody's gentle touch on her bruised cheek, the open unjudging kindness in her eyes after she (they) had killed Momma. She found she was gripping her thighs so hard her fingers ached.

She didn't hear or smell or see a thing but she felt it in her bones when a shadow fell over her.
She looked up and a man - a vampire, she recognized at once - was there, towering over her like an obelisk in a desert, surreal but solid as if he'd been chiseled from granite. She knew before he even spoke that his voice was the voice she'd heard in her dreams, singing her a lullaby. *Oh, sweet child of mine.*

"Child, you've hurt yourself," he said in a tone of surprise. Compared to the monsters that had hunted her here, he should have looked reassuringly man-shaped, his intentions knowable if no less bestial. But his eyes. His eyes were tunnels going back and back into age upon age of power and cruelty, like a history book about some hard to comprehend ancient horror, a plague, a purge. She could sense the suppressed violence in him the way you could sense the electricity in the air before a storm, a tickling crackle in your lungs.

She scrambled to her feet. "I've had worse," she rasped. Her breath scraped in her dry throat.

He smiled. "And it's only made you stronger. You draw strength from pain. I knew you would, child. I know you, like my own flesh and blood."

He reached out a hand and gently touched her bruised cheek. His fingers were cold and leathery and sent an electric zing of animal terror through her. She flinched. Her eyes prickled, and she was shaking, backing off, hugging herself.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore, my girl," he said, like every word was a gift he was bestowing on her. "Your struggle is almost done."

There was a calm cold place that knew no fear tucked away in the back of her mind. Her hand curled around the slippery glass vial she had taken from the woman's desk.

She turned and ran, and she didn't hear him but she knew he was following her. She burst through a door, realizing only once she was through it that this was one that had always been locked before. He must have unlocked it. There must be a reason. She unscrewed the capsule. She was standing on a balcony, looking down on a long large room, all natural and knotted wood, but gleaming beeswax golden with polish, with taxidermied animals and luxurious leather furniture and a large map table. The map room. The woman had mentioned it in the journal. The mentions of 'specimens' had creeped her out. Alex stared straight across at a head mounted on the wall, a human-shaped skull with cerulean fish-scale skin, eyes like red glass, glass shot with blood.

She turned around. The vampire was standing there, silently, classic movie monster, smiling benignly. He stroked her tousled hair out of her face.

"Someone special has come for you," he said. "You need to be ready. You need to know who you truly belong to, now. I have high hopes for you, child. In a little while, I will tell you about them."

She tipped her head back, pulse pounding.

His mouth parted, that flash of searing sharp white, and he tilted his head and lowered it down, down.

When that still calm part of her mind judged him within reach, she slammed her open mouth against his, and spat thick bitter dusty copper between his teeth.

There was a long moment in which she did not think it had worked. His physical presence still loomed immense and immovable over her. Then, slowly, slowly, he swayed away, and she forced herself to look into his eyes again and saw them dim and unfocused. She wriggled out from under him, kicking against the back of his knee. And she planted her palms against his shoulderblades and
shoved with all the trembling strength left in her body.

He went over the railing. There was a long long pause before she heard the crash.

She ran.

She returned to the scroll top writing desk where she'd stashed the rope she'd knotted out of cleaning rags and bed linens. The hairpins she'd used to pick the lock on the window were pressed between the pages of the journal. She tied her rope to one leg of the desk, which she'd pushed over by the window.

She didn't know when this night would end, the sky returning to that dirty dishwater grey, bleeding that eerie half light. She'd have to find her way outside in the solid dark, without even the hope that it would provide her with cover from what would be hunting her.

She climbed out of the window and down the rope, hand over hand, feet stuttering along knotty bricks and uneven planks of wood.

She was about five feet from the ground when a blast of searing solid air shook her loose and she fell.

He watched the dragon as it circled once over his head. When it opened its mouth Sam felt the sound it made at the base of his skull, in his tailbone, in his gut. The curve of its wing blotted out the last grey light, but Sam could still see all of its teeth.

He ran for the one door, dead ahead, because all he could think was take cover and that was the one possible hidey-hole he could see.

He reached that low doorway, a short flight of steps down into the ground, reminding him for a heart-jumping second of the bunker's entrance. The heavy doors, the wide handle. He was sure for a second second that in his blind animal panic he'd made a terrible mistake; of course the doors would be locked, and he'd be trapped in this frame against it, pinned defenseless against the dragon.

It didn't want him dead. If it did, he'd be on fire already. So. There was that.

The door wasn't locked, though it was so heavy his injured shoulder screamed in protest when he pushed against it with both arms. Hinges slowly, slowly scraped open. He hurtled headlong down another flight of stairs, underground. Faint splashing under his feet, a fetid sewer-y smell.

He found himself in a wide intersection of tunnels, some straight, some flights of stairs rising or descending or curving sharply out of sight, some hopelessly dark and a couple lit by yellow flickering lamp light. He was getting a mental picture of the place now: it was a labyrinth of shafts that spiraled down and dropped to probably nowhere; and nooks, cracks and larger tunnels that branched out of the main cavern (the white room) and coiled up into the lodge. Originally, it had perhaps been a system of caves, a natural formation, that the Men of Letters had build over and into and adapted into cellar and prison and sewer. It was a maze and a prison and a trap.

He'd been herded down here, one last stand, before that white room with the needles and the industrial freezer and the plastic tarps and the hospital bed.

He picked the narrowest tunnel and he ran up a flight of stairs, into another intersection of tunnels. He might as well have gone in a circle. The dragon's talons rapped sharp and metallic on the cement steps. It was stalking him slowly, like a cat with cornered prey.
He had no weapon that could do a goddamn thing to a dragon. He could only annoy it and get himself killed and leave Alex and everyone in this place doomed and Dean...

He looked around again, forced himself to take a closer, methodical look at his surroundings, to think, even though his reserves of mental clarity were pretty much shot and he was just combing through the debris. Where was he really? Was there anything in this environment he could use?

It was more desperate guess than observation and deduction. This place (probably) didn't just run on magic. It had light and electricity. It had yellow flickering lamps with thick glass covers. It had heat. It had pipes and wiring. Old castiron gas pipes that had been corroding for at least the last sixty years.

He had an idea, a gamble. He just had to go against what his instincts were screaming right now and do something suicidally stupid. That shouldn't be too difficult.

He turned around, raised his blade, and yelled some hoarse garbled battle cry, because it seemed the thing to do, something along the lines of: "I've killed your kind before."

He could swear the dragon was taken aback, by the way it paused. Hysterical laughter bubbled in his throat.

He charged, knife brandished in a reverse grip. The dragon hissed and snapped. He dodged to the right, it lunged, he let it get close enough that its long flickering tongue nearly curled around his throat, and he made a backhanded slash at its nostril with his knife. Close enough that he could guess by the slitting of its pupils and the snakeish coiling of its neck what it was about to do, and he dropped and rolled as far as he could make it across the cement floor.

It was like a snake strike, lightning, a quick deadly beautiful thing.

The explosion slammed through the air, slapping Sam with heat, rolling him over and over and depositing him on his side, his screaming shoulder. He was on the lip of a flight of stairs, and then he was rolling down and down and down. He was falling and when he hit the wet cement all he could taste was his own blood. It tasted like dark wet earth and hot copper. From his back, he rolled weakly to his 'good' side, trying desperately to draw in a breath.

The gasp of air he was finally able to pull in tasted like fire. So he'd done it. The dragon's blast of flame had hit a gas pipe and started an explosion. He looked up, back the way he'd fallen. Fire spurted, the air shook. Mighty gouts of flame had erupted, streaking across his entire field of vision in searing columns of fire, as the deep subterranean gasses found their outlet and exploded into freedom, igniting, blazing. Aftershocks ringing in his ears, sounding like the ground or the walls had splintered, cracked, opened up. Part of the tunnel had collapsed and passage down these stairs was now too narrow for the dragon to reach him. That was the 'good news.'

Agonizing crunch of bone in his shoulder when he shifted, but he had to try, had to know - had to get up. Get up, he thought. He fumbled for his knife, was astonished when the blade's edge again slid under his fingers. He heard another distant boom, a roar, a second explosion. Had one exploding gas pipe set off a chain reaction? Was he about to be buried here?

He got up on his knees and he crawled back the way he had come, head dangling down below his shoulders, hot ash raining on his back.

He expected the ceiling to cave in, a wave of fire to sweep over him. He didn't expect to make it out until he felt the edge of a step bump against his knuckles.

He had to go up, with the rising smoke. He dropped his head down, between his elbows, sucked in a
breath of gritty stinking barely breathable oxygen, and then pushed up onto his feet. He swayed.

And saw.

The shape and shadow of his brother, lit red by the fire. Sam made the entirely reasonable assumption that he was a mirage. Dean, with his arms outstretched towards him. Dean, pulling him from the fire again. It was exactly as he would have dreamed it. He waited for the dream to turn dark again. Don't don't don't, he thought. It isn't real. He swayed on his feet.

Dean smelled like blood, more pungent and even more familiar than the smell of smoke and cinders. His arm was around Sam's back, again. Sam couldn't help leaning against him. He surrendered to it, real or illusion. Somehow, he hadn't gotten a good look at Dean's face.

Dean half-dragged him up the steps.

He was outside, breathing deep and painful. Dark mossy earth under his feet. The first thing he said to his brother was, "The dragons are bigger round here." He coughed so much that the words probably weren't intelligible anyway.

"Right away, buddy," Dean said, gruff and strained and not making any sense. "Gimme just a sec."

Dean let go of him. He sank to his knees, sank by half into despair, expecting Dean to just disappear.

Dean, he saw blearily, was fighting a dark figure, a monster of some kind. It was very strange looking, and oh great, he thought, another hybrid, a spiny ridge on its back, which had an atavistic hunch like it hadn't totally adapted to walking upright, but a long and mobile neck and it was fast, lunge and snap, lunge and snap.

Get up, he thought. He needs you.

He didn't need Sam to kill the monster. He dispatched it within seconds. He was lit brighter than ever by the fire and the splashes of blood on him were black. He looked back at Sam. Sam couldn't read his expression.

He remembered the dragon. Where was the dragon now? Sam didn't think even Dean could kill a dragon, not without a magic sword anyway. The thought made him look around, as if he was going to see a magic sword conveniently situated in a rock somewhere, a very badly timed and unfair test of character.

What he saw instead got him back on his feet, setting his teeth against the battalion of pains firing through his body, and running, lurching, stumbling.

Alex got on her feet, and the orange flickering firelight was illuminating the courtyard in which she now found herself. The leather spine of the journal had dug hard into her ribs. She picked it up again. She looked around. There were dark figures now emerging from the lodge, which seemed to be on fire, such a bright red fire, such a searing heat that she could feel passing through her flesh and bones.

She looked back.

Sam, she thought.

Then she spun around, looking, until she saw the red and gold of the firelit river and the water wheel,
turning. It would be close to the wheel. She tilted her head back, looking for the silhouette of a tower against the night sky. There was more than one and they all looked like the guard towers on a prison. The tower she searched for would be closest to the wheel. The wheel was an energy generator.

Alex ran.

She ran because she knew she was close, and her mingled terror and excitement were shooting off fireworks in her head and her heart. She no longer felt worn out and weak, or cared that the bruising along her ribs was doubling her over and turning this headlong sprint into a clumsy lurch. She felt nothing but a swell of frustrated anger when she was tackled by someone bulky, arms like chains flung around her waist, pulling her to the ground. She struggled frenziedly, elbows digging into the muddy ground, rolled over and kicked back at whoever was pinning her down this time.

It was Sam.

There was a second shadow falling over her and a jarring of bone and a splashing sound and a rain of blood in her peripheral vision and a hard clunk next to her head. He'd tackled her out of the way of...something.

He pulled her to her feet and she let herself cling to him for a second.

The gas blaze had spread fast. Fires burned in the lodge, in some places as high as the roof five stories off the ground, licking the sky. Streaks of red, strange fire. They lit the yard; they reflected off the flashing river, turning it red gold bronze. A last great explosion kaboomed, shook the ground and shattered windows like a hail of bullets, loud like thunder trapped in a jar.

Dean, seconds from beheading another monster, advanced on Alex without lowering his bloody machete.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, still curled against Sam's side.

"Dean," Sam croaked. He felt exhausted, felt sharp, sickening pain spasm through screaming muscles, smoke burning in his lungs.

"I know what I'm doing," Dean snapped. "They could've turned her by now."

"So?" He dragged a hand down his face, smeared sticky blood over it. "We'll worry about that later." He really wasn't worried. The fear and confusion on Alex's face, looking at Dean. Sam could see him through her eyes. Dean was real. He wasn't the stuff of dream or nightmare. He was pretty sure.

"We have to get up to that tower," Alex said. Sam looked down. The colors of Alex's eyes and mouth and bruises were dark smudges against the white curve of her face. She had pulled away from him.

"What?"

"I read about it, in this diary." She was hugging a leather-bound book under her arm, he now noticed. "It's the control tower. I think - I think we can open a door out of this place."

He looked to Dean. "I think she's right. There's a water wheel - I think it's this place's power generator. Maybe we can open a portal. But Dean, there are people still trapped inside, innocent people - "
Dean looked back at the lodge, the flames, the shattering glass, the storm. He knew it was hopeless. Sam knew it was hopeless, and he was thinking half-deliriously that if had just made it to the library first everything would have been alright somehow. He glanced back to Alex. She looked spooked-horse tense, like she might take off running again without them if they stalled much longer.

"Yeah, sorry," Dean said, "It's suicide. We're out of time for the no-man-left-behind play now. Let's go kiddos."

The fire had started eating through the logs of the compound wall, and soon it would be encircling them, and the noise of it was already biting at their heels, a loop of crashing, rending noises and howling flames.

They set off again. They could make it out of this, Sam thought desperately, as three more monsters got on their heels, two more dead ahead, cutting them off from the river. They were closing in. They could make their way out of this, he told himself, blood pulsing on his tongue, heart pounding in his ears. He grabbed Alex by the arm, shoved her behind him.

He remembered the last time he'd been in Purgatory, Benny saying Go on and I was never any good up there anyway. He glanced at Dean, wondering. Doubting, for a minute.

Dean slayed the monsters, which was not the part that Sam had ever doubted. He had doubted...he didn't know what he had doubted, he pushed it from his mind as Dean turned and looked back at him, rubbed the back of his hand against the blood on his cheek. His face was unreadable again. Sam stumbled towards him, pulled Alex with him. They would make it.

The door to the tower had a broken lock. It opened directly to a spiraling flight of stairs, each step stabbing through Sam's ribs as he climbed.

When they reached the room, it really was what Sam had pictured, which was to say a dusty jumble of Steampunk-ish tech. A control center, with radio coms and with a control panel with levers and knobs and dials, silver and copper, connected to exposed iron tubing. There was another map mounted on the wall, and this one had lights on it, little red dots like rifle scopes, and the lights were moving. There was one light inside a thick dusty glass shade, hanging from the ceiling, yellow and flickering and casting weird wavering shadows.

"Well nobody's rollin' out the welcome mat, so looks like we haveta bust this door open," Dean said. He was looking at Alex, who shook her head. She was still clutching that leather-bound journal to her chest. "You wanna chime in now, sister?"

"She - the book didn't say," she said. "It's a diary, not an instruction manual." She paused, and now her eyes were smudged even darker, turning inward. "It didn't help her. She didn't make it out. Maybe they broke it."

"Screw that," Dean grunted, started yanking on levers, turning dials. Sam was just waiting for him to rip the panel off and start ripping out wires. Not that he had any better idea himself.

"There could be a pass code," Alex said.

Sam tried saying 'open' in Latin and Enochian and Greek and nothing happened and he felt so stupid, standing there, watching from the corner of his eye the building burning out the window. People, burning because he couldn't save them. The sky was grey again. He could smell fresh smoke and thought he could smell burning flesh, but maybe that was still in his head. Hell, maybe that was his own flesh. He'd been burned, hadn't he? His pain signals were all cross-firing, hard to tell where the damage originated. All he knew was that people were burning because of an explosion he'd
He looked down and saw a beaten-flat plate of pure shining silver in the dead-center of the control panel. Sam pressed his palm to it. He thought he felt a tingle, a scratch. A faint brown residue tarnishing the silver. He got out his knife, sliced his palm, pressed the open wound to the silver, fed it his blood. Nothing happened for a second.

Dean had been switching over another lever, and white sparks shot out from under his hand, reflected in his eyes when Sam met them. It was only in that second that Sam wondered how Dean had come to be here, in Purgatory, and in exactly the right place in all of Purgatory to find him. Before that second he had simply accepted it as the way of things. Dean would always find him. It was comfort and it was something that he didn't want to look too closely at, like he hadn't wanted to look too closely at the dragon or the raging gas fire. He felt an iron weight settle in his chest, on top of every other pain.

A different kind of faint light in the room. Sam glanced at Alex, saw her face bathed in that silvery blue glow. He turned around. It was almost the color of a blue moon.

Dean grabbed Sam's arm, pulled him close. He reached for Alex's hand, and she let him take it. Blood and obscure magic scraped under Sam's fingernails, his fingers curling into his palms; he could taste it on his tongue when he gasped. He closed his eyes and he was falling.
Chapter 23

Dean came to with a gasp, flat on his back in the dirt. The wind had been knocked out of him, a tight and familiar wire wound around his heart, arms and legs and fingers and toes frighteningly slow to respond. The world spun overhead, the sun shining and the sky that wintry shade of pale blue arcing on and on no matter where his wobbly vision tilted.

He remembered Sam speaking Latin at knobs and dials, trying to talk old neglected Steampunk-ish tech around to opening a portal while Alex was desperately paging through a book that looked a lot like Dad's journal, and he didn't know which one of Sam's spells, which one of his last-ditch attempts, curses or charms or prayers, had come through. He was just sure it wasn't anything he had done. He still had the bitter taste of futility on his tongue, an acid drip eating away at his heart.

He turned his head, looking for Sam. Found him. Sam was lying on his back, eyes open, looking even more like shit in the light of day, deep purpling bruises on his face, clothes torn and bloody, smelling like smoke and singed skin, blistered and cracked, the flesh underneath bloody and raw.

He glanced past Sam, saw Alex's small form crumpled, with her face concealed by the tumble of her dark hair. Then he rolled over, got up on his knees and leaned over Sam. Sam's eyes met his, bleary and wary, then Sam closed his eyes and his mouth pulled up in a weird half-smile like he was choking back a laugh or stifling a groan or maybe just like he was very, very tired. Dean grabbed his shoulder, shook him slightly. His eyes popped open again, wincing.

"Hey, stay with me," Dean said, the words coming out choked and grating. "You gotta stay with me, buddy."

Sam sat up, a deep grimace pulling on his face, and Dean, holding onto his shoulders to steady him, felt a shuddering spasm run through him. Sam fell back onto an elbow, breathing hard and ragged. "Okay, that's okay, take it easy. We're okay. We got out. Pretty sure, anyway." Dean patted his shoulder and let go of him, climbing to his feet to scope the area.

They were on a road, the side of the road, broken blacktop and snow-dusted, weed-choked soil beneath his boots. Telephone wires stretching overhead. Blown to anywhere, USA. He turned around, saw the land was flat and fenced, red heifers dotting the snowy fields. Brown and sere prairie strewn with snow drifts. He saw a familiar green and white highway sign and he knew right where they were. Breathed in the smell of Earth, traces of snow and cattle manure and gasoline fumes on the air.

He heard Alex gasp ragged and shrill, turned to see her curling up from her side and hugging her knees. She stayed like that for a minute. Then she got to her feet and smoothed her long tangled hair behind her ears. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. She still had that leather-bound journal tucked snugly under one arm.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Back in Kansas, Toto," he said. Too much to ask that they be beamed right back to the bunker, but he supposed there was a sensible precaution in not routing your base straight to monsterland.

"Earth," she said wonderingly, slow-blinking and turning on her heel, head tipping back to drink in the sky, the pale winter sun, daylight on her face and the distant song of grossbeaks and finches, also overheard by a redtail perched on a telephone pole, a low breeze rustling through the dry prairie grass.
He let her have it for a few seconds, then he said, "The Alpha came for you, didn't he?"

She spun to him, eyes wide and dazed. "Tall, dark, and some kind of grandaddy vampire? Yeah," she said. "How'd you know?"

He didn't answer, staring at her a little while, standing there starkly bruised and shivering and pale as only a brush with death could leave you, and he was thinking that he still might have to kill her and Sam would be so disappointed if he did. If they couldn't save just this one civilian or whatever the hell she counted as now.

"You know I gotta ask," he said.

She nodded slightly, then she opened her mouth up dentist's chair wide, used her forefinger to peel her lip back from her gums. He got uncomfortably close to her, looked inside. Pink smooth human gums. Good enough for now. Let them just have this one win.

It'd be easy enough to kill her, later, if he was wrong.

"Well, Miss Jones, you've sure been slackin' on the flossing," he said. Dad humor to defuse the situation. Christ, he must be getting old.

"Gee, wonder how I could forget," she said, dry but shaky, mouth sinking into a small grimace.

He turned back to Sam, grabbed him by the hand to help him to his feet. A harsh gasp as Sam tried to roll forward, flopped onto his side. His clothes were wet. River water, Dean realized. He was shivering. His lips were tinged the wrong color. "Okay, hang on," Dean said.

Sam looked around. His eyes cleared some. A spark of recognition, staring at one of the heifers. His mouth crooking in what was definitely an amused little smile.

"Friend a yours?" Dean asked.

"I've gone jogging along here," he said. Then, brain jumping a track just like that, "How'd you find me?"

"We can do the recap show another time, dude."

"Dean. Please, I need to..."

"Rode a rogue reaper into Purgatory, cut directions to the local Fortress of Solitude outta every clawed Tom, Dick and Harry. It was that simple."

"Y'know when you have to say somethin' was simple it makes me think it wasn't, right?"

Dean felt his lips tug into an involuntary half-smile, muttering, "Smartass." The feeling of something warm and solid settling over him, anchoring his feet to the earth.

Another moment breathing manure and gasoline fumes, then he gathered his thoughts into some kind of order, got out his phone and dialed Jody.

Playing catch-up over the length of a ten-minute emergency phone conversation was never fun. Filling somebody in on something you'd done that was guaranteed to piss them off was usually not fun either.

"Be the death of me," Jody was saying mid-rant when he got the great idea to pass the phone to Alex.
Alex took the phone like a pan fresh from from a five-hundred degree oven, fumbled it between trembling fingers, bringing it to her ear, biting at her bottom lip with her eyes darting away from Dean like a rabbit down a hole. She turned her back on him and Sam and she walked out of earshot, wandering across the blacktop.

After what was probably no more than another ten minutes but felt longer, when Sam's knees started to buckle again and Dean had to support his weight, she came back. Her eyes were red but her face was calm and almost back to healthy color.

"She said to tell you she took 'Cas' - is that your angel? - to the bunker," Alex said. "She wants to know where in Kansas we are. If we are in Kansas. Are we really in Kansas?"

They were twenty-five minutes outside Lebanon.

Jody said she'd pick them up.

Jody pulled up in one of the roomiest Mustangs from the bunker's garage. Cas was in the passenger's seat, and Dean watched carefully as he got out, still looking like shit but not like warmed-over, gutshot and poisoned shit. So, at least somebody's week had improved somewhat. He met Cas' eyes and they were warm and relieved and slid right by him to Sam and his mouth tucked up at the corners and then he looked back to Dean and whatever Dean was unknowingly broadcasting this time made Cas' smile flatline.

"Can I keep it?" Jody said, patting the Mustang's hood. More forced lightness. She was looking straight to Alex, pure relief shining in her eyes and deep concern written in the lines around her mouth, the swoop of her brows. It was another look Dean was intimately familiar with. Sam, standing over him, a wobbly smile pulling at his lips, saying welcome back.

Alex walked towards her, short cautious steps, hair tumbling into her face again. Jody made quick strides towards her, pulled her into her arms. Jody was quietly saying something Dean didn't catch and it made Alex's shoulders start to shake.

They pulled up in the parking lot of Lebanon's emergency clinic.

"C'mon, sweetheart," Jody said. Alex shook her head, arms hugging her middle, still clinging to that book like it was a security blanket or a bible. "You gotta let them check you out."

"So I can what? Answer all the questions they're gonna ask about the asshole ex that did this to me? I'll be fine without all that. I'm just bruised and scratched up a bit and I've had worse, okay? I just wanna go home."

"Honey, you could be in shock."

"It'll pass. It always does."

Dean dragged Sam away, leaving them to this argument. Cas followed.

Pushing through pneumatic doors, laying Sam on an exam bed. It was as thoughtlessly familiar as any bad habit. Rolling the doctor who thankfully they'd never run into before, this close to home base, a paunchy suburban dad-body and dad-faced middle-aged dude, the kind who looked like he'd like to get this over with so he could be home to the missus' table by seven.
They'd been in a car wreck, Dean said, after getting lost somewhere out west. The engine caught fire. He'd crawled out first, pulled Sam after him and into a creek to put out the flames licking his back. A good Samaritan had happened by, more reliable transport than an ambulance in that back country.

A nurse ushered Dean outside to complete paperwork. He sat in the waiting room, filling in the same lies he'd told time and again on hospital files.

Cas hadn't said a thing this whole time he'd been back. There was more tension in his face than usual, his brows pulled together and his jaw jutting sharp, mouth zipped tight.

"How are you, man?" Dean said.

"I'll live, for the present."

"So you're not like 'dying' dying on us?"

"I suppose that's as good an assessment as any."

"Best any of us can say, really."

Dark purple-ish bags under his eyes, and Dean wanted to tell him to take a fucking nap already, for all the good that would do. Not angel enough to zap the pain away, not human enough to medicate and sleep it off.

"Jody wanted to catch a reaper and persuade it to smuggle us into Purgatory, once I explained that such a thing is possible. She wanted to go after you, Sam, and Alex. I convinced her to wait until I had recovered my strength...somewhat. Had you taken longer to return, Jody and I might be there now, hopelessly searching for you."

Dean chuckled, humorless and dry. "And round and round we'd go. Guess we do roll lucky sometimes."

He shook his head, rolled it on his shoulders, a sharp crack of released tension. He paced the waiting room from the coffee kiosk to the windows facing the parking lot and the highway and back again for more coffee. He could feel a lot of eyes on him. He was making a small disturbance in this otherwise sleepy clinic where the biggest afternoon crisis was someone's mom overdosing on gin and prescription painkillers.

Jody came in sans Alex ten minutes later.

"Did I ever tell you you really undersold the whole Cold War bunker meets Bond villain lair?" Jody said.

"It's not a villain lair, it's a Batcave," Dean said. "With a dungeon."

"Well, I'll drop you off at your cave, Bruce, then I'm taking Alex straight home. I don't think she needs to be in a place like that right now. I mean, god, not even a skylight. I hope you boys are takin' all your vitamins."

An awkward chuckle and a pause. She was looking sideways at him. Sharp-seeing light in her kind eyes, reminding him of Sam with witnesses again. Sam, who was right down the hall and still so painfully missed he might as well have been in a separate world.

"I do know something," she said very quietly, "about what it's like when somebody is scared of
themselves and of the mess in their heads. Scared of what they might do. After my husband and son, after I lost them both, well...you've got some idea, I'm sure. So if you still think the best thing you can do is to cut people off..."

"Jody, I didn't take you to Purgatory because you don't know that place like I do, okay? I spent a year there. You got no idea. You've been a liability. Besides, I wasn't about to leave Cas gutshot and burned out and on his own in a cabin in Evil Dead territory. That's all there was to it, and I'm sorry, okay, but I was right. We got Sam and Alex back and we put a real dent in the whole monster super-soldier 2030 operation, so no, I wasn't wrong and I'm not gonna..." He broke off, brain spinning, trying to catch up to what he was saying, to filter out the bad stuff. He'd said he was sorry, hadn't he? He had been right, hadn't he? He didn't want to hurt her. He didn't want to hurt anyone. He repeated it like a mantra.

Her eyes hardened for a moment. She took a breath. "I'm still here, okay? For both of you boys. That's all I'm trying to say."

"Thanks," he said, knowing that couldn't cover it, mind already spinning out a thousand miles away. Jody continued to study him from the front, and he felt the weight of Cas' eyes on his back. This clinic was too damned small and they seemed frozen in place like if he walked away maybe they'd just stand there, staring at each other and the space he'd left.

A nurse came and got him, took him back to the exam room. They'd done x-rays. Sam had a couple of cracked ribs, deep dangerous bruising to the meat around them but nothing punctured, no ruptured spleen. The hard-to-account-for puncture wounds on his arm weren't septic. A small constellation of burns on his back, but none had seared enough skin off that he'd need a graft. His body temp had dropped lingeringly low from that time in the creek, but he wasn't hypothermic. He'd gotten lucky. The doctor sternly informed him that they'd both been very lucky. He would write up a prescription and discharge them. They didn't bind broken ribs anymore. There was a risk of breathing problems, pneumonia. Dean nodded, wide-eyed and pursed lipped, like this was all the most interesting and concerning news he'd ever gotten from a doctor.

The pain pills they'd given him couldn't have been the 'fun' kind because Sam was alert and ready to tear ass out of this clinic, his mouth pressing together when he saw Dean, like he had something he wanted to say but couldn't in the doctor's presence.

But he barely said a word on the road home.

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They said goodbye to Jody and Alex in the bunker's drive, early evening fading light tinting a canopy of clouds violet and dusty grey. Jody hugged everyone. Dean watched the side of her face, the severe line of her brow and the tension in her jaw as she whispered something in Sam's ear.

Alex was less of a hugger. She did finally relinquish the book she'd been carrying to Sam, though, and let him awkwardly tuck her under his arm on his 'good side.' Mumbled "Take care of yourself" and "Thank you." He swallowed, looked over her head and away from her, no doubt thinking something stupidly martyr-ish like how he should have gone all Saving Private Ryan and not left a single man in enemy territory, not left a single man to burn, because yeah, now he cared about that, couldn't be fucking bothered a few years ago, but now -

He thought about Jed, being dragged away by demons. Was Jed alright? How could he possibly be? Dean could go and check on him, he supposed. Wasn't sure he was brave enough. To see what he'd done. This was the part where he should start telling himself that he'd done the best that he could. They'd all done the best they could. Go team.
"Just try and keep in mind what I said," Jody was saying. "Please. For both your sakes." She was hugging him. It felt nice, slowly sinking in, that warmth anchoring his feet to the earth again.

"Thanks for not jumping straight to the the - " Alex made a slashing motion across her throat. Jody frowned deeply but didn't ask just then.

"You're welcome, kiddo," he said. She smiled at him, small but genuine. Strange girl.

Dean looked from Sam to Cas, thinking that in this cold pale daylight they both looked pretty shitty. He should herd them back inside, make them take it easy. He, on the other hand, looked fine. Because he had somehow become the least humanly vulnerable member of the gang.

It was so fucking hard to believe it, to believe in any of it.

They were in the war room, sitting around the strategy table, doing the recapping. He hit on all the essential points. Alpha vampire. Hybrid monsters. Calling in Crowley. Demons setting a town on fire because he'd bargained with Crowley to start a war. Getting the hell out of Dodge. Going solo op into Purgatory. He told it completely straight.

He didn't mention Jed, much. Or anything specific concerning the visions.

"So do you think you killed him?" Cas asked, once they got to the part where things got all Michael Bay explosion-y. "This Alpha?"

"No," he and Sam said in unison.

"Not usually how it pans out," he said. "I mean, c'mon, you ever see a Dracula movie? Any Dracula movie?"

Cas nodded in solemn acknowledgment of the point.

That night, he got a lucky three hours of darkness. After Purgatory, after fire and failure licking at his heels again, he slept three hours deep and dreamless. It was nearly a goddamned miracle. Then he laid awake for another two, jittery and strung out, staring at the walls of his room. Trying to think of nothing, to force himself back into solid meat and bone by will alone.

The next day he felt calmer, considering, but also had that nagging itch in his palms and on the back of his neck like he was waiting on something. He told Sam it might be good to take a breather for a few more days. That was all they said to each other the whole morning. Sam shuffled some files and other crap on the library tables around for a while, and then abruptly declared he was going for a drive to clear his head. He couldn't go for a run. Cracked ribs.

"You better not think about running or even power walking," Dean said, to be sure, then let him go. Even at a non-conversational distance, Sam had a distracted and stressed air around him. Understandable with the recent weeks he'd had. Months. Sam nodded in reply, in farewell, not meeting his eyes for long, his shoulders and back taut as tripwire as he walked up the stairs. Sam was still in soldier mode, nothing and no-one to fight right now, but it didn't make a difference, you couldn't just snap out of it.

Cas left him too. To search for some cure for his dwindling grace, he said, some patch-job or crutch which he needed more urgently than ever, considering. Dean didn't ask too many questions.
Probably, Sam knew more of what Cas was doing these days than he did.

"I'll be seeing you soon," Cas said.

"Yeah, you'd better," Dean said. "But, y'know, hopefully not because..." He trailed off. Cas had a pinched look, almost hurt. Great.

He had that rigid soldier set to his shoulders too, the one he used to wear all the time when he was still wrapped in the flag of his holy mission and his faith. Not to get all nostalgic, because that Cas was a cult indoctrinated dick and this new model had a lot going for him, but maybe what he really needed was the I pulled you out of Hell, I can throw you back in Cas right now.

"Just because," he said. "You can drop by for any reason, y'know that?" The words were awkwardly suspended on a wire of what friends were supposed to say to each other over that crater of things they weren't talking about. Cas looked at him with too much understanding. A grim denial that boded badly for what Dean needed to believe. He needed Cas to be his fail-safe, his get-out-of-jail card, his cyanide pill. He needed to believe.

Cas' eyes softened, too understanding and too fond by half.

"I have work to do," he said, "but you can call me back any time." He left.

That night, Dean laid awake for hours and got out of bed at one a.m. He fell asleep on the sofa in what had become the game room, drinking Kentucky bourbon and watching The Bridge On the River Kawai, drifting off to someone saying, "And with you it's just one thing or the other: destroy a bridge or destroy yourself. This is just a game, this war! You and Colonel Nicholson, you're two of a kind, crazy with courage. For what? How to die like a gentleman, how to die by the rules - when the only important thing is how to live like a human being!...". He dreamed of the woods again, returning to Purgatory's cool shadowy arms, a relief like a cold cloth draped across burning eyes.

The following midday, he found Sam in the library again, doing some kind of methodical research project with the the same severe focus as when he would field strip a gun. He had that journal Alex had passed along to him. He was cross referencing it with other books, making notes in a file on his lap top. So at least he wasn't researching curse removal, all that blood magic and sacrifice shit that had been the start of their problems lately. His fingers pushed into his eyes, pushed his hair out of his face and tucked it behind his ears. His hair was getting ridiculous, more so than usual. Dean's fingers itched for something sharp, this time for completely benign reasons.

"Heya, Sammy," he said and winced when Sam nearly jumped out of his skin. Too much forced lightness in his voice. It hadn't sounded right. Had a metallic ring, a taunting cold cruel note to it, backed up by the echo of a percussive strike, shattered plaster and wood and dinged steel frame.

He dropped into a chair at the parallel table, leaving several feet of careful distance between them, and said a leaden, "Sorry."

"And you complain about Cas sneaking up on us," Sam said in a strained attempt at pissy irritation. "Half the time you stomp into a room, slamming things around like a teenager or a poltergeist, and then the rest of the time it's like...it's like you're not really here..."

"Well, alright," Dean said. "Slamming things around it is, then."

The silence was thick, sluggishly filling the space between them, smothering the oxygen, dusty and choking. Ashes. Lingering memories of a bad couple of weeks, a job gone to shit and ruin, beyond
fixing, blowing out of town and leaving nothing but ashes in their wake. Jesus. Who even were they now? Where could they go from here?

"What was it like for you?" he said, and then, when Sam was looking at him again, "Purgatory. Now you've been there more than a fifteen-minute layover, how'd it sit..."

"I already told you everything that happened."

"Yeah, you what, gave me the TV Guide recap? I wanna know what it was really like."

"You mean you wanna know how I felt about it?" Sam's eyebrows were as perturbed as Sam's eyebrow's got, his eyes wide and wondering. "Really?"

"Yeah, Sam, really," he said, fighting down irritation. "I wanna know how you felt. Is that so hard to believe?"

Sam pressed his eyes shut for a second.

"It was dirty and nasty and might've put me off walking for a while even without the cracked ribs," he said. "But it wasn't like it was in the top five of the worst things that ever happened. So. I'm totally fine. Don't worry, man, if that's what you're doing."

"That's it?" He crossed his arms, frowned, broadcasting disappointment and knowing it would get under Sam's skin.

Sam frowned, hesitated a moment, then said, "It didn't feel 'pure' for me if that's what you're gettin' at."

"No," he said. "Didn't think so." This was what he'd been looking for, this iron weight sinking into his gut. This confirmation of some fundamental difference between them. This distance. It was like picking a scab.

"It was confusing. I mean. Nothing was what it was supposed to be, seemed to be. And I was part of someone else's plan, a pawn in some long game that I didn't understand."

"You always could complicate things."

A badly strained chuckle. "Yeah, I guess so."

Dean looked again at the open books, a lot of illustrations sprawling across their pages, from glossy black and white photos to rough sketches in old blotchy ink on yellowed paper, vampires and dragons and Purgatory and tangled diagrams of family trees which he supposed were theories on the origins of the species. Hopefully that would keep Sam entertained for a while. Keep his mind off other things.

He thought idly about the gun strapped under the table.

"There's nothing wrong with you," Sam said. That surprised a genuine laugh out of him, short and grating. He clenched his hand, the flexors on his forearm, the burn and ache that went down to the bone.

"You really need to take the platitudes down a notch, Sammy," he said.

"Nothing inherently wrong with you."

"Okay, sure," he said. "Never said there was."
Sam raised just one eyebrow, a look of arch know-it-all skepticism he hadn't worn in a while.

He stood and turned his back on Sam, made to walk somewhere, the side table where he'd left a bottle or the door, he wasn't decided.

"Something Bobby said to me once," Sam said, and Dean had the fleeting thought that he was invoking Bobby's name as a shield so as not to take full ownership of whatever he'd say next. "You always carry a piece of whatever war you're fighting inside of you, you bury it so deep it becomes a part of you. And maybe that makes it harder to know what you are when you're not fighting."

"And you, you're just above it all. Nothin' really touches you."

"No, of course not. I - I'm saying we're the same..."

He snorted, reaching the side table, turning around without touching the bottle. "We're clearly not."

Sam shook his head.

"Cain said I'd kill you," he said, hollow like an echo. Dad said, the angels said. Take some responsibility for yourself; Sam had come back at him once, arms spread in that self-righteous indignation he saw so little of these days, looking back at years of it getting chipped away at the edges while Sam was learning to wear his stubbornness and defiance on the inside, a secret suit of armor.

"So?"

"Crowley, Cas, you, in that particular order. Bet the trifecta. But at least you get pride of place, huh." He was digging at old wounds again, stupid and compulsive.

"Yeah, well, I don't remember fortune telling falling under Knight of Hell powers. So what? He was psychotic. He wanted you to turn out like him because he had somethin' to prove, to justify the sick choices that he'd made. He wanted to drag somebody down with him, like..." Sam cut himself off.

So the only way to get through to Sam would be to bash his head in. What else was new.

"When I was in Hell," he said and watched the shadow falling over Sam's eyes like he knew what was coming, "after I...broke... if Alastair had put you on the rack in front of me, you think I wouldn't have cut you open?"

"If it was you or me, I'd want you to do it," Sam said. Sam who had this perfect knack of seizing on the one thing to say that would make this shit feel even worse without even trying. Sam who took refuge in stoic accepting martyrdom so easily these days. He might as well be on his knees, throat bared, lamb of God. Abraham and Isaac. Playing out the script of the wrong damn story.

He had no comeback to that. He went for the whiskey he'd been loosely aiming for, his second best fallback for when words failed him.

His arm ached, and he rubbed at it until the burn died down for a while. He hummed the opening chords of Smoke on the Water under his breath, pouring a double, then knocked it back. Slowly, the acid drained out of his heart.

"Whadya want me to say?" he said, slurring slightly even though he wasn't even touching drunk enough.

"I don't know. Say you're not gonna leave again."
"I'm not gonna leave you," he said. Another tired echo, but he meant it in that moment. And for a moment Sam looked like that meant enough. His eyes wide and guileless. Waiting. "I'm not gonna leave you."

He made a beeline for the phonograph, put a record on, something Sam had bought. Settled on Clapton and Linwood's Tough Luck Blues. He came back to the table, fingers snagging a book, dragging it down the woodgrain. He sat opposite Sam. The book had genesis in the title, a fold out map illustrating a hopelessly tangled genealogy of European royals who might've been bloodsuckers. Great. He propped his chin on the heel of his hand, read without commentary or taking another drink for an hour. Looked up after that time to see Sam's eyes with bags underneath, a shadow hanging over them, still managing to smile fondly at him. It took him a skipped beat to realize that what he was feeling was peace, peace in the still heart of a storm, a glass bubble moment before time started winding a tight wire around his heart again. Peace nonetheless.

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