bring us to the path of truth

by orphan_account

Summary

Crowley is no human, but neither is he no more than a fiery and aiery, sulfurous spirit of smoke and anger, lust and pride. Sam Winchester, the boy who should be king, has survived by a hair one of the harshest episodes of his tortured life.

Winchesters move on, they bury the past and banish the unwanted, but what place is there in Creation for despoiled demons?

Notes

No beta reader, any mistakes are my own.

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Chapter 1

After these in the fifth place come
the Deluders, who imitate miracles,
and serve wicked conjurers and witches,
and seduce the people by their miracles,
as the serpent seduced Eve.
—Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1535)

When the bleary figure in front of Crowley resolves itself he throws himself backward, rolling off the mattress left on the concrete floor, landing on the etchings of a devil's trap, tangled in a single-ply sheet.

"Are you hungry?"

Crowley watches his captor nervously, adrenaline coursing through his blood. His body remembers holy fire scalding his skin off. The agony of peeling sheets of dead flesh away as he removed each layer of his suit.

Kevin doesn't make a move on him, silent and steely. Emotion shatters Crowley's chest like a wrecking ball in the wake of his terror. He heaves for air as gory memory after gory memory passes, a montage of a teenager in terror. A young girl's neck snapping. A terrified woman exploding into puree. A blade chopping through bone. A mother dead. Kevin's bastardly smirk, too, at last, within the illusion – a splinter of rage at that.

Crowley retches over the floor, vessel in spasm. Unfamiliar exhaustion takes him, vessel left weak when his muscles cease their rhythmic clenching, nothing in his stomach to expel.

"Crowley," Kevin says. Doesn't sound impatient. Doesn't sound angry. Doesn't inflect at all. "Are you hungry?"

Crowley weighs the question. If he was Kevin he'd be eviscerating himself right now. Kevin's a hard one to read. All of this really could have been avoided, Crowley thinks, if Kevin wasn't such a hard one to read and he hadn't thought inflicting pain would…

"Think I could keep it down, state I'm in now? But yes, I'm hungry," he says hoarsely.

The haggard youth nods. Tilts his head.

"I'll come back later."

Crowley thinks he might be having pulmonary edema, breaths ragged and wet and rattling when he breaths; his chest congested with emotion and physically congested. His cheeks are sore, stripped by salt. Cried in some semi-conscious state, then.

"Kevin…"

What to say?
The flinch of the boy's upper lip is the only outward sign of the hatred Crowley knows burns within.

"Shut up, Crowley. You're still a demon. You went to Hell for a reason. The only card you have is you never starved me. One card, and you're going to lose it when you stop sleeping and eating again."

Kevin is gone. Crowley takes stock of his surroundings. He didn't care to when Sam and Dean hauled him; dumped him in the trap. The brick and concrete basement is anything but inviting before taking into account the iron rings bolted into the walls hung with sets of archaic, barbaric manacles. Even less pleasant is the iron bolted to the floor within the trap he's been abandoned in, waiting to chain down a creature of his ilk or some ensnared monster. Similar plates lie at either side.

The inscribed leather collar is still locked around his neck and has been alternately cutting into the flesh of his collarbone and beneath his jaw, outfitted with iron rings of its own. One and one make two. Trouble with Crowley? Chain him to the floor.

There is trouble, he thinks, with Crowley, but not of the kind that would spur a dramatic escape. The demon climbs back onto the mattress. He tries to make sense of the sheet, tugging it at angles until it disentangles from his legs.

No one has cleaned the dried blood crusted in his nostril and beard or bandaged the bruised and torn skin hurting like it might be infected. He is too weak to heal. Not too human. The embers of his power glow feebly inside him. He expended every milligram of it fighting the effects of Sam's holy blood, and he lost.

More sewage and ever more emotional sewage is filling the hole in Crowley's breast. Victim after victim. Young women with high ambitions. Old men with no legacy to leave behind. Corrupt leeches in high and low places. Bobby Singer.

Souls dragged to Hell for their dreams flayed into strips of flesh. Raped. Living out their worst nightmares for eternity until what they fear is what they become. Crowley conducts his life by the principles of efficiency. Efficiency means giving Hell's demons souls to ravage – shrieking, pleading, damned – but tucking other souls neatly away so there is no risk of an unmanageable influx of new demons. He performed his job neatly. Perfectly. Hard copies of every detail. He gave grave consideration to Hell's fuel, smiling to see the numbers in his ledgers comfortably in the black as he sipped his whiskey in his office chair.

He can hear their screams and pleas, even when it becomes too much and he presses his palms to his ears until his flesh aches from his own strength.

He remembers with clarity his own time in Hell between human soul and unclean spirit. Fighting, fingernails ripped off his hands, screaming until his throat tore raw, spitting with rage: except Crowley was born for Hell. Terror held him in its clawed grasp, but vengeance possessed his mind. Tit for tat. That meant taking on power for himself. A moment of clarity and his humanity sloughed away. He carved out a niche, dealing several unfortunate deaths to tormentors who believed they had the better of him and innocuously cultivating an ambitious legion that shared his talent for ensnaring souls with honeyed words.

Those souls. Eternal damnation inflicted for indulging petty vices. So many among them not born to fit in. Some clarity will never come to. All those souls claimed a century or longer ago, deformed, who no longer remember a world with night or day, who now know a world of only pain and humiliation.
The never ending screams of those souls go on deafening the prone demon. *He should pay, and pay, and pay.* Few in Hell ever incur debts so hopeless as Crowley's. Every ledger in the black he so proudly singed off on is bleeding red from between its covers.

He hates them all for it. The demons for idolizing Lucifer, who would as soon dispose of them. The humans for being so stupid, so weak in the face of temptation. His old legion for not coming to his aid, heedless that Abaddon will weed them out.

He hates himself most for ever playing the game.

And so he is a demon, but crippled to act upon his nature. A new breed of abominable creation of Hell's boy king, that inheritor in blood and body who cast aside his crown; let any comer pick up the tarnished thing…yet has rendered Crowley deposed and tearing himself apart from the inside in his private dungeon.

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Sam Winchester is wearing his best worried eyebrows, crouched in front of Crowley, a hand on his forehead as if the demon is a child with a fever.

"You look as bad as I do. Kevin says you're hungry but you won't eat."

Crowley would swat off being babied, except he's miserable and he wants to be. Not for a moment does he confuse it with deserving it. *Selfish selfish selfish.*

"Thought better of it. I don't need to eat," he says, voice cracked from thirst. "It's impractical to eat. Eating leads to chamber pots and that leads to Kevin developing a new grudge on top of all the other grudges."

The hunger remains a hole inside him, the craving excruciating and endless. His lips are chapped, his skin dehydrated. He could be dying, but he isn't convinced of that. *Deserve worse.*

Sam withdraws his hand, making that face he makes.

"Heaven fell. Abaddon is out there. I couldn't walk until yesterday. Castiel is a human. And you—"

The old irritation with Winchesters stating the obvious zig-zags through the weight of Crowley's self-loathing, temper struck.

"Are a demon. Source of all your troubles. Seeing as I did my best to free Lucifer from the pit and bring on Armageddon, pulled one over on Dick Roman and didn't help clean up Castiel's mess when he betrayed me." Castiel. Human now? He exhales, temper starting to pass, mutters: "Pillock forgot I was the brains of the whole thing."

The tension of the situation collapses. Crowley plunges into regret, again, saying, "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry..." as memories flood back, faces and blood, intestines and unanswered prayers for mercy. Here is Sam being kind and he's acting the prat.

Sam scoffs, face still on.

"You didn't exactly phone in. You killed Kevin's girlfriend and his mother, mutilated him and played prophet roulette. You tortured Samandriel. He's dead because of you. Meg is dead because of you. And all the other people you killed—People whose names I don't even know."

The angel Samandriel: drool dripping in a string from his chin, sopping with sweat, blood on his
face and clothes – holes stabbed through his brightly striped shirt, reeking of piss and panic.

Crowley: Torture never gave him the exubrent joy it did Alastair, his own delight cerebral, each victim a puzzle pieced together in his mind, each new brutality designed to turn up a new piece to fit into place. Designed to carve out a part of a person. A terrified person helpless at his hands. Angel? Human? Monster? Demon? They all screamed the same. It's sick. Sick to so dearly enjoy their dismantlement.

Crowley can't muster the defense that Kevin Tran declared war on Hell, Hell didn't declare war on Earth. He knows the boy. The terror he put him through. His suffering. His strain. Now Crowley has left him truly alone in the world, bereft of anchor.

Kevin. Young and frightened. A means to an end. A tool, not a person. All Crowley's mistakes in one agonized, psychological-torture-defaced, inherently good young man. Crowley has left not scars but weeping wounds. He has dealt pain that will not heal with time. The pain may yet change Kevin. May drive him mad.

Crowley startles when Sam's voice breaks through the vortex of self-loathing within his mind.

"Eyes here. We gotta figure out what to do with you." Sam winces. He shakes his head, his mop rag hair. His eyebrows rise apologetically, his voice repentant. "That came out wrong. What I meant is we can't just leave you down here forever."

"You could. Nothing to stop you," Crowley volunteers.

If Sam has a defining feature it's probably not masking a single expression – not because he can't but because he wants to make sure everyone knows where he stands. (Besides a foot above them.) He grows grim yet remains patient, but that's accusation narrowing the corners of his eyes.

"Rotting down here wallowing in regret, or guilt, or hatred? Not gonna cut it if you still want that forgiveness. Cas already tried that one."

Castiel. The one person Crowley knows his feelings on. He got carried away after waiting so long. Waiting two years. Shooting his way in to get the tablet was impolite. Enjoying digging in his bowels for its own sake. For the sake of hearing Cas scream. That. No. Disgusting. Respecting Castiel's selfhood – his bodily integrity – though? Not completely obligate. In the end Castiel didn't care for Crowley's. Castiel is working his way up a learning curve. Crowley is too. Lessons in reaping what they sow.

He loved it, though: Castiel's actual plan. Castiel growing in cleverness from rude, blunt object while simultaneously exhibiting his classic downright stupid determination by cutting himself open and shoving a rock inside him. It reminded Crowley why he so liked Castiel. Why names like "sweetie," "doll," "darling," and "love" fell so easily off his lips. Before.

They were supposed to talk. He had been waiting so long to talk. Kevin again. Always, everything, Kevin Tran. Why had he been so maliciously overconfident? Why had he been so cruel? Just a scared schoolboy. A boy who discovered his profound competence when all else was ripped away.

"You said he's human?" Crowley asks, focusing his full attention on Sam. It matters. It would matter if he were nothing but hellspawn. Two years. Not the best conversationalist, Castiel, but the earnestness is endearing. The times it becomes aggravating he's still nice to look at. Two years of close partnership.

Sam picks up on the seriousness of the question, pausing before he answers him.
"He's handling it," Sam says. He gets the source of the gravity all wrong: "...we might still be able to do it Crowley. Just not me."

Crowley laughs, body weak, his laughter croaking. Be human? Really be human? He can't go back to the demon he was. Doesn't want it. The cleansed parts of him, and they're the majority of him, recoil in horror at the very possibility. Sam brought him so close to clean. Greedy, selfish, violent monster.

His eyes sting, dehydrated or not. He shakes his head, smirking morosely at the younger Winchester.

"That'll do us a world of good when Abaddon rings us up," he says, thinking it out as he speaks. "Spells won't be enough. Need me juice. You boys are lambs for slaughter against a little telekinesis. Castiel's right useless, now. No need to roll over and show our belly. Might as well tear our guts out ourselves."

"Right. Thanks for that visual." Sam hangs on the verge of speaking for a quiet moment. His voice is lower, deadly serious now. "So, you're in. First...this devil's trap. We could use you upstairs – except if Kevin gets paranoid he might actually kill you."

Crowley grasps the gist.

"So you want to go on playing bondage and discipline. No objections. You keep me in your BDSM restraints, parade me around however you like it, Sam."

He can't help but grin a little the way the Winchester draws back, brow riddling like he's… Wouldn't be Sam's scene. There go his virgin ears. Crowley takes stock of his own cramping stomach, his desiccating body and the weight he's carried since the church – always just at the precipice of crushing him, shutting him down completely. This is serious, though. Deserves a sober treatment. Crowley's face darkens, all humor disappearing, eyes on Sam's:

"You can trust me. You know once I invest you can trust me. I get angry. Human or demon. Violently, murderously angry. I've done things… To Kevin, specifically, also, Bobby, and 'things', broadly. But look at our history. All of it. The times I've come through. If I don't get right with you, then I'm dead, mate. Abaddon will hunt me like I hunted Lucifer's loyalists. Like I hunted Meg. Contenders for the crown don't enjoy a high survival rate."

The boy looks into him. Not with the defiance, the anger, the suspicion and the quick eye of a natural predator ready to exploit an opening typical of Sam Winchester. Sam cares. That hurts. Crowley can't define how or why this potent soreness blooms beneath his sternum. You don't deserve it. Not that. Worse. He only feels responsible for you.

There it is.

Sam has stood and moved to a complicated bit of floor deep in the room that appears to require keys.

"I'm going to dismantle the trap. I think we can stick to the collar and a pair of handcuffs, chains off – no serious impairment, no powers."

Crowley cringes as Sam goes works at removing a triangular piece of the floor, breaking the trap. He hasn't stood in days. Sam is there to help him, muscles like Hercules even if he's been lain out for days, himself. He keeps hands on Crowley's shoulders until he's certain he won't topple.

The demon gives him a weary look of appeal to his good nature, mustering a little animation.
"I'm supposing I can't run to the shops, seeing I would get a bead on the location of your whatever-this-is. Considering the eyes out for me, I don't want to go anywhere. So, I need you to buy me lotion. This leather? Not supple. Handcuffs either. And floral scents? Hilarious until we've all smelt it for a week.—though I like a good scented hand wash."

Sam laughs, his own laughter hoarse.

"I wouldn't try for scented hand wash. You won't survive Dean. Room, food, free spellwork, and you put in research. Tricks, we execute you."

Straightforward deal. No hidden agendas. Crowley smirks.

"Add in a few clauses about a modicum of protection and the duration of my obligation and give me a little tongue..."

"Crowley."

He doesn't have to play innocent. It's the best plan. He is innocent. Of this one. Thoughts of conjoined lips aside. You don't deserve to touch a Winchester.

"You were pre-law. You know your way around a contract. Write it," he says. "Can even throw in a few lines about your bondage fetish."

Now there's a face, Sam's eyebrows befuddled and voice reprimanding.

"Dude."


Sam reflexively steadies him on his feet. There are tears again, the strain of human lifetimes of black memories more than his vessel can contain. He wants to scream but only begs in a rockier voice than before, mucus clinging to a torn throat, hands on his face; fingernails digging into his forehead.

"I need you to trust me. You're all I have." His voice rapidly crescendos. He hears himself yelling, echoes on the walls. "I'm a bloody great burden. Never argue that. I'm a charity case." He drops his hands. Drops the volume. He turns on the boy, teeth bared; snarling his words, out of control. "At worst a junkie will leave with your wallet, maybe murder you. I can do so much worse. I need you to trust me. I don't know how else I can live this."

Sam Winchester knows what he's on about. Naturally he does, with what he's just survived. He remains restrained, mature and collected but not bereft of sympathy.

"I'll think about it," he says with especial gentleness. "We don't know if this is permanent, Crowley. How fast you may regret that. And I'm not the best role model for starting over. You heard me back there. One minute I was on mission and then, when Dean—I cracked."

The depths to which Crowley deserves to regret it are obvious now... There are no grounds for mercy.

"God's not talking. He's definitely not going to show up and show me the light. There are no more angels, and anyway they were a great lot of bastards. I can't go get churched," he says. "There
aren't AA meetings for this." He reaches. It's obvious. What's not obvious is Sam's tolerance. How much or little he'll give when the world has forever treated him cruelly. When Hell has since before his birth. "I'm saying there's not a higher power to teach me how to deal with this. There's just you, Moose."

Sam softens. But does he care?

*He feels responsible. He only feels responsible.*

"I'll think about it," Sam stresses. "Right now you need water. You need soup. You and whoever you're riding. I don't think you'll keep anything else down until you're hydrated."

Crowley laughs. Not with pride; tipping on hysteria. A bedside. A bald, unconscious, frail child, feeding tube and oxygen mask. Verge of death. A haggard man, years younger. Just a stroll through the hospital for Crowley. Farming grounds. High quality, pure souls at their breaking point. Tears like his tears now on this face. The smile on Crowley's old borrowed one. These same hands grasping his arm. His wife might kill herself. Please, please, please.

These lips on his.

"Bloke's in Hell. His daughter had leukemia. Contract came up. I thought he looked dignified. Worn the body ever since."
Chapter 2

Dean sets his plate and glass down on the table with two definitive noises.

"This contract you might make with Sam," he says.

He carefully picks over Crowley's expression: curious but unimpressed shading over that mourning and sulking he's been doing since he came upstairs.

The demon leans forward a little, offering:

"This is the part you demand I sign it with you instead of dear Moose, after the speech about not trusting me, after you talk about all Moose has gone through and what he doesn't need is me of all demons in his life after everything I've gone and done."

Dean wrinkles his nose and sits back in his chair with a glare as Crowley gestures in the air for Dean to brush it all aside and get to the point. Crowley's brow tightens and he drops his eyes back to his food, cutting another triangle of sausage patty from his meal.

It's six o'clock, but they haven't hit the grocery store since they retreated to the bunker. Sam and Kevin are getting 'real dinner', whatever that is, before they stock up. Dean was. Apparently Sam has a grocery isle partner he can trust to enforce the purchase of 'real food', now. Fuck them, too.

Castiel is somewhere kitchenward. Dean almost hugged the life out of Cas when the bastard got himself to the bunker. The battery on his cell phone was dead, Castiel apologized, and, as a human, he had no mechanism by which to recharge it.

The ride back from the church the night the angels fell to Earth was a real joy with a bloody, dead-eyed Crowley and a soggy, confused ex-angel in the back seat. No Cas in sight, they ended up surrendering that stray, Hadariel, to a crisis center – after he fell to his knees and kissed Kevin's feet at introduction, 'Kevin Tran' burned into his mind, and begged for guidance and forgiveness if Heaven had failed God.

Humans are a human problem. Not a prophet problem. Not a hunter problem. Humans are doing alright with the sudden baby boom. It's 100% of the twenty-four hour news cycle and a bumper crop of halfway houses. Hadariel wanted to be with his brothers and sisters.

Cas, on the other hand, is a jackass sometimes and really fucking gullible but he's family. He belongs right where he is. That and if his siblings saw him there'd be fresh ex-angel hysteria, tens of thousands of angels begging the disillusioned dork for answers and leadership. Alternatively, they might re-enact the crucifixion.

He saw the guy making a plate after him, although he doesn't crop up while Dean demonstratively meditates on Crowley, just to put the demon a little more on edge.

Dean folds his arms over his chest.

"Nope," he says, when his dramatic lull is done. Crowley looks up again, appropriately more uneasy now. Dean wets his lips. "All three of us sign it. There is no situation where you single out whichever of us doesn't have authority. Not happening."

It stirs up pride in Dean's chest when Crowley surrenders upfront and huffs approval.
"You're catching up on contract law."

"Considering I had to read that whole stupid thing you rolled out to get the drop on you, I got to thinking."

"Ooh. So many easy shots," Crowley murmurs without taking one, instead returning to diligently work his way through his meal in small bites.

Crowley is as pale as Sam. Sam has an appetite though, Crowley doesn't. The shine off his handcuffs looks like victory. They came away with one. Just one. But after the atrocities Crowley committed this year, and that bullshit Sam-as-a-hostage situation Cas had a hand in – and that other hostage situation, Lisa and Ben, Cas had a hand in but Crowley was smarmy about – one victory feels pretty good.

Dean thinks back. Exhales a short laugh. Lets a smile slide over his lips. He has Crowley's attention.

"You know why we were able to defeat you? Integrity. We don't have it."

Crowley's expression curls into pained, confused resentment. Dean's sure it sounds like a low blow to a guy in the gutter. Dean's been there, where he wouldn't recognize he had a virtue if it stabbed him in the eye.

Dean laughs; now it's genuine, it's friendly. He quirks his brow at Crowley.

"Heaven didn't either. Heaven had less integrity than I do. Heaven was, uh, a wretched hive of scum and villainy – and the one asshat still up there gives you a run for douchery." Dean forks up some food off his plate. The smile falls off his face. He brings the tone down. "…maybe I don't trust you trust you, but if it's what Sam wants, then what the hell."

Understanding appears on Crowley's brow, he withdraws, straightening to do it. Dean lets him wrestle with having strength of character by himself.

Suddenly Dean halts, cold foreboding in his chest. Sits forward in his chair. Feels his face screw up.

"Wait. Do I gotta kiss Sam?"

Crowley pauses, fork and knife in hand, wearing his best 'Are you serious?' look. Dean's wearing his 'Yes'. Crowley waits, visually considering all the ways he could put it – the truth or the lie, then:

"No," he pronounces clearly like Dean is the stupidest human he's ever laid eyes on. Dean wants to hit him upside the head but Crowley's too far away and Dean's too busy scrubbing that scenario out of his thoughts. Not a big sacrifice compared to the other ones they've made. Just too weird.

Dean's thrown for another double take. He barely noticed Castiel quietly slinking in. Cas shoots an apprehensive look Crowley's way and treads around the table to place himself in the chair next to Dean. Now Crowley's angry, jaw tense. Dean doesn't get it.

"Castiel. You've been avoiding me. Completely. I haven't discerned why. I thought one cavity search was enough – unless you're just stuffed full of secrets."

"Hey," Dean warns, put on the alert.
"Dean. I don't need you to defend me," Castiel says, fixing his posture, eyes on the demon. "Crowley is correct. I have been putting off...speaking."

After a minute Dean whispers *Awkward* to himself, watching them stare at each other, wearing his incomprehension hoping somebody thinks about cluing him in.

Suddenly Crowley's a different person. Drops the anger. Looks worried. Dean's even further thrown than before but goes back to eating, keeping an eye and ear on the two of them.

"You did heal up, mate? Before you went all mortal."

"Almost. I'm afraid even once I've healed completely I will always carry a scar."

Castiel relaxes, picking up his utensils and starting on his food.

"Poetic. Apt," Crowley says in the tone of an apology. "But I want to talk, understand?"

Dean looks between them, disbelieving. Scowling. Okay, now he's pissed.

"You can do your talking right here. If there's something going on you can't say in front of me you really think, with *your* history, I'll sleep on that?"

Castiel looks at him, confused.

"Crowley and I are not conspiring. I suspect Crowley desires the liberty to raise his voice with me without your interruption."

"My canny little kitten, you," Crowley says, voice souring.

Dean's hit by a Mack truck. He's been hit by a Mack truck so he can place the feeling square. New visuals. Totally unwanted visuals. Totally out there never wanted to seriously consider it **not-awesome** impact.

"—whoa, whoa, whoa. Did you guys *fuck*?"

"You're a pervert, Dean. I should know," Crowley drawls.

"Not as such," Castiel says.

"What does that even *mean*, Cas?"

"It means mind your business and leave us to mind ours," Crowley says, putting authority behind it. A conversation ender. Dean wants to ask but he doesn't actually want to ask. Not when they're double teaming him. When he gets Cas cornered all bets are off—

Wait. That sounds like that's Crowley's plan. Alright. Fine. Maybe Dean will approach this with something resembling sensitivity.

When the storm hits, the next day, there is intermittent, unmistakable yelling. Stone bunker. Great acoustics. Dean can't make out the words or pinpoint where Cas and Crowley are but he can suss that, after a few minutes, Cas starts yelling, too.

"Dean?" Kevin prompts. "Are you going to do anything about that?"

The kid's sitting across from him in a matching leather chair, the two of them with fiction novels out of the 1920's – Dean will not play chess with Kevin again. They haven't scored a TV yet,
which Castiel is actually the one frowning upon.

Dean winces.

"Kevin, I'm gonna lay down some hard won experience. Never, ever get in the middle of a couple's fight. Especially if one or both of them is a witch."

Kevin makes the same face.

"Wait. Are Crowley and Castiel—"

"You ask them. That is my final word."

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Crowley is sitting on the edge of his bed in the Spartan concrete and brick apartment he's moved into since he came upstairs. He looks up miserably as Sam lets himself in the unlocked door. It's been four hours, but Sam thinks Crowley cried more recently than that. The demon's fists are bloodied. Sam recognizes the aftermath of a round of wall punching when he sees it.

The wall definitely didn't put a fist in Crowley's eye socket.

"Let me guess. Divide and counsel. No, hold that. Divide and threat assessment," Crowley surmises, scrubbing his face.

"That's gonna be a nice shiner tomorrow."

Crowley rankles.

"Killed his Lucifer-worshipping tart. My god you all turn into gullible sods for a pair of tits. If I saw the future coming I would've jumped—"

That's the end of that. Sam is, personally, glad, even if Crowley's got the thousand yard stare on. It begs several questions, but Sam shuts the door behind him instead of asking them. He glances around the room. No chairs. That matches the rest of the 'no furniture'.

"Uh, can I…" He leaves off the question, gesturing toward the bed. Crowley shrugs, so Sam sits toward the end. As much as he'd like to give him space, he admittedly takes up a lot of it. "I don't know, Crowley. Meg came through for him way more times than I ever would have expected."

The hollow look the demon turns on him, the way he presses his lips together, the sorrow that outweighs the resentment…

"So did I."

Okay, Sam thinks. There it is. The whole fight in a nutshell. He knows Crowley's damage, what he doesn't know is anything about Castiel and Crowley's actual relationship to each other. Sam puts on his listening face, the one he uses to lead on interviewees. The one stamped with authenticity that says he cares. He cares about the people he interviews, actually, but, honestly? Crowley a little more.

Crowley hesitates. He raises his guard, but ultimately he lets it erode again and the words start falling out of his mouth.

"Two years with that entitled, pushy bastard. You have any idea how incompetent he is? Right up until the end he was murdering his followers in broad daylight. Had to have a team out on just an
address. Then Eve. Mass homicide in a diner? Really? And I brought him Raphael, even when he cut me out. Which is more specifically in harm's way than I have ever put myself, Apocalypse or not. Faked an entire ritual with blood that didn't smell anything like the blood I got him. I saved the bloody world." Crowley sounds a long way from bragging about it. "Meg? I mean…Meg? What do you think she would've done if she got the crown? The very first thing? Popped the cage. Saved her daddy." Sam doesn't know if that's true, but Crowley's eyes harden with conviction. "You think she died for Cas? To me it sounded like she was carrying the same grudge against me she always had right up until the end. But, no, Castiel wanted to sodding bone. You know we had the sexual tension. He just hadn't bothered to figure when to use his parts. I didn't know I needed to stop work and put in some time on my knees. I barely kept him in play fully focused."

Sam's 'listening' face has progressed to his 'wow' face, if only because of the vehemence Crowley's started spitting it with. Sam takes a breath. He's not sure he knows how to even begin addressing this, at risk of sounding obvious. Crowley has years of lived experience on him that Sam can't touch, even if he does understand. It was a little more than a week ago he looked at Dean and saw the same traitor. The brother who put his trust in everybody but him, no matter how hard he worked and how many times he tried.

He got a different resolution. A better one. Dean took him into his arms. He didn't punch him in the eye. Sam knows Cas is hurting, too, somewhere else and for different reasons. The last thing he wants is to flub his words, to stand in the way of them working this out – for sentimental reasons but also for his own quality of life.

"That's…heavy," he says carefully. Not carefully in the way of avoiding offense but carefully in the way of communicating he's following, even if he hasn't figured out exactly what he can say.

Crowley shudders with emotion. Sam weighs his expression and decides that right now the demon is still as close to wall punching as crying.

"He never thought of me as an equal. He was using me. His words. You wait two years to hear somebody say that. To make somebody say that to your face." Crowley laughs. "He rather fancied me, though. Was going to keep me. In a terrarium – but you know that bit."

Pointing out that that is a step up from a power tripping Castiel a hair from executing Sam on sight is not the right tact. Sam felt the same betrayal. He felt his heart break. He suffered. Sam had something different, though: the same mental distortion under his belt, speaking relatively. He lay in bed that first night that God walked the earth and he forgave Cas, because somewhere in there was Cas. A Castiel who didn't know how to deal with the betrayal he felt when his friends – his family – rejected everything he had done in secret to achieve the power to save them.

Only if Sam had had one Red Bull, Cas had knocked back a packing case.

Sam tries to put himself in Crowley's place. Crowley has his pride buried in there. Otherwise he wouldn't have put himself toe to toe with Castiel. Otherwise, maybe he wouldn't have split his knuckles on a wall, either, but Sam intimately knows a temper doesn't go hand in hand with pride. Crowley doesn't ramp up the way that Sam does, there are no warning signs. Taking that as a given, Sam rules out clapping a commiserating hand on a shoulder.

Crowley bites. Sam's wrist is still in gauze.

Alright. A proactive approach is going to be safer.

"You need anything? Like headache medicine. Or a drink? We should get some antiseptic on that, after you wash the brick dust out."
"I'll take both, please," Crowley says. Sam's almost taken aback. He's been so deep in Dean, Cas and an angry, delusional Kevin it takes a second to remember the world outside the Impala where people have manners. Meanwhile Crowley stretches his fingers out as if seeing his bloody knuckles for the first time.

"Right on that," Sam says, offering a smile that has no effect on Crowley's mood.

When he gets back with the bottle of acetaminophen, the whiskey, the antiseptic cream, bandaids, gauze and tape Crowley is waiting at the end of the bed, hands still wet from scrubbing, blood fresh blood welling up bright red where he washed the clots away.

"Let's get out of here," he urges. "It's depressing in here. We need to let your inner interior decorator out."

Sam remembers Crowley's house. Over half its appointments were probably auction material. Crowley's going to have to work with less, but it's a step up from the last time Sam met him on the lam.

"No," Crowley says tiredly, pushing himself up from the bed, squinting at Sam. "Carpet later. You need a haircut. Nothing comes before that."

"You know what? Fine. Third time's the rout." He's not sure when his hair became everyone else's business. "You win the scissors. Just..." Sam looks down at the unopened bottle. "—not drunk."

Crowley mulls on it as they make the hallway.

"Usually delegate that, but I'm the only qualified candidate in this hole so the grave responsibility falls on me." He perks from his brooding. "After I got to thinking about lotion I thought 'This place must have a pharmacy'. Pharmacy? Considering the...quality of your liquors, I'll give that a little more kick. That and I need to do inventory if you want me for spellwork."

"There's a pharmacy, and then there's the pharmacy behind the pharmacy. Thinking you'll love it," Sam says with a smile. They walk the halls. He holds the door for the demon. It's been eighty five years but the shelves of hand labeled bottles are dust free. Sam is anything but a magician. Yet. But he can work out there's a hermetic version of a hermetic seal on the room.

"The Pure Food and Drug Act never reached this room," Crowley says, bloodied hands tucked in the pockets of his slacks, handcuffs pushed up his arms. He showered this morning but he only has the one set of clothes. Sam sets the supplies he brought with him on one of the broad work tables and, taking Crowley's lead, pushes his hands in the pockets of his jeans, too, looking up the tall shelves with their cobalt and brown glass bottles. Even Sam can't reach the highest reaches, a wooden latter providing transport toward the high ceiling. " Copaiba Emulsion for Gonorrhea and Gleet," Crowley reads, leaning in toward a shelf. "Nostalgia. Oh, White Liniment with Chloroform. For man or beast. Worm Cakes. 'You can save your children', Moose. And it's 'pleasant to take'. Ah, the spice rack. Ooh, very exotic. Laksa leaf. I could stir fry something Malaysian with this – or render your enemies permanently impotent. Have to keep that straight in the kitchen."

For a moment Crowley is grinning. Sam's grinning along. He's learning. He'll learn more. All of it. His brief memories and high, if partly retrospective, admiration of Henry stand out in his mind.

Finally Crowley heaves a sigh, pulls his hands out of his pockets with a grimace as he moves away from the shelves, sits on a stool next to Sam and allows Sam to paste cream on and bandage his ripped skin. He downs a handful of acetaminophen tablets, sets up a clean dropper bottle and then moves, mood low once again, to the shelves, glancing them over more rapidly, walking the room,
and picking out several bottles.

"A little freedom?" the asks, not sounding in the same ballpark as rebellious. Sam pauses, suspicious. He weighs the evidence and produces the keys from his pocket, glancing at the closed door. The collar and cuffs are soon in a small pile on the worktable. Crowley doesn't look enthused about it, perusing his bottles.

"Don't read them, it'll put you off," he warns while he begins, well, alchemy. He pushes the bottles away, labels facing the other direction and mutters over the bottle in Latin: _Thou ministering spirits, may Creatures of Salt be overcome with drunkenness by liquors ebullient to the spirit and tasting of Elysium nectar which deprive men of their reason like unto the – _ here Sam's understanding falters, but he picks up the rest – _driven by every gust of wind._

"Crowley. That is really shady," Sam says.

Crowley shrugs, dragging the bottle of whiskey over with a bandaged hand, peeling off the plastic theft deterrent and unscrewing the cap. He releases the three drops of the unction into the mouth of the bottle, each disappearing in a swirl of gold.

"This smelled like paint thinner," he counts. "What's shadier?" He holds the bottle out to Sam.

"Don't. Overdo it. Put out an elephant that." He remains glum but is already starting to look livelier, or maybe distanced from his burdens. His brow knits. "Ought to leave a glass out for Dean. Like a bear trap."

Sam laughs before he takes a short draw.

"Okay. If this works like it sounds…We pretty much swore off prank wars but."

He'd do it. It's been a shitty life since then. Besides, Gabriel is… He's dead. It's better than pouring a drink on the floor for him.

It's not even three minutes before they've slid off the stools onto the bunker floor in what Sam approximates equal states of intoxication, even if Crowley imbibed more. Ebullient to the spirit. Definitely. Sam's on cloud nine. Crowley looks relaxed, and possibly a little too fond of the stool leg, because he's stroking it from where he's lying on his back.

"So this is us. The Men of Letters. Me, Dean, a Prophet of the Lord, a guy who used to be an angel and a mostly reformed demon."

"As far as I'm trapped. In a witness protection sort of way."

"We may have a woman of letters in the pipeline. If there had been any way to exorcise Josie Sands of Abaddon, we'd have two."

"S'on you, Moose. I don't mean… Yes, I do. I do mean." Crowley trails his finger along the leg of the stool but he's looking narrowly at the ceiling. "Azazel went, but after he succeeded. You had more clout than anyone. Than Lilith. Heir apparent. If Lucifer hadn't risen, the infernal crown was yours. I didn't like it, of course, twenty something that Azazel, no friend of mine, never groomed – but Hell feared you like nothing else. There's terror, and then there's the terror of being snuffed at the handwave of the king. I didn't differentiate the possibility of you from the threat of Lucifer slipping his prison, except he did and it was my best interest to keep him out of you. Anyway,
afterward you neglected it, so I held on to my expanded investment portfolio."

Sam wonders for a moment, but conviction rises through clear.

"I wouldn't change it. Anything. We got it right. Uh, as right as it's gonna get at this point. There's room to get it, uh, right-er."

"Way I see it this is us," Crowley says. "Trueborn King of Hell, Michael Sword, Prophet of the Lord, there is *something* cosmically wrong with Cas, and blah blah blah. Today, I'm drunk."

Sam's eyes widen.

"What if I fix it? Hell. I mean…we save them. Everybody."


Sam rolls over onto his elbows, sloppy smile on his lips.

"M'a contract. With you."

Crowley catches his breath. Holds it. Rolls his head back and looks at Sam a long time from a crooked direction, hand closed on the leg of the stool. He wrinkles nose.

"S'sober talk, galoot."

"N' the rest of that was drunk talk."

Crowley gives the matter due consideration, expression opening up.

"The ass on Castiel. Tight, tight buns. I mean, round. But the rest of him – no fat on him. It's physically impossible. You had a look?"

Sam groans and rolls back over onto his back, rubbing his face with his hands, which feels *fantastic*. It reminds him of being pumped full of drugs at Glenwood Springs Psychiatric Hospital. He wants to run his hands all over his body but settles for just sliding them onto his chest, because Crowley is talking about Castiel's ass.

"No. I don't *wanna* have a look, either, dude. You're comparing notes with the wrong guy. I'm straight. Like. Really straight. Not like Dean straight."

"Don't let on to Cas. Slut'll jump right on that disco stick."

Sam closes his eyes and tries to pretend he didn't hear what Crowley said.

"No Cas talk. No business talk. No…Hey," Sam becomes alert sweeps his hand through the air, gesturing to the whole, glimmering room, "Tell me about what all these do."

"All those? Doubt we'll make it through. Better not forget this, Moose," Crowley warns.

Sam lets the words sink into him, Crowley's voice all gravel in his intoxicated state, lulling him into deep comfort. Tincture after animal parts and fluids, herbs, twigs, leaves and spices and the powders, unguents, unctions, philters, vapors, collyriums, perfumes and poisons that can be imbued with power. Witches learn them, Crowley says, but also magi. This is a magicians' sanctum if he's ever seen one, Crowley says. He has, in fact, knocked over several since he took the crown – burned some, raided others. Wholesale monster slaughter, going after alphas, ultimately depriving
magicians of vital components – that might have shaken them out of their nests. Witches he could control. Loners, magi, he says. He's never seen a den like this. *Some of your books could put my eyes out, and worse*, he says with a frown.

Sam would hate to admit how much time he spends researching while drunk, but he reassures Crowley he won't forget any of it.
"... Article three, section D. Party A is forbidden to plan or conspire over any malicious action against Party B for the duration of the contract. Article three, section E. Party A will submit to restraint by Party B upon request, command or indication for the duration of the contract. Restraint in this case includes. Article three, section E, clause one. Any mechanism of restraint that inhibits Party A's ability to manifest demonic powers or influence. Article three, section E, clause two. Physical restraint up to and including complete immobilization." Crowley lays the stapled printer paper on the table beside him. "And there we have it, gentlemen. Now we seal it."

"At this rate I'll lose count of the layers of mojo covering me," Dean says. Crowley takes it to mean he has decided against last minute addenda.

"Don't remind me, Squirrel."

Crowley has erased contract after contract from his inscription-riddled essence, calling up glowing veins of text to extinguish debts owed him or snuff out the articles about collection. Ownership of the soul is required no longer than translating its will into power. Crowley is an artist with souls, but his manipulations leave deformities and black marks like permanent sunspots. Although uncollected, the souls in question remain marred and will be eternally, an effect typically gone unappreciated by their owners until long into the afterlife.

This contract is no different, except that his partners in it know the small consequences. He must only touch their souls briefly, his shackles easily forged.

Crowley has a sour stomach about employing his talents as he steps up to Sam. Sam soon distracts him, given the giant is difficult to physically negotiate with any kind of professionalism. His imagination conjures a thousand ways to kiss Sam Winchester. They all require erotic grasps and positions. If he could dispose of those figments, he would. He isn't practiced in any kind of self-control in that area. Guilt accompanies the fact. That he has practiced maintaining a professional mien compensates while hardly assuaging.

Sam's eyebrows rise in recognition of the physical dilemma. A well-rehearsed smile on Crowley's part promises the boy business is business. Sam shrugs his brow and steps in, pulling Crowley up, Crowley's hand going to Sam's opposite arm; he steadies himself. Touch is unremarkably simple, unless a man has gone a very long time without it. The electricity on his skin, human nerves firing in excitement; its soothing, alluring effect on his vessel. He thought it would work him up in ways that would shame him. The effect is the opposite. The demon can't inhibit emotion from flaring up in his chest, but the emotion is gratitude, buoyant and bright.

Next is contact with Sam's soul, swiftly redefining "bright". Crowley has never encountered one in perfect shape. The lightest of touches and its colorless energies write new boundaries into Crowley's true body of elemental air and flame.

He breaks away, gratefully uncertain if he marred it at all. Sam's kiss lingers on his lips, those neglected nerves reliving the sensation. He knows he went about it all somewhat enthused, Sam barely reciprocating but unresisting. He sees Sam understood the reverence he couldn't help, the boy not put off by it, the gaze from beneath his furrowed brow painted in hues of sadness.

Crowley lifts his own brow.

"Trials did you good, Moose. Like stepping into the Holy of Holies, you. I imagine. Be ash before I
got both feet in there.'

Sam looks more consternated than complimented, and Crowley is nauseous at his inability to rephrase *Never seen one that big*, so the demon turns his attention on Dean.

"Do not kiss me like that," the older Winchester warns, shaking his head at Crowley.

"You're safe, Dean. You completely fail to inspire me," Crowley assures absent his usual zing. Dean quickly realizes Crowley means it and switches gears to jealousy. Not enough jealousy that he sticks his tongue down Crowley's throat, their lips pressed together longer but their kiss still. Dean's soul is deformed at demented angles, yet light stubbornly pierces even what Alastair had begun to sculpt into a demon. The whole thing shimmers a color Crowley has never seen. He thinks *Purgatory* and would bet on that.

Crowley's intention is neither to leave it worse than he found it nor to infect himself with Dean's impossibility, already washed by Sam's purity. Body to body it's only seconds, but in the aether Crowley has spent hours mulling the thing over before daring to touch it. An uncanny sensation thrums through the energies of Dean Winchester racing into him. Crowley breaks away as soon as he's done manipulating them, searching inside himself for anything unusual.

Everything inside him is unusual.

"Done and done," he says, switching to a salesman's smile.

Dean claps his hands together, points a finger at Crowley and grins.

"Awesome. Let's never do it again."

He leaves on that note, rubbing his hands together and retreating wherever he'll piece back together…not his certainty that he's heterosexual, Crowley doesn't think, but his embarrassment about getting a kiss passed over from his brother in front of and by Crowley.

"He's perfectly well adjusted," Crowley says when Dean has thoroughly vacated.

" Compared to when you met him?" Sam asks, wearing the face of a worried sibling. An actual question, then.

"He was hollow as a dead tree. Now he isn't," Crowley surmises after evaluation. Sam looks relieved. "Think you were just imagining it?"

"Since he came back from Purgatory it's been...different. For both of us."

Crowley's expression invites him to elaborate, Sam has donated more time than he deserves to listening to Crowley's own troubles, but Sam declines, ignoring it.

"I'll need clothes," Crowley says. The pertinent change of subject only reminds him what a burden he's become. *Selfish, selfish.* "I need them now, really. I'm assuming I'll be having quite a change in wardrobe."

The corner of Sam's lip quirks.

"You could say that. I don't need to ask how you feel about American plaid. I'll...see what I can find. No promises. We have to go teach Cas how to shop for himself – he's in the same fix," Sam says.
There's nothing more to be said.

Crowley retreats to his empty room, leaving Sam to his own business.

Now that the blowout is two days behind them, Crowley has found it amenable to interact with Cas. The man stopped avoiding him. Their conversations are stilted. The pain hasn't left them, but after airing it there's no point in aggravating it.

If Castiel had been avoiding him, Crowley similarly finds himself silently deferring to Kevin. The difference is Kevin has no desire whatever to speak with him. Crowley's crimes are too great. Too complete.

He's sorry. It's a sorry state of being sorry. A borrowed state. For Kevin, that's what matters.

Crowley deserved Hell – deserved it as mortals went. They dragged him below on a bad temper and cheek. As perfect a fit as Hell was, he didn't have the slightest idea what he would become. Even as he transformed himself, he had no power to foresee the monster that was to come forth from him: Deceiver. Defiler. Glutton. Torturer. Slaughterer. Rapist. Crime compounding crime until no crime was remarkable if it produced his ends.

He committed them all willingly, enthusiastically. The violent lust that defined him has disappeared since the day the angels fell, but he remembers its pull and the black satisfaction when he sated it.

Lying alone in the dark, stripped to his skivvies under utilitarian covers, he has endless time to revisit year after century. His mind is a field of fresh corpses wandered by memories of the tormented. He can still hear them, and there is no hope for relief. His breathing is laborious. His tears fall without a sound.

And yet, coming upon Kevin in the bunker is worse than this.

He wants to make amends. Give restitution. He would neatly cleave off his own fingers one at a time until someone else had to do the rest. He would spend three times as many delirious hours as Kevin had been subjected to producing his repayment. More. Nothing can be conceived as out of bounds.

Nothing is exactly what he can do for Kevin.

He is left to equal parts obsess and despair over it.

Kevin is a Holy man, pure of purpose. The idea of earning forgiveness from him holds particular allure, but that idea is premised on a lie. Crowley will not have made up for a single depraved act. It is ultimately an avenue of underserved relief from his own suffering. Vanity.

He cannot understand how Sam has moved ahead, how Castiel and Dean do, and their crimes have been few. He sees nothing but corpses and revenants. The single clean thing in all of it is Sam: Crowley's new beginning and perspective granted not by Grace but by a Winchester's stubborn resolve.

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"How can you stand him?"

"Crowley?" Sam places immediately, standing chest to back with Kevin, adjusting his posture with a few meaningfully placed touches. "Uh, I guess because I'm used to him."
He'd actually like to not have this conversation with a gun in Kevin's hand.

The pistol's rapport stings through his earplugs, amplified by the stone walls. Two. Three. They're going to have to put down their hard-stolen cash for a couple of earmuffs with full size cans if Cas and Kevin will be practicing in here regularly.

"Better," Sam says. "You're still thinking too hard about the target. I need you to keep your attention right here. Like we talked about."

He touches the problem spots in Kevin's elbow, shoulders and back.

Nothing good can come out of Kevin blowing Crowley's head off over and over again in fantasy land.

Kevin detaches the empty clip, stepping away from Sam up to the divide to load a fresh one. He looks good. He looks like a total novice, but he has the motions down, just not the fluidity he'll need in a firefight.

Sam doesn't want Kevin to ever be in a firefight. That seems pretty unrealistic at this point.

"Being used to being surrounded by evil bastards isn't a justification to keep one in your secret lair," Kevin says, looking back at Sam over his shoulder. Sam hates that trauma-hardened look on him where the frightened straight-A student used to be, too.

He shifts his weight to his other foot; exhales.

"No offense, Kevin? Safety on, gun down when you're hinting about killing somebody in the building."

"Right," Kevin says, making a face and flipping the safety, laying the pistol on its side. He turns around, pulling the ear plugs out of his ears. Sam mirrors his action. "You kill demons. That's your entire gig. It's a synonym for 'Winchester'."

Sam's brow wrinkles up; he's giving Kevin what Dean would call 'the eyes', but in his defense they're a good reflection of where he is internally.

"Except, what if I don't? What if I cure demons? I changed Crowley. Almost completely. If I give up because I flubbed it…I can't just kill them when it doesn't completely work out."

Kevin wears his anger openly. He isn't the hysterical boy in the laptop cam video. His anger is becoming clearer cut, better defined than ever.

"He killed my girlfriend. You were standing there when he threatened to 'defile' my mom's corpse, and you know what? I don't know if he did. He had no problem taking a piece of me. Do you have any clue what it does to me when the guy of my nightmares and hallucinations is around any corner? I've never wanted to kill somebody like this in my life. Hell, Sam, he taught me to want to kill somebody."

Kevin storms past Sam out of the gun range. Sam follows. Sam knows where he's going. He thinks about putting his foot down and making this a dry campus, except that would put him at number one on everybody's hit list.

At least there'd be harmony.

Memories of not so long ago filter in.
"I do. I know what that's like," he promises softly when they've reached their destination, while he stands by and watches Kevin go through pouring himself a drink from their too-well-stocked wet bar. "During the Apocalypse, Lucifer…He wanted me for his vessel. I was supposed to be. I used to think it was why I was born." He's less sure, now, after lying drunk with Crowley. Two kings and a queen thrown down. Maybe 'trueborn' doesn't mean 'poisoned'.

Maybe he's an idiot for thinking it. Maybe he's starting to suspect he hasn't gotten a look at the whole chessboard, yet.

He presses on. Kevin's not looking at him but he can tell Kevin's listening: "Sometimes he was kind. I'd think 'Nobody else is ever going to understand me like this'. Other times, he wasn't. He was a monster. I didn't handle it like you. Sometimes I was a monster, too. With and without him."

Kevin collapses into a leather chair, knocking one back and pouring himself another. Sam takes a breath but sticks to storytelling. "Then I went to Hell, and it was just us. The two of us. For a long time, I thought that was my forever. I don't want to put you through that. That's definitely not why I brought Crowley with us. When I look at him, I think if I put a bullet in his head I'd put one in mine, next. If I can do that to Crowley, now, then trials or not I belonged with Lucifer. He gave up on humanity when God invented it."

Kevin raises his glass to Sam, three fingers of vodka sloshing back and forth. He smiles. The amount of snark in the kid is passing Dean levels, Sam thinks.

"Origen Adamantius. Second, third century. De principiis," he says. "This whole idea goes a long way back. I haven't found anything out about people actually trying it before. Origen didn't think demons could be saved. That their actual bodies were blasphemies, and that only…I guess what right now I'd call 'emanations of divine substance' should exist without bodies. Then he talked about other theologians, practically a footnote. Um, the other side of the dialogue was in the end every human is purified into aether. So maybe demons could still be purified, maybe even purify themselves. For him that was up to God." Kevin looks away, detaching, a furrow in his brow. "That's not 'Kevin Tran' talking. That's 'Kevin Tran, Prophet of the Lord' reading up on self-defense talking." He fixes Sam with a look. "I hate that guy."

Sam watches Kevin down his second glass. Frustrated, Sam weighs taking the bottle. He does, muttering Slow it down and setting it aside on a bookshelf. He's supposed to be the adult. Standing here uncomfortable with his arms crossed, he asks himself how that's working out. It's not.

"Crowley's not planning to purify himself. I want you to—You need to know that. He's all we've got if we run up against the big guns. Against Abaddon. If he can even get his power back to that level."

Kevin's gaze slides to the vodka before he scowls at Sam.

"Thanks. I'll stop living in terror, now. Today. You're planning to let Crowley farm his way back up to level ninety, and he didn't change classes."

"Dean and I signed a deal with him—" Sam holds up his hand before Kevin interrupts. "I wrote it. Five years. We're in charge. No plotting against us. No exercising malice against you. No powers without our say so. We make an effort to protect him against all comers – there's about thirty clauses to that part. He can't hurt you, Kevin. He doesn't have the power to cancel the contract. Only me and Dean."

"What you're basically telling me is I should just get over it," Kevin says, starting to sound tipsy. "No. God, Kevin, no."
"You are. You're just not as much of a dick about it as Castiel. It's okay. I've got this hunch that's God's opinion, too," Kevin says, slouching into the chair, looking a long way up at Sam. Back to stone hard and stone cold surety. "I don't want to get over it. Nobody said I had to be a saint – I'm just a vehicle of God's word. Unless He shows His ass and explains it to me Himself, why I should 'get over' this year when I still want nothing but out?" He looks down at his empty glass, tilting it to watch the shallow vodka run down its bottom, then optimistically drinking that. "If my only 'out' is distilled and bottled, don't take my alcohol, Sam."

Nothing about this conversation is okay. The least okay part is that Sam doesn't have a pep talk for this one. They've all been here. If Sam's learned one thing it's that he and Dean and Cas have had to choose to let go of the past and make not the future they want but the best one they can tack together from what they have at hand. They've all failed. Multiple times. Sometimes they've died for it. They've literally broken the world. More than once. This time it was less the world and more Heaven, if he splits those up.

"It sucks," Sam relents, resting his crooked arm on one of the shorter bookshelves, leaning. "And there's no reason to believe it's going to get better. That's something I want, that I have to believe."

He wets his lips, searching for anything in him that he can do for Kevin, specifically, but it's just not there. "You may always want to kill Crowley. You may not make it past what he – we – did to you.

"It's not just Crowley. Dean and I treated you like shit because we had this vendetta...Fuck. Dean tried to kill your mom. But everybody we wanted revenge on? They're already dead, or as good as dead." Sam throws a hand up. Azazel, Lilith, Ruby, Alastair, Lucifer – maybe Meg, maybe not. "Crowley was way, way out of line, but he's been in the foxhole with us more times than I can count on one hand. And Dean, and me, and Cas? We're not you. We've all got blood on our hands that'll never wash off. We'd all been fighting to survive for so long none of us looked at the situation and said...This isn't war.' Cas hit some interference, but from what Dean told me Naomi was in the same place as the rest of us." Sam shrugs. He can't apologize for more than everything. "We let Abaddon and Metatron walk in and take whatever they wanted."

Kevin eyes Sam, rolling his wrist to confirm the emptiness of his glass.

"Thank you. For owning up to how much you guys all suck. Seriously, I appreciate it." There's no snark in there. That worries Sam more than if there was. "—hand me that back."

Sam thinks this is what a problem looks like.
Chapter 4


Sam.

**Ava**

*The switches that just flip in your brain?*

*Do you know what I can do now?*

Control demons.

*You are quick on the draw.*

**Jake.**

*How do I know you won't turn on me?*

*I appreciate what you're doing here. Keeping calm. Keeping them calm. Especially considering how freaked to Hell you really are.*

*Doesn't matter if we believe it. Only matters if they do.*

It hurt, the pain of crushed vertebrae and ripped, frayed spinal cord unbelievable.

And then it didn't hurt anymore.

**It's always been about you.**

Bullet after bullet after bullet after bullet after bullet after bullet after bullet after bullet into Jake's body.

The first time the anger completely overwhelmed him.

*I'll get to you in a minute champ. But I'm proud of you. Knew you had it in you.*

*I'll deny it if you ever quote me, but I'm proud of you.*

Sam wakes up, chest heaving, body doused in sweat from a nightmare he thought he'd put behind him.

The halls of the bunker are silent at night, their bomb shelter a surer sanctuary from the world outside than any anti-government survivalist's.

The door to Dean's room isn't locked. Sam thinks briefly of Castiel showing up at any hour with a problem as he closes it silently behind us. Fresh perspiration has risen to his skin. His t-shirt sticks to his body. He can't make out Dean on the bed with just the blue glow of the emergency lights from beneath the door but he can hear him breathing.

"Dean," he whispers urgently as he's close to the bed. A short, unvocalized sound in Dean's throat, all air, tells Sam Dean registers him, is awake and alert. Sam's crawls. Now Dean's pinned underneath him. Urgency tells Sam anybody could be listening.
"There were five of us."

"Wha?"

"In Azazel's trial."

"Okay," Dean says. He's silent a few moments, but he's smart and he catches up on Sam's train of thought. "Uh, were they all total dicks? With dicks?"

"...no," Sam admits. His brow wrinkles. Suddenly it looks vastly less credible the bunker is a ploy of Lucifer.

"Five's not even a magical number. It's like seven, thirteen and, uh, five's only a magic number for boy bands. Which, before you go off on anything else, we are not. What's got you so spooked, Sammy?"

"Everything."

Dean continues leading Sam in pursuit of reality, complaint laced through his words.

"You're thirty now, right? I'm thirty-four. And you're in bed with me. Which is...fine. Whatever. Don't drool on my shirt. Just when you were a kid your nightmares weren't over two hundred pounds of dude pinning me to my mattress. Some help?"

Sam's head is clearer now. He recognizes the hold as aggressive.

"Um. Sorry?"

Dean grunts in the dark.

"That's a conversation between you and my lungs."

Sam throws himself over onto his back besides Dean, memory foam mattress catching him comfortably.

"I don't know, man. Claustrophobia is getting to me. I haven't stayed in one place this long since I...left Amelia."

"Nah, it's just the post-traumatic stress disorder. Believe me. Wikipedia says mine has been rockin' since I hit dirt after Purgatory."

Sam's chest clenches with frustration. Whatever Dean is going through, he may be throwing out more hugs, now, but he's not opening up about it. Not any of it. Sam has poked around the edges and been rebuffed.

"About that. You know Dean, I know you're not the talk it out guy, but sometimes when I end up trapped into conning a therapist I come out feeling a lot better."

"You know what? I look at the requirement 'significant clinical impairment' and I think...being crazy ass sons of bitches is a bonus in our line of work. I am undiagnosible in the States."

Sam makes a face Dean can't see in the dark, then:

"Hey. Scratch my earlier one. Agoraphobia is getting to me. I'm lying here pretending we're in the car."
"Little role-play never hurt anybody. You made your costume for the jubilee yet?"

Sam finally laughs, relaxing into the lightly-grasping foam.

"If there is one thing I know, Sam, it's that we crushed the entire Lucifer thing like a couple of badass trash compactors. You're doin' good man. Just a nightmare. Eyes on these bitches running solo."

Sam chews his lower lip.

"There's a problem closer to home. We're responsible for Kevin. And Kevin hates Cas. And Kevin hates Crowley. And Kevin is going to get alcohol poisoning. And he's our kid."

"Whoa. Two things: One, Kevin is Asian. Two, we knew his mom."

"Seriously? Those are the first two reasons Kevin isn't our biological child?"

"Shut up," Dean pauses, but follows up right after: "Kev's a legal adult, now."

"I know."

"I'm just saying maybe you're not doing him any favors still thinking of him as a kid after you left him solo and all the shit he's shouldered."

"And you think of him as...?"

"I'd swaddle the fucker and give him a bottle, which I usually reserve for your sorry ass. –okay. So we're a couple deadbeat dads, Kev is doing what every teenager in a movie does first year of collage only with a boatload more anger and crazy, and we what?"

"Maybe you should take him out this time. Last time we drove up to Red Cloud and ate at The Palace. Korean place."

"Is Kevin...?"

"American? Dean, you are the insensitive white asshole. And it's not Indians, it's Native Americans. Or 'people of the native nations'. It was the first place we saw."

"Wow, grudge long?" Dean grouses, weight shifting on the bed – which Sam can barely feel compared to another mattress. He swipes his phone from the bedside table, LCD screen lighting up his frowning face. They're silent for a minute before he offers: "Guess I can take him to Smith Center. Talk up a movie...which he will see straight through but maybe I can get him to play along with. Leave you with the radically transformed depression duo. If you can get them in front of the television it's like dropping a blanket on a bird cage."

The screen is thumbed off, leaving Sam's night vision shot.

"...which kinda begs a question. We're spinning our wheels, here," he says. "Are we going back in business? I know...Cas isn't ready. Kevin isn't. And I think taking him or Crowley out, they hate that stuff, but we can't just leave them here together. Kevin will kill Crowley and Crowley will let him. And they all need to be ready. Just...hard sell."

"Maybe we should buy Crowley a house. In town. Which...First off, I don't know how we'll get financing."

"Charlie. We all need social security numbers. Credit histories. But, Crowley? I don't know. I think
he'll hermit up, and he's my responsibility. Plus, we need him in shape. Actual fighting shape. Not…bring him groceries, let him watch TV drunk \textit{all the time} shape."

"Shit, Sam. I don't know. Day at a time, huh? What I do know is I'm itching to hunt. Just to get out of here. I'm gonna have to start working out—" He holds up a hand, cutting Sam off. "No, I'm not gonna join you running fuck-knows miles at five in the morning. You're already stinking my room up with nightmare flop sweat."

Sam recognizes he has an opportunity that may not come again for a while. He knows Dean won't spill, but he doesn't always need him to to get a read on him.

"Dean, you and Cas…"

Dean's voice comes back rough.

"Sammy. I need you not to ask me that."

Sam doesn't know what he hears. He's left stuck with Dean's words.

"…see you in the morning," he says carefully, rolling off the bed and heading out.

Dean doesn't say anything, but Sam hears the familiar sounds of him messing with the covers and hugging his pillow back to him to get to sleep.

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"I think we should hunt."

"Come again?"

"Saving people, hunting things…making up for that shit you pulled?"

"That's a low blow, Moose."

"You'd know," Sam says.

He's not at his most sympathetic when he's thinking about Sarah Blake grasping her neck, trying to breathe through a constricted airway, the high pitched, panicked noise of suffocation. Her dead, unseeing eyes staring up through and past him. Her body lying lifeless on the floor, slowly beginning to pale.

Crowley looks up from his coffee, scowl darkening his face. He hasn't been shaving, beard thick and dark except coming in grey high on his cheeks, chin always bald.

"Did you not \textit{hear} me on the phone? I wasn't talking out of my ass," he says, bitter as the black coffee. "What's the \textit{point} of this ritual you two engage in over and over your whole bloody lives? This \textit{obsession} you have of walking blind into these scenarios and wrecking destruction. You don't look at it from our side. You never do." A frustrated sound, a moment of searching himself, gaze unfocused, then focused on Sam again. "Case A: You \textit{killed my dog}, you bastard. And I know what I trained him to do was wrong. I know that now. I didn't then. Didn't feel that. One night he just never comes home. I go, and I find him, and he's dead. Shot up. Torn throat to belly. I \textit{loved} that dog. I'd say his name, I'd double-take he wasn't there. And he's all that I—" Crowley bites his lip, shoulders heaving. He sets the coffee down, but looks at it, scowl dissipated by mourning but brow still furrowed. "And these monsters? The ones you kill. They're not evil spirits. They aren't \textit{me}. They're people getting by. And you leave behind these human victims with their ruined lives
and a world of questions. It's a great ugly business is what it is."

Sam pushes both hands through his significantly shorter hair. Breathes out. He thinks about Riot and hopes Don loves him half as much as Sam did.

"...I think we should hunt," he repeats. Intones it different. It hurts, but he gets Crowley's admonition. "If we can stage an intervention, then that's what we do. But putting an earthbound human spirit to rest? That's the right thing, Crowley. I had to watch Bobby go downhill. Most of those people never wanted to get stuck here and go vengeful. The monsters? There's nobody else to get those people straight. Most of them don't know a better way. Some of them do. It took me way too long to see that, but I see it."

"And Kevin needs a break from me," Crowley says in a deadened tone.

"Yeah. And Kevin needs a break for you."

The demon pulls himself together. Sam watches his eyes come into focus.

"'I'm a little over the light bondage, periodic rash business. Shooting and knifing though..."

"How's the inhuman strength coming?"

"Not human. I'll be slow, for me, and not a lot of transdimensional maneuverability, but I'll do, Moose," Crowley says, and then looks up at Sam, no less depressed but committed. "Bring along a few spell components. Get back into practice. I'm a long way down from demon massacres. And you. I've heard you used to be a real exorcist."

"I'm still a real exorcist. By the books. But that's out. Sending you to Hell is the opposite of having backup. I...my grandfather showed up from 1958, ahead of Abaddon. He had some I-don't-know kind of power. I'm going through these books but I think some of it was master to student. You said magicians usually are."

Crowley's expression is one of distaste.

"So, we run into demons we bugger right off."

Sam smiles, sober and reluctant but grateful.

"Thanks, Crowley. I kind of thought you'd be a bitch about this."

"Had me at 'It's for Kev'. I can't not. Only been out with Dean, not you. But you know my style's unorthodox."

Sam scoffs.

"If that's today's word for 'underhanded', then, yeah, I know. I'll adapt. And...I guess I'll find us a case."


Crowley doesn't have time to mourn how rapidly ideals and regrets dissolve while he's unloading a Browning into a harpy.

Her sister shrieks in horror as Sam side-steps and the bullet-punched harpy plummets thrashing to the forest floor screaming in a lower register, helplessly flapping feathered arms throwing up detritus, bird's legs spasming and kicking, body bucking two last times before collapsing, dead.

"What part of 'You can't get the drop on me'" Crowley snaps in anger as the living sister passes through mystified grief into fury and lunges at Sam.

Minutes later there's a gory mess of dead harpies on the forest floor. No survivors.

"'Screeches like a harpy'. Wow," Sam says too loudly from some twelve feet away, pressing a hand to the side of his head.

"Idiot, stupid feathered bints," Crowley swears as he lets go of his temper. Sam squints at him; shakes his considerably less shaggy hair.

"I can't hear you," he yells.

Crowley stares at him, pressing his lips together. There's no bothering trying to communicate 'I can hear you quite well'. Magical effect, obviously, however terrible the noise was. He tucks away the old service pistol and holds his arms out, indicating the considerable fleshy and feathered death toll.

Crowley has slept in some dumps over the past years but he never paid the night for one. He sits at the dinette table frowning at Sam as the hunter lays his pistol on the dresser and strips off two bloody layers of clothing to get a better look at the gashes on his abdomen.

"That was an exercise in futility...And physical. Much too physical. Kept your guts in?"

He's more concerned than he'll let himself show, playing along with Sam's feral disregard for personal injury. Dean Winchester is a purpose-filled, systematic killer. Sam Winchester is anger and instinct. Crowley goes along with Sam better but wonders if them both seeing red didn't exacerbate the situation. He remembers motion at the corner of his eye, a slender neck snapping under his power and a harpy dropping from on high like a stone. Murderer.

Sam hasn't answered, blotting the edges of the wounds with his ruined t-shirt, gauging their depth.
It's unfairly distracting how fit Sam is in all senses of the term, his taut belly button sunken deep into his muscles and pectorals massive – Crowley'd like to drag his teeth down those sweat-damp dark hairs in the valley between them. Sam is inked black with an anti-possession tattoo and thick veins on his arms feed oxygen to hungry muscles. The demon starts to think he'd do better spending his concern looking elsewhere…and that Sam would remain perfectly safe tattoo or no tattoo because that isn't the definition of getting inside him that comes to mind. Pervert. Pervert. Pervert.

Right. Completely terrible idea from start to finish, this.

At least, kick to the gut aside, distractingly gorgeous aside, Sam looks like he has his health back from the trials. Crowley saw the change the first time they stopped for petrol, Sam breathing easier.

"This'll take a while to wrap up," Sam interrupts. "Get us some beer?"

The beast inside Sam retreats when he throws those puppy eyes Crowley's way. Crowley smiles thinly.

"Sure," he says, because it's a much better plan than standing around feeding a fixation with Sam Winchester he can't see a way around when he's living and breathing him. Obvious now how the Winchesters grew so insensibly codependent. Crowley wonders not for the first time if they've ever gone at it together. That's a musing that doesn't strike up the guilt inside him. It's an honest question he sincerely doubts he's the only one to ask.

Harpy claws superficially tore Crowley's own skin, but a couple plasters and a change of shirt – from one colored button up to another – and jacket and then he's out in the night air walking to the petrol station across and down the road cursing himself and the entire debacle out of earshot of Sam.

No one actually had to die today. After the disasters of the non-Apocalypse, monsters began mixing up ranges for the sake of proliferation and ultimately species survival. Crowley knows why because he asked them why while he was cutting into them. It went brilliantly alongside his and Castiel's needs – the more species the better, he'd thought. How many did you kill? You never counted.

These harpies had been across the country thieving livestock for who knew how long before it went Hatfields and McCoys here in Wyoming. A sister had been caught and hacked to pieces in a barn, put up as a scare-harpy by humans too jaded by the almost-end of the world, God walking and falling angels to call the police.

"It's like no one can have a goddamn civil conversation anymore," Crowley relates to the gas station clerk, a woman in her forties without makeup, skin pocked from years of tobacco abuse, as he buys Killian's and a few high gravity 'malt beverages'. The petrol station has nothing that even looks like beer.

"You're sober for a bar fight," the woman says, eyeing his visible wounds.

"Bringing the bar home," Crowley says, charming her with a smile while she rings him up. He pays in cash.

Sam has patched himself up but isn't doing Crowley any favors in his size-too-small undershirt, muscles, bandages and nipples obvious. He looks exhausted instead of homicidally insane and forces a smile from where he sits on the bed cleaning his pistol when Crowley walks in.
"Sorry. I picked a bad one."

Crowley shakes his head while he unloads his plastic bags on the table. He sees he was overly optimistic. There's no way he can convince himself to drink any of this.

"It's Raining Men in the middle of town and they aren't angels' is a hard to pass up. There were forty-five seconds I thought she'd be reasonable."

"Hey, no, me too. I don't think that was coordinated." Sam does some other sweet, worried thing with his eyebrows. "I was thinking. You didn't stab Dean in the heart like that back when he cuffed you. Thanks?"

"Don't thank me. Didn't want a dead Winchester hanging off me when the other had a Kurdish knife. Doesn't matter if I could survive the magic. You'd of gimped me even worse. If I cut his hand off he's still up and angry, and still the cuffs. Trapped in a mutilated vessel no matter what. No, I waited to dial out. Your blood. I had the luck to get Abaddon. I wanted you both dead, Moose, but I pick my battles. Usually."

And then Sam dispatched Abaddon and the gratitude and admiration broke the dam, the potency of his sanctified blood pouring through.

Sam shrugs, motion diminished to protect his belly, not bothered by the explanation because it's not the worst he's heard. Crowley's aware it's more important Sam get in his head than he pretend he was ever civil if they're going to be killing things together.

The pieces of the pistol slot back together. Sam gets up with only the smallest noise of discomfort, coming to the table.

"Four Loko? Seriously Crowley?"

"I don't know what any of this is. None of it's out of Belgium. That shite's not even really Irish. 'S brewed in Colorado," Crowley says, testy the moose is questioning his choice of alcohol. "I'm not letting any'v it down my gullet. You're on your own."

He tugs a bottle of the not-Irish 'red' out of the cardboard packing and thumbs the top off, handing it to the Winchester, nose wrinkling at the scent. Sam gives it a curious, appraising frown, then, with another shrug, takes the bottle to his lips.

Crowley realizes with shock it's more expensive than what Winchesters drink.

"Sometimes you boys actually repel me," Crowley says in a friendly way, tossing his jacket over the back of the chair.

"How's that denim going? Any new rashes?" Sam mocks behind him, grin in his voice. Crowley feels Sam's eyes skirting over him.

"It's black. It's the one thing. Denim's going better than the rest of it," he says, dropping back down in his seat, flashing Sam a smile. "Granted we're without provisions, and I saw only a 'Pizza Hut' in the town center, my powers of deduction tell me you ordered pizza."

Dearly unimpressed, skeptical cant of his eyebrows or not, he'll admit this is all a blessed distraction. Undeserved. Unwarrented.

"Veggie deluxe. Choke it down and pretend it's food," Sam says, sitting opposite him, turning his eyes to the door a moment.
"Granted how I'm feeling about this whole 'demon' business, now: I can't wait to burn demonic energy to never eat again," Crowley mutters.

Sam laughs. It's a pleasant sound and his face lights up mischievously. Crowley's never seen that look on him before and he smiles, heart doing something untenable. For the minute it doesn't matter that Sam's only sitting him. That doesn't preclude the desire for real companionship, something Sam robbed him of, but he trained Growley up wrong. *Your fault. Got your dog killed, berk.*

"You know," Crowley says, all cheek, "moose actually wade into lakes. They graze on the bottom. Then they stick their noses up out of the water like whales. You can be swimming or boating in Canada when suddenly: moose. Sometimes they go saltwater to get from one place to another and get eaten by orca."

Sam eyes him with pure skepticism and a little shock.

"Thank you, I…" He has nothing.

"You need to understand the ways of your native species," Crowley says in official tones. "Otherwise it's a kind of roadblock on your path to Nirvana."

"Nirvana?"

"Heaven's a wreck. Who wants to go there? Population: one jackass and a few billion human prisoners."

"Point taken," Sam says. He goes grave, attention detaching.

"Point taken?" Crowley ventures suspiciously.

"We need a safe place for souls, otherwise we're just feeding Metatron power. Annwn. Irkalla. Niflhel. The Field of Reeds. Pitstop in Samsara. Pluto's going to be contentious because we ganked his brother. Hela would be worse, after Lucifer. –we need Gabriel. He knew his way around these gods. The only contact I have is Kali. She's furious he's dead, and she wants done with Heaven. The second option is we try the Buddha and I think he's a little…detached."

Crowley's mouth is hanging open, the demon flabbergasted.

"You realize you're at a point in your puny mortal existence where you're talking about re-routing believers' afterworlds or enforcing an inescapable transmigration of souls? 'Delusion of grandeur' doesn't start to cover it. Literally no one in creation would think of saying this but you, Gigantor."

Sam takes a drink from his brown glass bottle, still serious as his life.

"There's nobody else in creation to do it. Either I own up to King of Hell or I don't. I don't wanna go Castiel-crazy, Crowley, but if those are my souls, if creating that possibility was what a cupid was doing on orders when Heaven made Dean first to give me the choice to stay lightside, then I'm going to save them. I can't let them go to Heaven. I figure out how to do that, then I bet I can hold off giving Metatron more power, too."

Crowley doesn't know how to respond to that, blinking dumbly. He shakes his head.

"Be sitting here mind blown by your—" There's a rap at the door. "Hullo, pizza. Tip that poor sucker double, Moose. You're sitting here deciding their immortal fate."
Sam brings the pizza in, from re-ordering reality to schoolboy charm at the drop of a dime. He counts out too much money and presses it into the pizza girl's hands. She's startled but blushing and stammering gratitude. Unfortunately Crowley understands that feeling too closely.

Crowley goes and gets a cup of water from the bathroom sink. That's off-putting, but not as off-putting as the smell of Sam's beer. The pizza is like grease sculpted and dyed. Crowley enjoys pizza — real pizza. Optimistically something involving Parmesan, garlic and artichoke hearts, wood fired crust crisp but chewy. He's eating with a comrade. Sam usually sticks to fresh meats and vegetables.

Crowley has a long time to think about what Sam said as they combat the 'pizza' with their teeth in silence, washing it down generously. Crowley refills his plastic cup twice. It may not really be food, but he's starving.

"Saying we're all just…what might Squirrel say? Douchebag spirits. All of us together. Blanket term: daemons. The daemons from the Abrahamic faiths, the angels, God, me, were drawing three, four times as much power from living worshippers as Hindu daemons today? And we had more. Hinduism keeps its souls in rotation, dedication to self-improvement, et cetera. Heaven has been stockpiling souls for thousands of years. Some particularly choice Hindu souls have been snatched up by Heaven and Hell lately. 'God bless missionaries' I used to say. Me, I've got nothing now. Since God checked out on us, now there's just Metatron and whatever's going on in Hell. He's standing on a bigger arsenal than Purgatory. And if I can coerce Reapers…?"

Sam doesn't like what he's hearing, Crowley can read it off his face, but the boy has an ear open so Crowley keeps on:

"Here's what came down the pipe from that whole debacle of yours: Lucifer crushed Ganesh, and he's the way-opener for Hindus. Small kink in the efficacy of worship. You want him at full power you better start performing puja today and have an oil tanker of milk behind you."

Sam latches on, light in his eyes.

"Performing puja. That's the direct prayer line, right? Because that sounds like a plan. We break into the nearest Hindu temple after hours—"

Crowley holds a hand up while appreciating his initiative.

"No need, Sam. You can do it online nowadays. Some debate on that, but bugger all, heard it works. Google images will do us. Picture of a blessed murti, you have a murti." Sam has hooked an elbow on the table and leaned in, beer and pizza forgotten, listening to him talk like he listened when they were drunk. They aren't. It's both more flattering and, if Crowley's honest, overwhelming. "We perform puja for Ganesh, open the path, then puja for Kali. Puja's more like…" Wrong start. He tries again. "The murti, see, think statuary but not only, the gods can see through them. They're manifested in them twenty-four seven. We welcome her to us as an honored guest." He's focused on Sam, whose 'attentive' gaze with those three lines in his brow is too much. "Little juice for the trip," he says a touch unevenly. "She may need it in former-angel-ridden America right now. Nothing that'll set me on fire, thank – long as I leave off asking for her blessing. That and she doesn't set me on fire. Abomination and everything."

Sam chuckles, eyes downright gravity wells.

"Been there. Avoided getting smote."

Ridiculous. Can't possibly keep going like this.
"Countdown timer where you keep looking at me like that, Moose, this turns into a date," Crowley says, flatterimg him with a smile.

Sam breaks out into embarrassed laughter; looks away, toward the curtained window; remembers his beer and drains it by half; sighs, puts it down on the table, unusually shy and unprecedentedly boisterous smile still on his lips.

"I'm not completely oblivious over here. I'm not Cas." His tongue rolls over his lips, cleaning the extra beer off, self-conscious, head ducked but eyes on Crowley, askance. "I've been thinking…'I wish I hugged people'. I've never hugged Cas. Ever. Not even when he tried. I don't know, Crowley, the way I grew up, nobody really touched me. It kind of exaggerated what was already there. And now you, you're an extrovert. Obviously. And somebody should…"

He trails off, expression falling and eyes, too, casting a distant, nostalgic look down at his beer.

Crowley stares at Sam's beer a minute, too, like there's any answers in drinking it all away; he heaves a sigh.

"Right. Put all my problems aside for one night and have casual sex. Plenty of human touch there. This 'hunting' lifestyle is a genuinely inevitable descent. Didn't appreciate that until today."

"No," Sam says. It's all stubbornness, insensible – his clenched jaw says as much.

Crowley smiles. That dumb stick-to-it-ness has saved the world a few times, despite having no relation to anybody but Dean's reality.

"I'm serious," Sam says. Crowley's smile falls away as he recognizes Sam really is. "It's not what you want, right? So don't do it. I watched Dean go through years of hook-ups. You think you're not going to take it with you, but you will. You'll feel about those people. Take it from experience: Only somebody completely soulless can pick up a woman or three in every town."

Crowley breaks from sobriety into genuine laughter, brows inching up at Sam. Now, if only he hadn't been keeping out of sight with that monster around they'd have a right thorough history. Sam breaks into a disconcerted 'shove off' expression, leaning back in his chair, but the exacerbation is married to resignation.

The demon thinks on it a few moments.

"I fancied your friend Mills. Jody Mills. The one I didn't do in, you remember. First time in ages I just sat and got to know somebody and they listened to me and I got to listen to them. 'course, then I tried to do her in. Bad foundation for a second date. It's amazing how completely unrelated those two things were, then."

"Hold on. You took Jody on a date before…?"

"Tracked her down on a dating website, so, yeah. Thought she's a bit of alright."

"That's…"

"Evil? Comes with the territory."

Sam's lips hang in a half smile. He blows the words off with an exhalation.

"Crowley, I could write volumes—I mean, as many volumes on how dysfunctional I am as we could on Dean. I, uh…" Embarrassed laughter, again. More subdued but more comfortable.
"Wanna... sit on the same bed as me like awkward teenagers and watch cable? I know it's kind of shitty, but it's all I've got. You're keyed up, I don't know where I am, and we just... need to defuse, you know?" The boy screws his face up, then looks apologetic. "That's half the reason we're out here. Defusing. Accidentally committing mass murder. Which is, one more time, my bad and only my bad."

Crowley is prone to forgive him. *Selfish.* It's the wrong feeling. It's not the moral feeling.

But it's the human feeling.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warning: Heavy triggers.

Sam opens his eyes in a quiet motel room, sunlight breaking through around the curtains, air conditioner on but, stroke of luck, not rattling. He's still sitting up, pillow at his back. Crowley turned the television off. The demon is asleep beside him, tugged his own pillow down. Somewhere in here there's an unspoken agreement that having to split up to separate beds would equate with failing at defusing.

Sam hopes Crowley appreciates him manning up and letting him fall asleep before a demon. Contract or not he watched Crowley stab a switchblade into a monster's chest down to half of the handle yesterday.

It's comforting to get a look at Crowley without Crowley having a look at him, when Crowley's face is lax, eyes shut, brows two lax, smooth arches, mouth downturned, but softly, fingers loosely curled. The tuft of beard beneath the pout of his lower lip is actually pretty adorable. If a guy has to be infatuated with him, Sam could do worse. Sam knows that's what it is. Infatuation. One of those action movie attractions exaggerated by the intensity of the conditions it formed under. The dopamine-grounded reason regular couples go on dates to horror movies like a friend told him at Stanford while he passed up on a double date.

"Call us when baseball season's back on," Jess says.

Jess devoured art films. Almost all of them were as abstract as her own work. They could be enjoyable. They were. They took him to different worlds, but not the other world that he knew.

Crowley likes premium cable dramas and, apparently, judging by last night, documentaries.

"Highlight reel of humans fucking up over and over again. Can't beat that for entertainment. Anyway, you don't know it's not aliens," Crowley says amenably.

"'Alien abductions' are caused by fairies. Fact." He ignores Crowley's taken-aback expression. "And they're not going to find 'Bigfoot'. It's called a grizzly bear. When bears walk on two legs it looks a lot like some hairy guy."

"Hunting's going to kill my childhood."

"How old are you even? How do you not know this?"

"Never ask a girl her age. And I used to have more important things to do. Like be rich. If I haven't seen it on NatGeo, wildlife and dirt don't exist."

Sam makes a face and punches him in the shoulder to a verbal rebuke.

"One nature hike and I come back covered in detritus and gore. Not going to sell me on camping," Crowley grouses.
Sam had to admit he doesn't camp either. He gets plenty of nature when something inhuman has already set up camp for itself. Getting eaten by insects isn't high on his to-do list.

Sam's smiling to himself. Smiling and…watching Crowley sleep. And he's enjoying that, the relaxing idea of Crowley trusting him. Words are one thing; seeing really is believing. It's close to home, more personal than he planned or expected, even if it doesn't make him want to throw a leg over him and do any of the things Crowley has way too obviously been imagining with some of those looks.

*Come on, Sam. He wouldn't be the first man in your head.*

*Bed.*

The voice lilts through him, cold as the bite of winter.

Suddenly Sam can't be in the place he's sitting. He rolls off the mattress and marching to the sink, trembling as he breathes. He splashes water on his face and searches his own eyes in the mirror, knowing it's only a memory. Knowing it's only when someone is with you, *alone* with you an impossibly long time, thinking their thoughts becomes second nature.

"I don't know if I ever wanted that," he tells the mirror.

Silence responds. He doesn't know if he wants that, either.

*I didn't exactly hold you down. Every time.*

Wanting and missing or not, Sam doesn't need his head playing devil's advocate this morning or any morning.

Lucifer held on to his anger at him, his disappointment, for years. Lucifer fucked him. Pain had never staggered Sam Winchester, but losing control?

Lucifer never caused him pain. Not directly. He never had to. If their arguments became too heated, then he stopped protecting Sam from the surrounding inferno, and it wasn't always Lucifer's choice.

"I want some time alone."

"It's going to burn, Sam."

"I don't care."

Lucifer promised Sam he'd set him free from the restraints of his humanity through reason and better argument. That didn't keep him from reprimanding Sam through the best power he could exert. Sam had been corrupted, Lucifer said. Made filthy by his devotion to a drunken, rutting, childish, reckless man who didn't even value the life God gave him. Who squandered his time on Earth wishing he had the courage to die. "*Some things are just so natural,* Lucifer said in a tone like apology with a smile that looked like love. On Nick's face. Sam's face. In the beginning, in the dream they shared, fingertips left trails of frostbite, until Sam became as cold as his other half.

Inside them, the arctic.

Hell burns hot to torment the Morning Star.

Lucifer talked and Lucifer touched. Lucifer worshipped him. His one perfect human. His. Not his
Father's. Whispered how very sorry he was he failed him and Dean Winchester stopped them from saving the jewel that is the world: from global warming, from rivers of toxic sludge, from the deaths of innocent species beyond counting that once formed healthy, flourishing ecosystems, the precious prizes of his Father's kingdom thrown away as so much refuse by the selfish, parasitic weed species humanity.

Sam hasn't looked behind him at Crowley. The mirror doesn't capture the demon. He doesn't know if Crowley is awake or asleep. He pushes away from the bathroom counter and lets himself into the smaller restroom, locking the door, turning the shower on – cold – stripping and untaping his wound dressing. He doesn't feel a chill when he steps under the flow. It's totally psychosomatic, but so is the feeling under his skin a hot shower will peel it off.

The chaos of almost two hundred years of pros and cons and unimaginable pain and partnership beyond intimate, at its apex two in one, wrecked the human brain that tried to contain it all when Death forced Sam back into his long-liberated human body. Sam conjured his own Hell when his sanity decomposed, except that his hallucinations blurred Lucifer's obsession with him and Lucifer at his most petulant and petty with years of being trapped in the Impala with a bored, teenage Dean if a bored teenage Dean needled him about physical domination past. All those things in his history that really dug under his skin.

That's what I'm talking about, Sam – real interaction again. I miss that. The rapier wit, the wittier rape.

Sad to say, all that was a step up from reliving the fire.

Breathing returned to normal he can stay in the present and examine his body. The three claw marks may be ugly but the wounds have begun contraction. Sam laughs, the thought of Dean bitching Crowley and Metatron, Naomi and Abaddon made them miss Jurassic Park in 3D rising despite other memories. He knows the first step before wound dressing: a 'selfie' and Velociraptor wounds. Dude, you totally should have been here.

So, the alcohol prank went over with Dean trying to weasel the bottle from Crowley. Sam's walking a thin line. A thin, nostalgic, completely worth it in every way line. Dean's been smiling more this year. Sometimes he smiles down to his bones.

When he's clean Sam pulls his jeans back on, no underwear – needs a change – and grabs a motel towel, heading out into the room to dry around his wound. At this point this morning he doesn't care if Crowley's at the gun show. Crowley may have sexually harassed him in the past, but he's been as discreet as he can be about his interest, lately. For somebody suffering post-action movie infatuation, at least.

"Do these look like velociraptor claw marks to you?" he asks wearing his serious face.

Sam knows he's digging for reassurance that Crowley's toned it down. Crowley obviously doesn't.

"I'm not that old," a perplexed Crowley says from where he's lying on the bed.

Sam intones importantly:

"If Dean asks what we took on, it was velociraptors."

He picks his phone up off the dresser and executes his plan while Crowley gets himself out of bed, making a face to himself and looking at Sam like he's a few cards short of a full deck.

"Be in the shower, then," the demon says after squinting at the phone a moment trying to put
together what Sam is doing, leaving Sam alone to get dressed and re-bandage his wounds.

Concern comes over Sam's expression as he sets his phone down and looks across the room at the bathroom mirror. It's not about Crowley. It's not not about Crowley.

Sam knows Hell.

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Sam feels a whole lot less silly about making offerings and chanting to his laptop screen for the past hour and a half since sundown when Kali appears beside the dinette table. There's rice, cups of milk and water, fresh flowers, fruit, burning incense, two pudding cups – "Needs must. Haven't a kitchenette or the right stuff for cooking sweets," Crowley said – a lit candle, whole cloves, powdered cardamom, a plate of bloody red meat, and a glass of red wine set out around the screen. "Supposed to ring a bell but don't know how I'd take to that," Crowley said. Sam blessed the water, downing a mouthful of it for self-purification and dribbled it on the furniture without quandary. He had to work himself up to the laptop keyboard.

"Hello, gorgeous," Crowley says with a smile.

"I honestly don't know what to say," the goddess says, looking from the demon to the table to Sam.

"Good try?" Sam offers hopefully.

"At least you sanctified part of the area."

Kali furrows her brow, attention back on the make-shift altar.

"Small distaste for being set on fire, you understand," Crowley apologizes without apologizing.

Kali ignores Crowley completely, putting Sam back under close scrutiny. Her regal bearing leaves Sam thinking he's not much of a king of anything.

"You look better Sam. But you're traveling with a demon, now?" the goddess asks, caution and concern on her voice.

"Kind of," Sam hedges. "I almost purified him, but, uh, then I didn't."

Crowley freezes up when Kali actually attends him, lifting his chin as she approaches not with pride but in lieu of backing away. For a moment his breathing is audible.

"You did this?" she asks Sam, but she's looking at Crowley, reaches up and takes his chin, pulling it down, cocks her head and studies his eyes. "I didn't think Abrahamic demons could be cured. Impressive." She exhales a small, nasal laugh, smiling at Crowley. "If you joined samsara you'd have a long climb ahead of you. Not an impossible one."

Crowley goes from stoically terrified to mystified, squinting as if he isn't sure he heard her right.

It clicks with Sam and he catches his breath. Demons curing themselves is no longer Kevin's hypothetical.

That drives home the reality that a goddess actually descended through a picture on his laptop: the whole 'taking it on faith' layer stripped away.

"Kali. About that…" Sam prompts.
She's willing to hear him out. Thank… Kali.

"I'm sorry, but if you think a handful of humans and one of Lucifer's roaming dead…" the goddess says, still looking incredulous, sitting straight-backed, legs crossed at the knee in her sanctified chair.

"King of Lucifer's roaming dead for a stint, thank you," Crowley says, sass firmly back in place, so obviously a defense mechanism. Kali and now Sam are civilly pretending not to see through it.

"That's compelling," Kali says. "That's what Sam says he is."

"There's a lot of souls in Hell. Some of them that probably regret turning away from you a whole lot right now," Sam says. He's working his way through the fruit, milk, water and pudding.Apparently it's pretty rude not to after they're blessed during puja. Crowley has taken a few frowning looks at it all and the red meat, too, while he eats cold, extra-stale pizza.

The goddess sighs with a slight shake of her head.

"You don't understand Hinduism, Sam. Our followers are diverse, they're creative, and the ones that are monotheists may believe any one of us is supreme. The rest of them, depending on the sect, may not even be heterotheists. Who knows which one of us those souls would go to? Worse, that stunt with the angels is going to fill pews worldwide. I never imagined we'd see a greater disaster than the Apocalypse. I should have. It all looked like petty in-fighting. Then, when the angels fell, mindless, chaotic cosmic energies flooded the created world. My vision is still clouded."

Crowley chimes in.

"Metatron may have set off every live nuke on his hands, but I bet you he'll need time to figure out souls. He can't match up to an archangel any more than I'm Lucifer. Lucifer bested you. Samuel here bested Lucifer in the prize fight thanks to Dean. Then, Sam bucked his Hell taint which as it happened lead the way to…me. More and better than me if we play the cards right. And there is Dean. Just got a taste of him, soul to demon. He's impossible. He literally shouldn't exist. Boy never has any idea what he's doing, but where there's life…"

"Is there anything you can tell us, Kali? Where we could even start?"

"I have one idea. The Sanskrit Brahman and the Hebrew Ein—they're two words for the same uncreated, indefinable state of stillness. All gods came out of it. As far as I know, יוהי –"

They're both startled silent by Crowley screaming, hand on his chest and blood running from his ears.

"Ow! Damn it. Forget you heard that, Moose." He puffs up, at the goddess, reaching for the Kleenex box on the bedside table. "Everybody forgot how to pronounce that Kali. Everybody."

"Um," Sam says, when he sees Kali is more impatient than sorry, nodding for her to go on.

"As I said before, the wave energies that make up the created world are in chaos. There's no sign they'll settle anytime soon. Even time is distorted. Since the two of you are fixed in your 'now', that doesn't affect you. Under these circumstances, someone or something could alter the entire cosmic landscape. But if that happened it would be…permanent." The goddess goes from speaking from concern to a slow, sly smile. "Until another event of this scale, or until I consume all of time and return us to Brahman."
At first Sam's grappling with the repercussions of what the goddess has told him – then he's grappling with the repercussions of the goddess.

Crowley's all grins.

"Really happy for your advice. Sam will be sure to sacrifice you a sheep."

"I'll hold you to that," Kali says, rising imperiously, her sly smile becoming soft and reassuring before she disappears.

Sam gawks at the demon, then pins him down with a sharp look.

"Thanks, Crowley."

Crowley trades him a defensive look right back.

"Different people deal with existential crossroads in different ways. You live in Kansas. Thousands of sheep in Kansas. How expensive can a sheep be? I didn't say buffalo."

Sam screws up his face, in the process of accepting the inevitable letting it go.

"I have to sacrifice a sheep to my laptop screen and eat it. That's out there even for me."

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Dean said Kevin is looking better. Dean said give it a little while. Dean said those better not have been velociraptors, Sam, and photos of bodies or it didn't happen. "Garth" got them something that's almost definitely a ghost. They left their first rental car at the dealer and rented another one from a different service with a different hacked credit card. Sam agrees it's still completely illegal, but points out it's still much safer than stealing wheels.

Sam has something on his mind that isn't saving the world. Crowley's been onto him for a while. Sam has been not looking at him in an effortful way and even if his brow is clear the corners of his mouth and eyes are tight. The positive side is Sam has better taste in music than Dean. On the downside, Crowley knows he won't like whatever's occupying Sam's mind.

"Going to come out with it, Moose? I don't think it's about the sheep." he finally says while keeping his eyes on the road ahead, squinting at the sun's just-noon glare off the road.

"I wasn't planning on it," Sam says.

Crowley turns grim.

"I thought we've been communicating."

He's disappointed. He doesn't owe you anything. The disappointment doesn't outweigh his puzzlement.

Sam sits brooding in silence for another six miles, the he reaches to the dash and turns his iPod off. He shifts his large body, brow furrowed. Obviously he doesn't know what to say.

"Tell me you never raped Meg."

Obviously.

Crowley's stomach drops, going cold.
"You could've worded it worse," he says. Sam really couldn't have. The boy has no reason to pretend vain hope.

Sam lets out a breath. He looks at him, now. His eyes say he's so very sorry. Crowley doesn't know what for.

"Say it. Out loud. I don't care about the reasons. I don't care about the justification."

"I did," Crowley hears himself saying. "Whenever I wanted."

He discovers he's having a proper panic attack several moments after Sam has turned his eyes ahead, again, eyebrows conjoined.

"Things you have to hear out of people's own mouths," Crowley identifies numbly.

Sam doesn't answer, only cringes deeper and tightens his hand on the steering wheel.

The boy's been assaulted.

Spent his life surrounded by Hell, how can't he have been? Crowley is appalled he ever thought of having him. Another disgusting, devouring, lustful thing out of the abyss taking what it can rip from him.


"Can't find a woman who would want to touch you you pathetic sack of flesh? They say owners look like their dogs."

He pushes her shirt up her soft body. Kisses her stomach. Lets his tongue stroke the raised scars of the sigil that says: forever and ever and ever. Looks up at her smirking face, the rage in her eyes. Smiles. Thinks he'll strip that smirk right off with her clothes and the rest of her defenses. Done it before, will do it again.

"Can have any woman I want, whore. As it happens, I will. Be a good girl for daddy, now."

"—pull the car over, mate," Crowley says, head swimming, blood drained from his clammy skin.

Next he knows he's hands and knees puking lunch into the gravel and roadside grass, control surrendered to the vessel's instinct. There's too much in his head, all of it ugly, most of it Meg. He can see her vessel electrified with bursts of holy fire, head thrown back, face painted red with her vessel's fresh blood. Meg was ancient and had suffered many an insult to her being but there's shock in her eyes at the pain. He can see them fucking, and his fingers in her cunt, slurs on his lips, and hear her saying "Pig" like she's there with him.

Sam comes to stand beside him but he snarls Don't touch me with an acid-torn throat while mucus runs from his nostrils, washing stinging vomit from his sinuses.

filthy fuck you don't fucking touch him you never there's nothing that can what you did

Crowley's stomach is empty and he's heaving raggedly for air but it's another minute before he can
manage his feet. Sam doesn't apologize. Crowley doesn't like the expression on Sam when he dares a glance. Sam knew. Sam's known. Sam tolerates him – aids him. He shouldn't.

"Four hundred miles to Abilene," Sam says when he's determined Crowley can't manage to get himself moving. Crowley musters his wits to turn back to the car, letting himself in and falling heavily into the seat without looking at the Winchester. His stomach quivers. His body is exhausted. He stares dully ahead and he wishes there were worse than Hell. Hell's in his nature. Somewhere that small last poison part of him swears Meg had never been more beautiful. If he could take Sam's knife and cut that part out, if it hurt enough, if he could only live the final pain in her eyes and survive…

Instead the only living left to him is this. Hideous acts unanchor from his memory; ride eddies up from the deepest crimson of his perverted essence. The god of his boyhood churching, the one he betrayed, abandoned Creation. There isn't any hope of forgiveness. He's alone with his crimes and he has no right to ever forgive himself.

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Sam leaves his iPod off. For seventy miles they ride in silence before he turns on news radio to break up the road noise. Crowley doesn't look like he's thinking of him, or care whether or not Sam's writing off what he's suffering. Sam isn't. There's no other way to show support than not to tune the demon out. If the support is being totally ignored or rebuffed, Crowley can't stop Sam from demonstrating it.

Sam remembers salted iron walls, Alastair's bloody hands, watching black blood creep through his veins, turning his own telekinesis against himself, guilt, the knowledge under his skin he had been made wrong from the start being fed to him from his own brother's mouth.

Then he got his next hit: the blood that welled up beneath the knife's honed blade more beautiful than the woman bleeding on his hotel bed. His head wasn't on straight until she'd surrendered a couple of donation bags of blood.

Everything after? Showing up Dean, boasting his freedom to use or discard the power to kill his brother, the screams of Lilith's kidnapped chef suffering under his power, finally drinking his fill – Cindy McKellen, R.N., it's burned into his brain – and then crushing Lilith under his will? Living life to the fullest, or so his mind and body told him. Intermittent with his regrets, the next year of his life took him even higher.

Sam quietly lives with the truth. Azazel gave him Ruby's 'feather to fly' in his crib. He rooted him out based on prophecy, on promise. Except Nick drank. Nick grew strong. Nick had never tasted the blood before. Nick was a vessel of Lucifer. Demons are Lucifer's rage spilt out of the cage across dimensions. Sam's birthright.

A small, poison part of Sam eagerly reminds him that when Crowley is up to power he'd make a helpless meal ticket to the dark side of Paradise. Crowley a key to lay out Abaddon. From there, who could stop him anymore?

יְהוֹ may have checked out, but Sam appreciates the one kickback. Absolute Free Will means making the choice every day to move on.
Sam developed a high tolerance for long, emotionally charged, silent car rides over his childhood, yes, but especially in the past eight years.

Sam reprimands himself for not listening to more news radio, nevermind that the hot topics are unusually personal.

The twenty-four hour news cycle still chatters on about angels. "God is gone" slipped the bag weeks ago, although the angels are sticking by their duty and refusing comment on the architecture of the afterlife. In a majority-Abrahamic nation with a healthy, argumentative atheist movement everybody who's anybody and a lot of people who are, qualification-wise, no one in particular has something to say about what God intended for Earth by vacating his position.

Just like the more powerful psychics don't speak up about their abilities, no one with an inside track seems to have come forward about the major players in the Apocalypse or the angels' fall. Sam is grateful for that. More than ten hunters have Sam and Dean's names, but the community's code of silence remains unbroken. הוהי is gone – Sam can't just scrub the name from his head – but Sam offered up a prayer APB last night to all the gods he knew for the souls transformed by Eve's and maybe others' power.

Monsters aren't on the short list to receive constitutional protection if the sheer numbers of the globe's monster population come to light. Sam has never missed pulling out before his Juris Doctor more. Passing a bar examination? That he could pull off, maybe not next week but given a couple of months. Besides, there are problems beyond Kansas not being a state that allows semi-qualified, non-degreed participants to take the bar exam. Integrating himself into the court system with a false social security number and identity – something Charlie is on the case of – is totally different from the little necessities like buying a car under his new name.

It's even more of a pipe dream when XXXX XXXX: Advocate for Monsters doesn't schedule in with Sam Winchester: Trying to Throw a Cosmic Coup.

Sam bets Crowley would have a load of advice on the legal situation. If Sam hadn't opened his mouth and voiced the thoughts haunting him.

He holds off speaking that Meg assaulted him, herself, and he can only assume Meg has history of rape along with violence. That doesn't make it right for Crowley to have done anything to Meg or anybody else. Demons aren't totally out of control. They do what they want when they want to, and only when they want to.

Sam remembers Meg's touch. Her lips. The revulsion as she reminded him in that silky voice he watched her change. Saw her bare breasts in the light of the lamp. He wanted her, but not to be taken like a slab of meat, and there was her voice in his ear telling him he was so filthy. Telling him not in so many words he was an animal and she had the right.

Sam remembers Meg inside him, Meg murdering, Meg stalking Jo over days, toying with her feelings for Dean, his hand closing over Jo's wrist, Jo slammed to a table, Jo begging in terror the personality she thought was Sam, the crack of her skull on the bar, Meg looming and crooning inside Sam's flesh. Shooting Dean carried the weight of the same violation.

Practically 'the good old days'.
No matter what Crowley says, Sam wants to believe Meg changed because of what she saw in Castiel. Innocents still died because of her up until the end; she dwelt on the opposite continent of sensitive to what she'd done to him; but maybe she loved Cas.

That's not impossible.

Sam gets his head together and speaks up.

"I don't know if I can only make it worse, but I'm here. I still will be later."

He's eighty-nine percent sure at this point Crowley hasn't paid any attention to that. He doesn't get a response. Crowley's skin remains pale.

Sam knows if it hadn't been today it would have been another day. He would go as far as to say he can offer expert advice on that, if Crowley has any intention of talking. Very few people have ever faced their demons as literally as Sam. No sorries. No pity. Just the fact that Sam knows.

Cindy McKellen, R.N., screaming, and unwitting vessels slaughtered like swine before the end, when he drank to face Lucifer.

"Alright, Sam," Crowley says later, at the motel, sitting on the bed, emotions passing across his tired face. Whatever the rest is he doesn't manage to get it out.

Sam's been trying not to weigh on him, except considering convincing him to trim his beard. Over the years Sam noticed the beard is always a litmus of Crowley's state of mind. Maybe trimming up works both ways – could have a positive psychological influence.

Now Sam is prepared to weigh on him. Sam stubbornly drops himself down on the edge of the bed, whether Crowley really wants that or not.

The demon looks at him square on. Good sign. Great start. Sam offers his own tired, encouraging smile. Crowley looks confused, then sad, face slack, gaze empty.

"How are you still here?"

Sam gives the question due seriousness, wrings his hands while his thoughts turn inward where his answers, still not quite ready to be articulated, lie. He grasps hold of an idea, one lying there waiting to be pulled together and held up to the light.

"Crowley, 'evil' isn't some huge cosmic force lying in wait to disorder the universe. You would know. I would especially know. Lucifer is… Lucifer and I were together a long time. Evil is…what we do to each other. I've been evil. You have. Lucifer has. So has Dean. So have Cas and the other archangels. Gabriel had the least character defects of the big four. He tortured me without any remorse for an actual year." Sam holds his hands up in a regretful shrug, wishing he had more to offer, eyes apologetic that he doesn't.

"You see it," Lucifer says. "The grand tapestry. The little details woven in. So do I. That's who we are. That's why we are, Sammy."

Sam doesn't want Lucifer to get him wrong, but the chances of that are almost zero nowadays. Not that that prevents every blowout. Having identical tempers means sharing the same countdown, moved ahead by different offenses.

"Just because I see it doesn't mean I have to agree with you on what I'm looking at," Sam points out, brow sweet but eyes impenetrable.
"Sam, Sam, Sam," Lucifer laments, drawing each iteration out with disappointment. He isn't angry. He looks proud, and Sam likes that. He likes it a lot and he doesn't even resent that today. Lucifer reaches out and touches Sam's identical face, fingertips lingering on his cheek.

"Just…be 'good'." Crowley looks particularly consternated, but only at first. His brows inch up, he looks no less tired, although appreciative, eyes less dull than minutes before. "Sure you don't want to try the Buddha? Sounds like you've got a good start on that eightfold path."

Sam chuckles half-heartedly.

"I googled. I actually can't. We're looking at a lot of attachment and suffering coming up. I'm probably going to lie all the time and I'm going to kill people. And get drunk. Those are just the ones I'm a hundred percent on. No ticket to Brahman-Ein-Nirvana in my future, man. Until, uh, Kali consumes all of time."

He plasters a smile on. Crowley doesn't return it, but he looks dimly amused.

"We get some sleep, then we stop some rage killing. We liberate a ghost. Those are good things," Sam says. "If it looks like I'm reading the situation wrong…this time I don't take you on a nature hike."

Crowley nods in response. Sam watches him regaining control of himself through force of will.

"Civilized written correspondence never hurt anyone," he says, more quiet than usual. Pauses. "— that's not literally, comprehensively true but it's a possibility as possibilities go."

Sam considers his bid to remind Crowley the everyday is passing day by day, then launches it:

"Thought about using a razor? For a guy who hates hiking you're getting pretty mountain man."

Crowley reaches up and runs fingers through his beard. Definitely the first time he's thought of it in days. He gets up more on command than with any enthusiasm and digs through their duffle, through guns and MREs and toiletries until he recovers a straight edge razor. Sam easily admits to himself the feeling in him at the sight of Crowley back to grooming is happiness.

He thinks back to Crowley, unconscious, vulnerable, lying close enough to touch. This time he frames the memory in context of Crowley's faith in him. With the demon hanging on for no other reason than Sam believes Crowley's willful enough to see his transition through to the other side, Sam doesn't have the liberty of being evil. Not even just sort of evil. Sam is Crowley's sober companion. Crowley doesn't know it, but he's definitely Sam's.
"When do I get tailored a suit?" Crowley asks, examining his FBI badge in its leather holder, flipping it open and shut, inwardly rehearsing. His face feels naked. It's the first time he's been clean shaven in years, but this morning when Sam told him what they'd be doing he went back to the mirror and scraped off the rest.

"When I work up the stamina to take you to a tailor. Plain cut. White shirts. Everyman ties. Basically I'm avoiding it because it's going to be you standing there judging me. In fact, I'm leaving it to Dean."

Crowley frowns but nods his head to the side in concession. That sounds like him. He's making the best of a bad draw with a loose fitted brown leather jacket, brown cotton shirt and, unfortunately, blue denim jeans. It's a dark wash and needs must. He had his way at Sunglass Hut. His new Oakleys look magnificent. That's enough for now. They make for two FBI agents tracking a serial killer, one plain clothed to become a tail.

"Agent Kendall Harvey. And you're Agent Glenn Halford. From Judas Priest. Guess we won't discuss your extra-curriculars," Crowley repeats because they've said it aloud only the once before. "Random name generators, Moose. Close as your phone."

Sam laughs, that laugh Crowley identifies with a story about his brother coming up, like Dean's embarrassingly ridiculous and the best thing in the world at once.

"To call Dean's technological skills 'patchy' would be the polite way to put it. He can hack half the security systems out there and jury rig broken electronics and I blew his mind teaching him to order pizza online."

Sam parks the car in front of the Abilene Police Department as Crowley puts the final touches on his character in his mind. He prides himself on professionalism and if he isn't to be Crowley no one's going to think he's ever been somebody else. Crowley is by far his favorite identity. He's put most of himself into the role, except the fellow has a fairly standard British accent and is pleasant when, sometimes, he really otherwise wouldn't be.

The land is flat and the view wide. The stringy trees planted in the grassy islands that break up the asphalt offer little shade. Crowley can't imagine the circumstances under which he'd be persuaded to settle here – an opinion he'll keep to himself, given the general Texan opinion of Texas.

"Agent Kendall Harvey's American. Don't jump out of your skin," Crowley warns with a smirk as they reach the station door, Crowley holding it open for Sam, the taller and the sharp dressed of the two of them. Sam looks surprised but stays on task.

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Three vics. Two men and one woman. All sent to the Tarrant County Medical Examiner a city away for autopsies that came back reporting massive internal hemorrhage and organs exhibiting signs of excessive blunt force trauma not mirrored on the surface of the corpse.

"Like somebody's getting up in there and going to town," the case officer told them as he lay out the photos, both crime scene and the shots of pulverized tissue from the autopsy. "Never seen a thing like it."

He gave them the list of interview prospects.
"You've been interviewed, and then you've been interviewed by me," Crowley said smugly, back in the accent Sam associates with him as they strolled back to the car, Sam envying his sunglasses for practical reasons. Now he's wondering if Crowley, Ruby or Meg could be European, South American or African – or besides the Christian hotspots, Christians, Jews or Muslims from somewhere else – and how he'd never know.

They're inside the household of Bianca Wilson, wife of the late Richard Wilson, single story, walls pale yellow, raised, stucco ceiling a triangle slanting overhead hung with a fan hard at work chasing away the heat. Sam wonders if the Wilsons ever even use their shuttered-up fireplace. There's a couch and an armchair, a decorative cross on the wall and a big screen television. Vacation pictures on the low bookshelf against the other wall.

Sam is in the armchair, leaning forward attentively. Crowley sits on the opposite side of Bianca Wilson on the couch. Her arms are folded in front of her, and she's crying, looking from one of them to the other as if they came with answers instead of questions.

Sam hasn't adjusted to Kendall Harvey. His voice spans the same register, high and chatty and low with a jaguar growl. Sam never had a reason to give changing accents as a whole serious consideration before, but the biggest difference by far is that Crowley swapped out all his vowels. The accent is probably the least jarring thing about him.

In the police station Crowley stood as straight as Sam, character brisk, motions purposeful and entitled, smiles pulled straight across his lips, lacking their usual devious upturn.

Next they waited at the closed door to the Wilson residence, Crowley Agent Harvey but not the same agent as at the police station: glasses already off, his stance just as professional but his eyes bearer-of-bad-news soft. He's sorry for her loss before they're ever in her living room being sorry for her loss. Sam lets him lead, playing straight man, staying focused, sweet expressions set to off. Otherwise they'd be laying it on way too thick.

"I can't begin to imagine how painful this has been for you Mrs. Wilson. Bianca. Is it alright if I...?" The tearful woman nods affirmation. "Your husband is dead," Crowley goes on, leaning in, selling concerned for her and resigned to his task. "This couldn't be more personal, but it's your personal insight we need. Think hard, Bianca. Something new he brought into the house, an unusual phone call – even a strange odor or a change in temperature where there shouldn't be. I don't want to frighten you any more than you're already frightened, but those things could mean someone, a stranger, was in and out of your house. Or if something unusual happened outside the home..."

Bianca latches to Crowley's every word, listening closely as he calmly speaks his list. She unfolds and lowers her arms, clasps hands in her lap, her breathing slowing and her tears beginning to dry as she wracks her memories at the demon's bidding.

Sam isn't unaffected, compelled by humans' social nature to obey Crowley's subtle cues, everything about the case growing closer and sharper. He lets Crowley's foreign voice walk him through his own recollections of the case files.

"There's something I didn't tell the police, agent," Bianca says, eyes on Crowley like she expects him to read her mind. "Rich loved me. I loved him. We were going to celebrate our seventh anniversary in two months..."

"But?" Sam prompts, word soft. Bianca catches up with herself with the external prompt. She looks away, putting herself together. Sam knows what someone building the strength inside themselves
to push past hurt and regret looks like all too well.

"It hasn't always been easy," she says, to Sam but mostly to Crowley. "These past four months since Rich lost his job. He got so upset. You know how men are, so proud to provide for their family. Rich had been depressed, I told the officers that, but... These past three weeks started yelling like he used to. He never hit me. He never hit me. I didn't want anybody to think he hit me. It caused us nothing but problems when they got involved two years ago. They harassed him; they didn't give him any help."

"I understand, Bianca," Crowley says, voice of experience unfeigned. "The same person who loves you can show sides of themself they never wanted you or anyone else to see. Sometimes you have to step out, and sometimes they're strong enough to step up. But now his self-control, his self-image were eroding under stress. Did he have any episodes outside the home? With you...or with anyone else?"

"I embarrassed him in front of one of his co-workers Tuesday talking about how hard things had gotten but how my job would get us by. One of his former co-workers." Bianca is breathing normally, speaking to Crowley candidly, sometimes glancing at Sam, not forgetting him, wanting to see that he understands, too. He does, so he shows it. "After she left, he...had an episode...right there in the parking lot," she explains. "Next to our car. He barely left the house without me, and he tried so hard to stay in control in front of everybody else."

"Do you remember where you were parked? Who might have heard you? Was his former co-worker still there?" Crowley leads on.

Sam can imagine himself buying something from the demon. Like a set of kitchen knives, or some real estate.

"We were at the United Supermarkets on Judge Ely. It was about seven o'clock. There were plenty of people shopping. Honestly, I didn't look around."

Sam trades a look with Crowley, catching the demon's slight nod. It's easy to get vengeful over domestic violence. It's a strong angle to work.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilson," Sam says, turning on his own condolences smile. "We're going to follow up on this. You've brought us one step closer to catching this killer."

"We're very sorry for your loss," Crowley says with patented sincerity, aloud for the first time.

"Thank you, agents. Agent Harvey, Agent Halford," Bianca says, looking at them with more trust and faith than Sam thinks they deserve. She'll sleep better, tonight. That's all he can really wish for, for her.

"Let's hope that's not a twenty-four hour supermarket," Crowley says, phone out as they return toward the car, door closed behind them, his thumb tapping with more practice than Sam thinks Dean has. "—open until eleven. Give it until one and let's go lay down some spellwork. See if we can get a fix on their residual energy. Maybe buy some rock off the local twenty-somethings that park and distribute places like that." He holds up a hand without looking away from his phone. "Kidding. We have enough cocaine for a tri-county area back of the main pharmacy."

Sam almost gawks, then remembers Crowley's quip about the Pure Food and Drug Act. He decides not to ask how much morphine they have, but thinks about the advantages if somebody comes home with massive bodily harm. That, and that the answer is probably "All of it." He decides to call Dean later and tell him to put a lock on the back room. Better safe than Kevin turning into a
junkie.

It's still weird to imagine demons and monsters, and, formerly, angels, with 3G. Sam doesn't like the idea. At all. Dick showed off just how much harder that could make the job. Crowley's paid up on his plan at 666; swears with the amount of obfuscating spells on his phone he couldn't be traced if the GPS was on, and it's not.

"So, next vic's house?" Sam assumes as they climb into the comprehensively unremarkable white Toyota.

"Mm," Crowley says, eyes and hand never leaving the 'mobile' through the whole process of situating himself in the car, the details negligible obstacles. His brow jumps up. "Here it is. Abilene Municipal Cemetery. Not even two miles off. Think all our friend has left are his bones. —wait. Gets better. There's a counseling center just next to it. And Google sends us on to… They do marriage and family therapy. Good on them. Even the remote possibility of a domestic violence angle? Think we just walked in at the start of a massacre."

Sam's stomach clenches. He rolls the car out into the street.

"Swap to the GPS for me?"

"Yeah, yeah. On it, Moose," Crowley murmurs as he taps through his menu to oblige, taking a short-term risk. The phone pipes up just afterwards.

Sam doesn't think he's ever met somebody who likes things as much as Crowley likes 'things'. Phones, clothes, rugs, liquor. Even things he can't possibly use. Like the moon. It's not a demon schtick. Meg traveled light. Azazel had a mission and no time for anything else. Alastair? He lived for…performance art. Lilith liked becoming little girls and then slaughtering families. Ruby kind of just liked sex. Meanwhile, Sam got to visit Crowley's house before it burned to the ground. The sheer amount of useless, mindlessly expensive stuff the demon is capable of hoarding would impress anybody.

Sam can admit working with Crowley is easy, whether he's looking for insane, feral killer or well-greased social mover in a partner, problem with somebody needing to not kill everybody aside. He bears no resemblance whatsoever to any hunter Sam has worked with or seen, except a little bit to Krissy and her gang. The 'normal' coming off of him is especially remarkable considering he's a demon.

"I've never played good cop, sexy cop that effectively. I'm bad at sexy cop and Dean's worse," Sam admits while the GPS talks on. Credit where it's due.

Sam has seen a change in Crowley, literally overnight. Either he let his interest go or he buried it deep. He gives Sam friendly, insignificant looks and teases without an ounce of seductive resonance. It's a different act, but Sam feels pretty safe going here at this point in his day.

"I've got angles to my angles. I know what they want to hear," Crowley says, taking the compliment gracefully, no smiles, just an appreciative brow. Sam thought it might go to his head, but no. "Her husband may have had a rage problem, but he made her feel safe. Lately she got more and more isolated trying to play nurse, she didn't see her friends anymore. Masculine confidence, understanding girlfriend."

Crowley stops to think and then keeps on:

"Watched you last town, and now. You want to be sexy cop, you need to open your posture up
more. That's your catch. Uptight as a... Nuns get an unfair reputation. More like you've got that same constipation as Cas. Metamucil, Sam. We need to practice your 'girlfriend'. Might even bring hugs into your life. Dean could kill with it, but still with his problem: issues from here to the next inhabited planet."

No flirting. Weird, but good. Maybe good.

Actually, it's nice to talk to Crowley. It's easy to talk to Crowley. All Sam can think is, god, the minefield that's talking to Dean has kept him from having real conversations since he left Amelia. Crowley wants to talk about each other. Like, actually have a personal conversation. Sam had gotten so used to those sometimes it hurts to just not.

"I don't think practicing my 'girlfriend' with you..." Sam lets hang with a smirk.

"As opposed to hiring a working girl? Aspiring actor role-play." Crowley matches him with a grin. "Don't get me wrong, Moose. Something to be said for supporting the local economy. Still, you haven't seen my 'woman'. Be fun."

Sam puts on a wide, plastic smile he keeps stockpiled for Dean, enthusiasm in his eyebrows as he looks away from the road to the demon.

"Wow, Crowley, I can't wait for this car ride to be over."

Crowley falls quiet, but a touch of humor remains on his face regardless of the forlorn look haunting him that never fully retreats.

Unless he's acting. His sadness could disappear as easily as his attraction.

Sam really doesn't want him to be. If he loses his line on Crowley, he loses Crowley. It's a tough line between the relief Sam's feeling with the sexual tension cut and how selfish he feels about abandoning Crowley to work out those labyrinthine emotions on his own. So far nothing good has come out of Crowley left on his own.

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Sam leaves the next household brokenhearted. He saw the terror in a child's eyes when he stopped outside her bedroom door. Asked a nine year old if her father hurt her. No need to ask her how.

Promised her he's gone forever now. Promised her four times.

"Alright there, Moose?" Crowley asks gently.

Sam would take a page from Crowley's book and vomit his feelings – literally, in the grass or the gutter – but he's still an FBI agent in an interviewee's front yard.

"Honestly? No. I'm siding with the ghost's call on this one."

Crowley's expression tells Sam what went on is beyond the demon's repertoire as well as a stab in his new demi-soul. He's known Crowley going on four years; familiarity tells him the demon's not faking that.

"Her own da."

"...and his friends," Sam says very quietly. Now Crowley gets it. He glances back toward the house, glaring at the door. "Different case," Sam tells him, trying to breathe steady. "For the cops and Child Protective Services. I'm gonna make sure they push it through."
"Weren't a countdown until our loose cannon kills again, I'd buy you a few rounds," Crowley says in apology as they get in the car.

"Afterward."

Crowley sits back in his bucket seat, looking over at Sam, bringing it back to business:

"Cause of death says 'ghost', but our serial killer has quite a range on him."

Sam focuses, nodding agreement.

"I've seen a ghost with this big a territory before. A dead pastor. He appeared to people all over town and commanded them to kill in God's name." He wets his lips. "I think it's a vigilante thing. Spirits that manifest because an offense meets their MO. If a ghost is bound to a certain crime… I mean, there's a lot of energy bound up with crime. Any crime."

Crowley mulls on it.

"So, he manifests through the act itself. Must ride his victims: free energy flying; siphons off what he needs to break in. He builds up to the violence, goes to work on them and vanishes home."

"Nothing like ectoplasm on the coroners' reports, but bleeding from every orifice would've watered it down. Especially with the delayed autopsies." Sam sighs. It brings them closer to the ghost and it doesn't. How many spirits could erupt over domestic violence? He glares at the steering wheel.

"The last victim. It's the woman."

Crowley scoffs.

"You sweet cherub, think women don't beat their fellows – not in this case but in others their wee ones, too. You want to go on what we've got or run it by him?"

"I'm not...I know—Forget it. Let's just do the spellwork."

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A grocery store parking lot is a special, very modern area. Anything living that would try and penetrate the tarmac is baked off. As far as the energies of the living or undead go, there couldn't be a cleaner slate, even if they're under a waning moon. Bad for invocations, Crowley thinks. Good for banishings. He has power to burn, even if it's a flicker of what it should be, so it doesn't matter. Or, it wouldn't, if he didn't have other plans.

Sam changed out of his perfectly tailored suit into his regular jacket and plaid during a stop by their motel.

"I haven't been fair to you boys," Crowley said, sitting on his motel bed not ogling Sam changing. "You came off perfectly respectable in that suit. A complete one-hundred and eighty."

"And before we came off as...?" Sam asked, glancing Crowley's way with amusement.

"A pair of degenerate children: entitled, a little insane and grinding a grudge against anything inhuman."

"You wouldn't be wrong. You know. A few years ago more than now," Sam says, buttoning up something flannel and plaid. "You pretended to be all kinds of things. I pretend Dean didn't raise me while he raised himself and kept dad on his feet at the same time. My entire personality was
bummed off other kids when I got to go to school and…what? I guess movies. Television. I'm not the same virtuoso, but I have range."

Crowley can't relate to that at all. He can't remember a time he didn't fundamentally know who he is and what he wants. His earliest desire? The same power his mum had, only more.

"The two of you. So much underutilized potential. It breaks my conniving heart," he apologized sincerely to the Winchester.

Then dinner, where Crowley kept his word and bought him his drinks, even if one their credit cards is just as perfectly illegal as the other.

It wasn't until after the food had been laid in front of them on the bar, that Sam said the next piece on his mind.

"…you said Dean was impossible."

"Utterly."

Sam's expression grew much too serious for dinner.

"What did you mean?"

"Hand-crafted by Heaven. Perverted by Hell. Baptized by Purgatory. Exceeds the design specs on a soul. Is he a human? A demon? A monster? Although, broadly speaking, most would stick to 'pain in the ass'. You're talking about the man who stopped the Apocalypse because he just wasn't feeling it." Crowley toyed with his steak, thinking it was not 'medium rare', although bearable. He looked up before cutting another bite. "You and I put in a lot of effort, but, no offense, we were both regrettably on task. First of all, handing you the Colt delivered you directly to Lucifer. Then I handed you up Brady. Complete disaster on my part."

Sam mellows, sitting back, distant for a few moments. Crowley sees him wanting to say something. He doesn't. He goes in at his baked potato, instead, done with shots, a draft beer in front of him.

Crowley finishes drawing his circle, candles burning in its center. They may not have anything of the ghost’s, but they have grave soil from its probable burial grounds which Crowley thinks should be enough. Sam was less than pleased to retrieve cardboard from the nearest dumpster, but then Crowley’s argument won: Want I should just throw myself in there when you've the arms of an adult orangutan? Now it's marked up with sharpie in the way of the ancient masters in accord with the stars. Crowley brought herbs enough to call the as below, so above properties he'd need out of, in a separate bowl waiting to be mixed with the grave dirt.

"There we are," he says. "Beautiful. Have at it Sam."

Sam shifts uneasily on his feet where he towers over Crowley.

"Me?"

"Learn by observation and enactment. That's why nobody bothered to scribble your secret order’s secrets down. This is the easy part. All ready for you. Different premise but not out of your area. Think of the hundred miserable times you summoned me somewhere."

Sam makes an offended sound.
"It wasn't a 'hundred'. More like five."

"Bloody well felt like it. Come on. Explained it in the car," Crowley says, standing, which brings him part of the way up Sam.

Sam looks down at the spell components, building resolve with a deep inhalation. He sits, looking like a schoolboy at an exam. Crowley pushes his hands into his jacket pocket, clasping his cell. With any luck they'll conjure up enough of an image to capture a photo.

"You're feeling the energies out and amplifying them with what's in you. Can't work the spell shut up like that," Crowley scolds. "Back massage?"

Crowley is getting better. He's had only the day to practice but maybe he could put his hands on Sam and not think, not the whole time, of putting his hands on Sam. He can at least fake it. He'd feel accomplished he's faked it all day if it wasn't unacceptable to come on to the boy in the first place. Pervert, pervert.

"I've got it," Sam says, a little of that temper showing. The corner of Crowley's lip turns up. Always been a feisty bastard; easier to appreciate when Sam's not plotting to get a knife in him.

Crowley's going to need to walk him through grounding himself, chakra meditations or something else to teach him to even his energies out across the kilometer of him, but Sam does relax considerably.

Sam speaks Greek, combining the spell components one after another. His Greek is just shy of offensive. It's Crowley's fault he didn't bother converting it to Latin, or English, but conversions can be tricky and his still-demanding vessel was hungry.

It's an apparition of a man that appears. Standing in the empty lot, stare focused on a scene that passed days ago. He's in bad condition, swollen from the blows of fists. Sam sits keeping his breathing even, studying the specter from a distance. Crowley approaches and captures his photos.

"I'm not a crime scene investigator, but I've punched a considerable number of people. Think a man did this, Moose. Blows are straight on. Be an especially tall woman," he says, raising his voice only a little to account for the distance, the night still and nothing to obstruct it.

A snap of his fingers. The specter vanishes. The candles in front of Sam extinguish. Better to clear the area of energies. No idea who could be living in Abilene.

"Man beaten to death. Probably by his gay lover. That'll make the papers in Texas."

"And we have his mug. Problem just shy of cleared up," Crowley says pleasantly. "This I like much better. Distinct lack of animal violence."

"I don't know, Crowley," Sam says, starting to clean up. "A lot of ghosts pack a real kick."

Crowley tries to imagine not crushing a ghost. Embarrassing isn't the word. Shameful might be.

"No. No they don't. Not against me they don't," he says, returning to Sam with a smile. "I may not be king of the 'roaming dead' anymore, but I'll be damned if the stationary, irritated dead will get one up on me."

So he is damned; it's just an expression.

He doesn't help pack up the materials, but it's really just to see Sam make that face at him.
"…now we _fill_ the grave and place the chunks of topsoil back," Sam says, as smug as he's ever been in his life. He bursts out laughing at the horrified look Crowley turns on him.

"I'm covered in moist soil. It's almost sunrise. I'm feeling a lot of animosity in your direction."

"Yeah. You got a little something on your…everywhere," Sam says, still grinning as he starts shoveling dirt, now in reverse.

He may or may not have 'missed' the pile of grave soil when Crowley wouldn't stop bitching. He'd plead the fifth in a court of law.

"Hey," Sam says. "Aside from…going to Heaven, at least Chad's free from all that rage."

Crowley can only nod along with that, face still screwed up with irritation. Sam's a proud sponsor of that expression. He wonders what would happen to him if he got a photo.

Sam can see why Dean likes this. He's not going to tell Dean he has a new appreciation for Dean's harassment when he's so far down in himself it takes a sharp prod to remind him he's not alone even in the same room as his brother. Dean grinning and laughing at him is jarring; it turns out keeping somebody miserable on their feet takes jarring. It's not just an asshole big brother thing – even though sometimes it's also that.

Meanwhile, Chad Nailer's no longer being punished for his good deed: Taking in his childhood friend despite the danger of her abusive husband. It killed him. Even so, loose cannon aside Sam can't help but put Chad's vigilantism together with the haunting memory of that little girl. Agent Glenn Halford has one more duty today before he and Crowley get out of town.
"Come on, Sam. Have a pickled egg. Put it in your mouth."

"I'm not eating something the owner of the gas station put in a mason jar, Dean."

"Clifford is an experienced egg pickler," Castiel informs him importantly. "He also pickles garlic and sausage."

"Crowley?" Dean urges. Crowley looks at Dean like he's gone further insane than Crowley knew. Dean looks at Crowley like he's hopeless. "Man up, guys. Come on. I'm telling you these are awesome."

Sam is definitely home.

"I thought I was going to throw up but then I was converted into their homemade pickled egg cult," Charlie informs him from where she sits at the table, busy on her tablet. She feigns a forlorn look. Or maybe she doesn't feign it. "Save yourselves. It's too late for me."

Charlie is surprisingly okay with Crowley. Or not surprisingly.

"You're Crowley. Hi, I'm Charlie Bradbury. I do the heavy network infiltration and the database programming. Is Lilith good in bed? Because Chuck totally glossed over that part but if you read between the lines it sounds like you probably know."

Crowley looks at her like she's a small, talking forest animal from a Disney film. Sam's pretty sure he doesn't give much time to Disney films.

"...yes. She was," he says anyway. "But her sex to the slaughter of families and ruin of lives ratio was skewed in the direction of the latter." He smiles, mischief and malice. "The queen is dead. She should have called me off my job for help. We could debate where 'pride' ranks on the deadly sins. —and a very short lifespan to the reigning queen."

"Nice sunglasses," Charlie says brightly. Considering her lack of social graces Sam doesn't think she knew that that's the way to Crowley's heart – invasive personal fangirl questions aside.

"Thomas Laurie Clarkson," Crowley announces, looking up from his phone.

"Thomas Laurie Clarkson. Got it," Charlie says. "British expat?"

Crowley walks over behind her, looking down at what will be his legal documentation, considering his past and future life carefully.

"American. South African parents. I'm feeling very American this month, considering I'm doubtlessly being hunted, and that sounds nothing like me."

"Shaky credit history," Sam volunteers. Crowley glares his way. Sam shrugs. "That sounds nothing like you, either."

"Shaky credit history," Charlie processes. "Born in…?"

Forbid I actually have to get a *job*. I suppose I made some bad investments. Make up the rest. Erase this vessel I'm wearing. Bartholomew Luigi Bassanelli. Missing person. We shouldn't be the same age, either. Regrettably he's in Hell, so they aren't ever going to find him."

"Got it, got it, got it, got it and got it. I'll do you next Sam. Probably tomorrow," Charlie says, giving him a smile, eyes bright. She's in her element. Her highly illegal element. Not that any of them haven't committed enough felonies for multiple life sentences.

"I get it," Sam says, returning her smile. "Art takes time." He looks at his brother. "I don't even want to know your name yet. If I didn't need to do hospital visits, we probably wouldn't be related."

Dean beams with pride. Like that's not a terrible, terrible sign.

"You missed velociraptors," Sam needles vengefully because it still has mileage. Dean has no idea where they were or what led to the case.

"Utahraptors, actually, if we're strictly speaking phylogenetics," Crowley fills in helpfully. "Bigger. You might have been a bit disappointed, what with the feathers. But good feathers. Sort of hawk banded to break up their profile in the woods. The *kick* on them, though. If the giant moa hadn't gone extinct you could go try and fight one to loosely simulate the experience."

Sam is getting pretty used to having Crowley on his side, and he likes it.

Dean's wearing his agitation on his whole body.

"I hope someday those 'utahraptors' come back and bite you. And then they eat you."

Sam holds his arms out, face saying he can't do anything about it.

"Hey, look, the woman who summoned them… Time's all messed up, now. Otherwise I bet she wouldn't've gotten a hit. Admirably, it was for science. But a really, really bad idea."

"If you would cease tormenting Dean with dinosaurs, we should talk about what you learned from Kali," Castiel says, the voice of someone with very little imagination.

Sam takes a breath, letting the raptors go. Dean doesn't let the raptors go. He still looks pissed, but he shuts up about it.

"That's more like a snacks, roundtable, legal pads, some posterboard for you to draw us a really rough approximation of what she said sounds like to you in math. Which if she's as good as she is Charlie can probably translate into something the rest of us get." Charlie doesn't look up from her tablet, but she grins. Sam's not grinning, just wincing. "And we need Kevin."

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"Metatron served as a notary," Castiel says, elbows on the table, arms folded, occasionally reaching out to raid the bowl of Chex Mix. "His knowledge of the enforcement procedures that keep the individual Heavens separate may be non-extant. As a Watcher, it was only after serving as a leader in Heaven that I understood the purposes of many of my brethren."

"Right," Dean says, arms crossed, slouched back in his chair. "Ash could get from Heaven to Heaven with the angels at full force. Now anybody could just stumble from one Heaven to another."
"The people already up there may not all handle finding out they were alone in their Heaven too well," Kevin says, looking less haggard than when Crowley last saw him but still shooting nervous glances his way. The guilt crawls over Crowley, but he looks away instead of trying to apologize with just his eyes. Kevin deeply resents that one.

Castiel looks soberly around the table, briefly studying each face.

"The absence of angels could lead to a total systemic collapse. Souls' creative energies pouring from one Heaven into another would grow into a celestial tidal wave, eventually throwing the Heavens it collides with into catastrophe without time for their occupants to comprehend what they've been caught up in."


Dean crunches M&M's.

"We could have a full blown The Matrix situation in Heaven. Awesome. Get Keanu on the dial."

"Who is Keanu?" Castiel asks, attention arrested.

"Actor, Cas. Been in a film about peoples' constructed reality falling apart," Crowley informs him. Castiel takes a moment to process it, then nods.

"As hard as he fucked us over, I think I get Metatron," Sam says. "He told Cas to come back and tell him about his mortal life, right? He thinks he can just walk around Heaven enjoying everybody's stories. Instead of the little created realities he found in books, these are huge – and they're physical. He's been hiding a long time. He's been terrified. Now he gets to live everything."

"And I thought Cas and Crowley had a 999 channels and nothing's on problem," Dean mutters.

Charlie tilts her head, eyes narrowing.

"What do you mean?"

"They're television addicts. Seriously, no offense, but you guys turn into vegetables. Like there's nobody home," Kevin says. He even sounds like he actually doesn't mean offense. "I can walk behind the couch to get something I left. It's like walking through a zombie flick. Skin crawling weird."

Crowley draws his brow together. Crowley sincerely can't remember Kevin ever walking behind him.

Kevin is right. There's no place in the bunker he and Cas would rather be than the converted recreation room. Documentries, dramas, pornography, infomericals, movies he doesn't even want to watch but doesn't want to bother to argue with Cas over. When he asks himself why he's hypnotized by the telly, he can't find an answer.

"What you're saying is whatever's wrong with Metatron, it's endemic," Charlie pulls together. "Maybe it's some kind of architectural problem."

Kevin groans.

"Nobody say it. Back to the tablets. I'm making myself a 'Beautiful Mind' room. No entry. I don't want you guys touching my stuff."
"And we watch Cas. See if something changes." Sam snorts without amusement. "Keep a field diary."

Crowley imagines Sam carrying a stool about sitting out of the way and journaling Castiel.

"I…have no complaints about it," Castiel says. Cas wouldn't. Cas may not even know what a field diary is.

"Stories," Dean says, standing up so abruptly, chair scraping so loud they all snap to attention. "Stories. Guys, it's right here. Like I can almost see it…and then I forgot what I was gonna say."

He starts pacing along his side of the table.

"I should have this one," Dean says; a heavy, frustrated sigh.

"You're right. Metatron's room. Thousands and thousands of stories. Books," Sam picks up. "And the thing that impressed him…"

Dean stops.

"He said stories were what humans brought to God's – the gods' Earth. What exactly did he say about storytelling?"

"It's the 'flower of free will'," Sam fills in. "Cas and Crowley can't invent stories. —uh, well, I guess Cas just needs some practice. Maybe Crowley, too. Not the point. Sure, they can lie. But characters they've made up? Worlds that don't and can't exist?"

Horror sinks into Crowley. It's an ugly reality realizing he has a fundamental limitation of that scale.

Bartholomew Bassanelli was a literary agent. He had taste. Arguably refined taste. He made a living wage. If he ever watched infomercials, it wasn't in a George A. Romero scripted fascination. Maybe, say, because he was drunk.

"Wow," Charlie says, looking between them. "That kind of sucks. I mean what do you think about before you fall asleep?"

"We don't," Crowley says, still thrown off. "We don't sleep. Not naturally. Not normally. Right now I sleep, but… They're right. Even if I do, I don't dream. They're completely right." He inwardly steadies himself before sharing with the group; the information is, it appears, vital: "All I think about before I fall asleep is my past."

Kevin gestures to the poster board covered with equations and graphs laid out in the center of the table.

"From what I got about Heaven from what Castiel's charted out here, if this The Day After Tomorrow tidal wave of his happens I don't think Heaven couldn't contain it."

Charlie has gone pale.

"If Kali's right, if something with enough energy re-ordered the universe…"

"Primordial chaos," Castiel concludes. "And then humans dream of new gods. Which begs the philosophical conundrum which came first: the human and the sentient beings of other planets from the slow transition of oxygen to heavy elements to life in the universe, or the gods."
"I, for one, welcome our new took the brown acid, driven insane celestial overlords," Dean, still standing, says with a false grin.

"I don't," Crowley says. "I suggest we fix this, boys. Charlie."

Kevin's expression, which wasn't energetic to begin with, darkens further. He pushes his chair back, rubbing one eye with the butt of his palm.

"I'll go set up my schizophrenia room."
Sam said he'd watch Cas. He sees other, retrospective reasons that's a good idea because they need to know what to expect from and what changes to expect in the former angels populating the globe. That requires a baseline observation of Castiel's behavior.

Cas remains every flavor of weird, expressions painted in wonder and curiosity even when he's engaged in routines like cooking his own breakfast and washing dishes. The fact that two people can work together to wash dishes more effectively delights him. He wants to go with Dean to pick out a 'modern dishwasher'.

He shows Sam his room. Aside from lamps from the hardware store and furniture from around Castiel has picked out multiple paintings of the kind sold at Walmart or Target. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Sam thinks about buying him jigsaw puzzles.

Dean has built him a low shelf for things Castiel has found while wandering the nearby countryside. An interesting piece of wood. A cicada shell. An abandoned hornet's nest. A giant stick insect in a big plastic terrarium who he named Anna. After Anna. Castiel explains he knows she is a female because the males are much smaller. Sam declines to hold her. He's afraid he'll hurt her somehow, despite Castiel's reassurance.

"If you were to disarticulate one of her limbs, she's capable of regrowing it," he says.

That makes Sam more nervous about it. He cringes through a smile.

"I want a Madagascar hissing cockroach," Castiel confides. "And an emperor scorpion."

Suddenly, Sam finds himself smiling.

"Pretty sure those are 'can do', Cas. Hey, Dean and I have a lot of totally unrelated talents when it comes to carpentry and construction but you know about the bee crisis, right? Every bee counts, or something." Sam actually knows a lot about current events because he's constantly reading newspapers. "Give us a trip to the hardware store and I bet we can get you started on a hive."

Castiel stops and turns. They stand unspeaking, a look of utter mystification on Castiel's face.

"Sam. I would like to hug you," he apologizes.

"...okay," Sam says, brow knotting. He's not proud of himself that that has to come out as an apology.

When he has Castiel in his arms Sam knows he was being stupid about the whole thing. Cas presses his face in his shoulder in gratitude and Sam holds him close stretching on to a minute. Two. It's not just about bees. It's fear and uncertainty and sharing a last name, for both practical
medical reasons and Castiel's dysphoria and separation from his angelic kin.

The name is Bonham.

Sam's over it. Cas thought it sounded wonderful.

Cas also wanted to be named Vikentije and had to be let down gently, even after he explained how he admired the man's efforts to preserve the Eastern Orthodox church.

Sam claps Cas on the back and suggests they watch some television.

That happens for couple hours, Cas in his usual tilted-forward stance like the LCD screen is the most important relic in all creation.

He sits up unexpectedly, turning to Sam. For a second Sam's confused.

"I'm happy that you and Crowley are becoming close friends. You've always seemed so isolated," Castiel says confidentially but importantly. "Benny aside and mostly a stranger to you, your relationship with myself and Charlie has been quieter than Dean's. You've still been a brother to me, Sam. It's only that you show it in different, silent ways."

Sam passes through bewilderment to self-conscious amusement.

"Honestly, Cas? I'm so used to Dean shutting me down. I need to know if I'm putting myself out there that I'm getting the same back. Crowley wants to talk. About basically everything. I know if I throw it out there he's gonna field it."

Castiel's expression says he doesn't fully understand Sam's phrasing. Sometimes he requests explanations and others he goes on context. This is one of those second times.

"I want the best for him. I'm unused to compartmentalizing the way you and Dean can. I grow angry with him even though it's for crimes I have no reason to anticipate he'll commit again. It's unfair when he has no such assurances about me and my criminal behavior was the more systematic at the time I betrayed him."

"At least you know it, Cas," Sam says. It's the blunt answer and the important one. Sam is an advocate of peace between 'Heaven' and 'Hell' in a confined space.

"I've spent time meditating on it."

"I figure: All or nothing," Sam says, thinking about Crowley, himself. "I'm sick of eggshells—I mean, treating somebody like if I say the wrong thing or don't guess the right one, then they'll crack. 'Walking on eggshells'. If it goes Sou—If something goes really wrong, I have it in me to kill him. I have it in me to kill anybody except Dean. But if Crowley's constantly trying to prove himself then he can't..." Sam stops, suspiciously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Castiel smiles softly.

"You've never spoken to me so much or so readily before. It's not unpleasant."

Sam shifts on the couch, running his fingers through his hair, smiling back like he's been caught at a bluffing game.

"Yeah, I...Not like I speak up a lot in crowds. You're still right."

Sam remembers Stanford. Long conversations with friends – Brady – bickering free, about people,
or sports. Conversations with professors, and they listened to him. All the hours spent with Jess talking about their day, themselves, movies, finances. Turning in on the couch to Madison after the credits rolled on her soap opera, her history spilling out amid their laughter.

It was forever until Amelia came into his life. An actual forever. A couple of centuries, as mentally distorted as they were.

A list of recollections that, now that he's made it, Sam would do a lot of things to rewind on.

"Sam?"

Cas is, thank actual God, the most bluffable guy in the world if Sam puts any effort into it.

"Yeah. Yeah, Cas," he assures, saying he's alright whether he is or not.

Castiel's worried blue puppy eyes might have one up on Sam's, just because they're bigger and there's actual incomprehension.

"Is it something I said?"

"No, man. I just...remembered something," Sam says, casting him a smile. "You want burgers? I think I'm gonna make a burger run. To town. In the car."

Castiel nods.

"I seem to continue to enjoy hamburgers more than any other food."

"I'm gonna hit the Jiffy Burger in Smith Center. Just got a few things to do first. Let the others know I'll bring food back."

----

Smith Center has a beautiful bar, small and calling itself a saloon with good reason, the decorations nostalgic. They're lucky to have something this nice in driving distance considering they're living on an archipelago surrounded not by water but surrounded by vast seas of unending farmland. Wheat, mostly, corn and sorghum, too.

Sam has come to understand from conversations at the service station in Lebanon and here at the bar that most farmers spend more of their time working other jobs than farming. It's that kind of economy, and farming takes less manpower than it used to with the incorporation of modern technologies. There are ears of wheat painted on the mirror behind the bar, cheerful yellow, a reminder of what home means despite all the changes.

Sam prefers this to the bar next door; there's something comforting about the sense of history – of antiquity. He's from Kansas. His father was from Kansas. His grandfather was from Kansas. So was his great grandfather, apparently. That doesn't mean anything to him, yet, but he's starting to piece together meaning from it. Lawrence is where the Apocalypse was averted. Lebanon is the closest American town to the geographic center of the contiguous forty-nine. Clearly that has a lot to do with the location of the bunker, but Sam doesn't know what, besides ease of deployment.

The bunker is now looks like a memory of industry past. No one questions a building like that; nobody even notices it.

Sam has jogged to the geographic center of America. There's an empty little chapel and an empty hotel, a plaque set in in a small monument topped with an American flag and a few picnic tables.
He felt kind of patriotic. A lot of it stemmed from the fact that the country would be overrun by croats if not for the personal efforts of him and his. He can't ignore the global perspective. Americans didn't divine most of what's in the books the Men of Letters rely on. They definitely didn't start or amplify the first radiation of Christianity.

They did wipe out the nations of the first people which besides, uh, genocide razed a whole branch of occult, in the broad sense of 'hidden', lore that the magi of the Men of Letters worked with tribes from northern Canada to southern Chile and Argentina to consolidate. Secret organizations as important as the Judah Initiative Sam hasn't had the time to try and contact, yet.

Here at the saloon the bartenders know him but not much about him except that he's quiet and he always pays in cash. He must have been staring at his shot glass for a while, now, spinning it slowly in his fingers on its cardboard coaster, because the woman on duty leans in over the bar.

"You alright?"

Sam looks up, apologetic. He's one of the only customers here at three in the afternoon and he's filling the place up with extra-concentrated brooding. He wouldn't want to be the bartender, having to watch him sit there trying not to think about anything personally important because the weight of the world is an easier burden to bear.

He focuses on his actual problem.

"I'm a serial monogamist," he says, lifts his brow at her in case she gets it – in case she has any advice on that.

The bartender shakes her head.

"Have one on me, sweetheart. We like you. You tip."

She doesn't need to emphasize 'more than most people'. It's implicit; Sam knows he does.

"Thanks," Sam says, smiling tiredly. "Thank you. I've worked some bars before."

And worked over a lot of bars.

He's hustled a long time and watched Dean hustle longer. He should probably forget hunting, forget normal, and go work at a casino. He's got an added edge when it comes to Vegas: Old women love him, whyever that is.

"Not sure what brought you and your friends all the way out here," the bartender says while glass bottle after glass bottle contributes to the next shot. She takes the old shot glass and replaces it with the new, the shot as sunshine yellow as the wheat on the mirror.

Sam gives her a grin and knocks it back.

"Family. We have some old property over toward Lebanon. Obviously Wesley isn't strictly a blood relation, but he does web design, internet business. He's a close friend." 'Wesley' is also twenty-three, something Kevin can pull off easily now that life ran him over with a bulldozer. Most people don't even card him. If they think he's twenty-one or younger they probably think he came back from the gulf in The Hurt Locker shape. "We're all in something," Sam goes on. "Digital security. Stocks. Whatever. It's probably stupid, right? Getting back to the land. Total city life fantasy world."

The bartender just smiles.
"We need that. People have been moving out of these towns for years. You come in with money? Not to buy everybody out? No complaints from me. Keep our kids on their parents' land in our own little Silicon Valley."

She leaves him, going to serve the few other customers populating the saloon. That leaves him alone with his problem. Now he's thinking about it. About the it in question: Crowley. Crowley is his type. Flirty, funny, sarcastic, quieter and more intimate when he needs to be. Really obviously play by play his type.

He's straight. Comfortably heterosexual. It only took running a couple of things and bystanders by himself to say: Yeah, I don't have any desire to go to bed with any of those guys. I have zero interest in guys naked. The line hasn't blurred even a little.

Crowley's not a body.

_Literally_, but figuratively, too.

He has one of the most expressive faces Sam's ever seen. Lips that tug up in the corner, stay pressed together in his 'on top of his game' smile, taunt in an open mouthed smile saucier than anybody else Sam's ever met, are turned down at rest, curl and snarl and sneer. His eyebrows do just as much talking. His eyes are large and bright and arresting and Sam has been memorizing _everything_ over the past weeks, like he hadn't seen Crowley in all states of emotion, already, over the years.

He's animated, and he's confidant. He projects a presence that isn't just his demonic aura. It's stayed strong and just as captivating while his powers have been shot, even tamped down completely.

"Serial monogamist," the bartender says, coming back to pick up his empty shot glass. "Met a girl?"

"Something like that," Sam says. "I know it's not synonymous with running in before I think it over. That's a separate problem. But…inseparable."

He has a feeling this woman has heard it all before. Most bartenders have. Alcohol loosens lips.

"I'm here with liquid support just like I am for everybody else," she says, tipping the empty shot glass toward him.

"Liquid support..." Sam laughs. "How about a beer? One for the road."

She brings him a draft beer, heavy and dark. It's not his style but it is his mood. The bitterness on it couldn't be more delicious, today.

Sam has come to terms with something over the few days since he returned to the bunker from hunting with Crowley.

If it hadn't been for Crowley, Sam never would have stopped hunting.

If Crowley hadn't taken Meg, taken Kevin, terminated their working relationship unless Sam hunted Leviathans, alone, and then _maybe_ – a big maybe, without an actual promise of support.

If Sam hadn't walked out of Richard Roman Enterprises because the elevators were cut to prevent evacuation, traveled down floor by floor populated by demons having their field day. If the parking lot hadn't been running with black ooze. If the demons hadn't given him the cold shoulder. _Him._
Sam Winchester. Not even a second glance once a demon ID’d him.

He got into the Impala. Turned her on. He had a car, a laptop, hacked credit cards and free Wi-Fi hot spots at coffee joints and the right motels. And he still heard Crowley in his head, days later:

*You got what you wanted – Dick's dead, saved the world.*

Which left his stock value at zero. Zero dollars, zero pounds, zero pesos, zero francs. Winchesters depreciate rapidly if the world doesn't need saving. Crowley, shrewd investor, didn't expect the value of shares to rise. All Kevin Tran, rising star, now.

Sam hadn't thought about it exactly like that, then, but he fully appreciated his total lack of resources. He also hadn't put together he could go all demon vampire and crush Crowley in his telekinetic fist. That wasn't until he got back in the business, because up until then he was trying to think about anything but how much, how desperately he missed Lucifer along with every single other loved one he'd lost. Castiel took the last distorted ghostly echo of him, Sam's last handful of sand; then Castiel died.

Sam even missed Ruby. Sort of.

Then he hit a dog.

Sam pays his bar tab. He walks to Jiffy Burger because the sun's hanging lower in the sky and it's only about a mile each way. The roads home couldn't be straighter, it's hard to wreck a car under those conditions, but he could be a little more sober. He doesn't have Dean's dying iron liver which, actually, Cas probably reset recently enough the thing's born again again. For the last time. Dean is drinking less than he used to be, so Sam's not too worried.

He's thinking about Lucifer while he meanders through neighborhoods where normal people are living Sam and Amelia lives with their dogs and their children. It's not too different from Kermit, Texas. Both are flat for miles and have all these Midwestern style houses.

Sometimes Sam and Lucifer were both angry. Sometimes only Sam was. Sometimes only Lucifer. Sam had dominated Lucifer completely, an insult the archangel had never experienced before. Maybe Sam still could, but he didn't want to anymore – less about resignation, a lot more about hunger for company.

Crowley is the question on Sam's mind, but Lucifer is inextricably part of the answer.

Lucifer isn't the love of his life. Their relationship has no resemblance to that. If he was, Sam would have to be as narcissistic as...er, Lucifer. Sam is a lot of things but that part never rubbed off on him. Even with the narcissism he doesn't think the archangel would describe them in those terms, either.

People talk about true love as two halves making a perfect whole, but people don't understand how unrealistic that explanation is. They've never actually participated in that.

Everything you hate about yourselves? Share and share alike. Finishing ALL each other's thoughts? Kind of a conversation killer. Sharing a temper? Like having a cart of Chinese fireworks always there beside you, fully loaded, in a world of flint and metal.

Sam would call Lucifer a lot of other things. His best friend. His conjoined twin. The single person who believes in him in ways nobody else can compare to.

Sam still remembers a body slamming him down, knocking the air out of him; a tongue dutifully
licking his sweating skin while his stomach churned; the doppelgänger of himself grabbing his ass in two hands, spreading Sam to accommodate him while Sam hissed and swore; his own face ginning back at him while Lucifer kissed him, no matter slow or rough; Lucifer almost wrenching his hair from his scalp, teeth digging into the flesh of his neck with the aggression of his kisses. If you could call those that. Positions that hurt him and positions that didn't.

None of those acts of petty revenge defined who they were to each other. They pissed Sam off, left his body hollow, sometimes they left him shaking and crying, but they weren't two hundred years. They weren't Lucifer telling stories of times beyond imagination. They weren't the archangel's poetic explanations of how life arose in the oceans and miraculously struggled through eons to triumphantly take to the land. They weren't stories of Heaven, or silent tears over Gabriel with Sam's hand on his back, standing or sitting. They weren't his interest in Sam's 'little human life', which carried importance but only because it happened to Sam – except the parts about Gabriel. Those Sam related numberless times with Lucifer's head in his lap, Sam stroking his hair.

Lucifer thought some of the most asshole things his baby brother did were the best. But so did Gabriel.

"You're all jerks," Sam says.

"He's my brother," Lucifer says, much more quietly.

Sam thinks about Adam, somewhere else in this Hell. Michael will be good to him, Lucifer says. Michael is only angry with Lucifer. Best they not get close.

Sometimes, rare times, Sam has spoken with him.

Despite everything else, despite their closeness, all those petty but brutal acts? They hurt just as much every time.

Sam doesn't forgive him for them. Not for a single touch. A single rape. Knowing Lucifer could turn him on and would if he wanted to were not effective selling points.

Maybe Lucifer saw Sam submitting to Dean as an abdication of control that deserved vengeance that fit the crime. Lucifer resisted Michael until the end, because Michael was wrong. Sam will never agree with Lucifer's beliefs about Dean.

Sam walks in the warm Kansas afternoon and Sam thinks about sex. He remembers later when Lucifer's piqué gave way over the decades and Lucifer would be any beautiful woman Sam described, recreationally. Sam saw what Bianca Wilson saw. Cruelty in one hand, love and protection in the other. He had what she didn't have: A level of devotion past 'husband' or, worse turns to worst, 'stalker'. Reliable. Forever.

Sam thinks about Crowley and 'maybe'.

The gender thing is kind of arbitrary.

By the time Sam reaches the Jiffy burger he thinks he's sorted his emotions into separate categories. There's the monstrous things Lucifer did. There's Lucifer and the majority of the time, which didn't even resemble torture. There's Crowley: His quick wit, his joking, his dogged sense of purpose and duty, his mercurial expressions...

There's a lot of hamburgers. Sam ends up with a cardboard box to carry back to the Impala.
He's beginning to feel more sober. He tries not to think about any of it on the walk back. No naked human body parts. In most instances in Sam's life, soulless months aside, there wouldn't be any naked human body expeditions without specific people. The specific desire to be nearer to those people.

He wants somebody he can make laugh. Somebody who makes *him* laugh. Somebody who murmurs conversations in the dark, beneath the covers. Somebody who likes dogs. Somebody who is into him and nobody else – because he really puts the monogamy in serial monogamist once he gets going.

It's not a jealousy thing. Sam never had the brakes installed when it comes to relationships. Everything he knows about pacing himself Jess and Amelia taught him. Slowly.

None of which applied to how to not go from zero to naked and exhausted a couple hours later as his primary courtship strategy.

Sam unburdens himself of the box of burgers on the passenger side floorboard and sets off for the bunker.

This is more than a problem for Sam. Wow would his life be easier if his problems could just be between him and himself – and he's not including not his ancient, petulant twin when he says 'himself'. Crowley is a shattered Ming vase or some other metaphorically appropriate, unmended fine relic. He wants Sam right now. Probably. Academy Award performance that says otherwise aside.

Except…action flick infatuation. Maybe that's what Sam has, too, after two hunts: adrenaline fueled heart pounding and Crowley the only one to have his back; potentially awkward social situations that required a lot of finesse and Sam having Crowley's.

Taking chances and Sam have a shitty track record.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warning: Gore.

Sam thankfully next sees Crowley in the context of burgers. Tossing dinner from the box to its recipients is uncomplicated and it involves the whole gang.

He sits next to Crowley because that's where he sits. Glancing over he's genuinely concerned about how Crowley is starting to hollow out again than anything else. He worries it might be that Crowley is back in cuffs, but they really haven't seemed to have that effect on him. Crowley is pale today, dark circles visible under his eyes. No sleep last night, but it all worse and harder on him than just that. From the way he looks at the burger – with as much trepidation as his usual disgust – Sam can tell his appetite is gone.

"I found a guy to call about a sheep," Sam relates after swallowing a bite of his own burger.

"Good on you," Crowley says. He smiles a little, but obviously he's exhausted. His eyes fall away and he focuses on getting down his food.

Sam decides not to pressure the demon to talk. He's out here in the library which is an effort and enough. Sam lets Charlie, Castiel and Dean draw him into their conversation in which Dean and Charlie are trying to explain Harry Potter to the ex-angel. Poorly. Dean still hasn't read Harry Potter but saw two films, out of order, now, and Charlie is constantly correcting him. Charlie welcomes Sam's support.

Sudden idea from the back of his mind.

Critical moment.

Poker face, still grinning and laughing.

Sam has gone light headed and thrills with adrenaline considering actually going for it. Crowley's arm is resting on his thigh while he eats the burger with some degree of determination but not at a pace he needs to push the foil paper down. Then there's Dean, across the table, on his second burger. That, not Crowley, is the source of mortal peril.

Sam sets the used wrapping of his finished burger down and leans back in his chair. If the chairs didn't have arms... But they do. He rests an elbow opposite Crowley on one and holds his hand thoughtfully to his lips as he follows along with the conversation. His other hand, though? That smoothly crosses the short gap between his and Crowley's thighs. He pulls the demon's hand into his, grasp closing over it.

Crowley examines his hamburger as if it's an alien species, but he was already doing that. After a minute he takes a breath and allows himself to relax. That – not flirting, not touching on him – is the actual plan. Solidarity. Sam doesn't think sitting tense as the draw on a compound bow improves anybody's appetite.

Crowley's hand is cool, a little clammy. Not for long, because Sam's dwarfs and engulfs it.
Luck of the draw that Dean has no idea. It's never easy to judge how sharp Dean is at any one moment. Sam wasn't feeling too enthusiastic about probably going as far as pressing his lips together, pushing his tongue against his lower teeth and punching Dean in the face. There are times to be ribbed for days. There are times to cut that short like a man if it deals with Crowley's physical health.

Sam breaks contact with Crowley with a sigh of relief when Crowley does need to roll the foil paper down on his burger. He nudges Crowley's fries at him. Crowley's sidelong, skeptical look tells him he's pushing his luck.

Sam answers with a breathy chuckle.

Hey. That isn't adrenaline. It's definitely endorphins.

Good, Sam tells himself as he nabs Crowley's fries for his own.

As the trials took more and more out of him; when death loomed, Sam had no reason to expect getting a rush out of somebody's company again. Ever. The longer Sam has thought about it, since, the more likely it's seemed that the seal on Hell would be fashioned out of his transformed soul.

No 'get out of death free' cards ever again, and no Heaven.

----

It's a given that Crowley would have much rather slept last night than not.

He hardly believes he's so recovered he needn't sleep any longer. It's returning to the bunker and his featureless room and Kevin's distrust of and hate for him that's wearing him down again, already. 'Be good' is advice for the active. He already misses just him and Sam in the car or at a motel, having an objective in front of him and all the open sky.

Two of those consider only himself. Still a selfish bastard.

He thought wretchedly at two or three past midnight that if he is to remember his whole career of atrocities afresh it would be prudent if they could visit him in alphabetical order. Allow him to expect what's coming next and how much it's going to hurt.

His fellow avid reader of the Shurley books has set his mind on Lilith. Not the girl's fault the books had glossed over the bits that weren't the Winchesters' adventures, or that no one had explained to her in detail just where he stood now, after the angels fell, yet.

Lilith had been his queen, and his boss, and a not-infrequent guest of his house. She had a thing for leggy bottle blondes that Crowley, if not in league with her about fetishizing their looks, was delighted to share. He understands 'white people' are new in evolutionary time and Lilith looked at them with their everted noses like aliens that've just landed and the most unnatural thing she can wear. "Why do they strip the color out of their hair?" she asks, early days, pulling at her curls, to which Crowley's face asks in return why in Hell she thinks he'd know. "And then they bake their skin! They lie down in...human-toasters. Weren't they only just rubbing themselves down with poison to make it paler?"

Not so long before the termination of her reign she wore one bottle blonde over and its...her...gorgeous, naturally fair-haired best friend.

Crowley saw the night going in a direction he wasn't comfortable with. He pulled the queen to the side, Lilith against the wall with a 'pretty please' pout and doe eyes. He admonished her regardless:
"We're going to ruin the duvet, and the sheets, and the mattress, and the pillows, and you know how hard it is to get blood out of that rug."

"Buy another everything. She's beautiful, she's mine, you're mine, because you're mine everything you own is mine, and it's a perfect evening," Lilith said, laughing, pushing past him and returning to their guest. He followed, irritated but compliant. Hail to the queen.

Crowley could remember the natural blonde's shrieks of Please don't kill me and all the other things people yell when suddenly after orgasms all around they find themselves in bed with one demon holding them making scolding, shushing noises and whispering Behave now, love and another with very sharp things.

Lilith was nothing if not creative. Her smoke billowed from one body to the other, Lilith giggling girlishly on the bed while Crowley translocated to the bedroom door, tut tut tutting the sobbing, moaning blonde shaking with mortal terror. That one didn't say much, but she made a good show of screaming – as if someone could even possibly be in earshot of saving her.

"She pissed herself. On my carpet!" he snapped later, being difficult for the sake of being difficult, lying there with Lilith in her eviscerated, bleeding body kissing his, dripping hot splatters of blood from exposed cavitities, and a dead woman sprawled limp in the sheets.

Hell's queen didn't dignify his complaint with a response.

Crowley hadn't anything to throw up so there was only the wretching. It left him collapsed on his side, dazed from oxygen starvation. It's not the only memory. It's not remotely the worst. He wasn't Lilith's right hand because he was a good fuck. Being head of acquisitions was a large and the most noticeable part of it. Being the sweet talker who greased the wheels when the queen, this month's sweet little child, clasped her hands behind her said with grave childish importance Crowley, I want it handled being the other part – and the reason no one expected him to have so many powerful allies in the aftermath of the non-Apocalypse.

Oh, the things he handled.

By the time morning came around breakfast was out of the question.

Lunch remained out of the question.

Sitting on his unmade bed, he looks down at his left hand, turning it one way and then the other. Moose wants him to keep dinner down. If he focuses on not letting the boy down he just might manage it. The longing aching in his chest right now is just as much a surprise as the night revisiting nothing but his queen. He's been granted a gift. He's too tired to entertain perversities about Sam. He considers only touch. Both how much it means, and how much he misses it. Sam's warm, dry, firm grasp punctured Crowley's dearly held theory that Sam no more than feels responsible for him. Crowley can't manage to pretend away the affection.

Sam conveyed further implications. Bathe. Remember to shave before you look like a lumberjack. Change your clothes. Crowley does all those in order, handcuffs hanging low on his forearms as he washes his hair in the hot spray of the shower. The heat gets down in him. He stands there naked beneath the water longer than he needs to, soaking it up while he closely studies the cement wall and the droplets of water accumulating there that slowly coalesce and roll down to the floor in beads. That hardly-academic exercise is a sight better than letting himself think.

Sam is waiting in his room when he comes back, sitting on the edge of the bed, which is neither unwelcome nor completely unexpected. It's not so much an invasion of privacy when it isn't
properly a room, Crowley's clothes folded neatly and stacked on the floor against a wall.

"Just a bad night. No sleep at all," he says before Sam can ask, not having to force a smile, feeble as it is.

"I didn't see you crashing that hard that fast coming," Sam says, sounding uncertain whether or not it relied on something he forgot to do, worried face on.

Crowley takes his own seat further up the bed, thinking he should at least bring a chair in.

"I didn't either. Thank you, Moose. I'm certain you risked a more or less actual harrowing from Squirrel."

"I'm practically James Bond," Sam says with a grin Crowley mirrors with less exuberance. Crowley would very much like to collapse on him, but boundaries.

"Appreciate you checking up," Crowley says, because it's true.

Sam blushes, chuckling, and ducks his head, eyes alight.

"Actually I thought maybe I could stay around until you pass out? The hopefully less creepy reverse of when Cas stares at you until you wake up."

It takes Crowley several moments to progress past baffled. His expression widens with surprise when his sluggish mind catches up and he realizes Sam fully intends to.

Sam speaks back up:

"I've come feet from death by insomnia, Crowley. It's probably on my top five list of least favorite things."

"You're very good to me, Winchester. I quantitatively don't deserve it," Crowley says, weariness audible, in no position to send him off. "You still remember nobody ever coerced or manipulated me into anything evil."

"I know. Strip."

"...I desperately wish I was in a state to pervert that," Crowley says, mostly joking. He's definitely being socially dominated because here he is yawning. He's already in just a t-shirt but his jeans he gets rid of. Sam's not going all the way and tucking him in, thank, because that would cross over into ridiculous. Instead the boy gets the lights before carefully making his barefoot way back to sit on the mattress, closer to the head of the bed.

Crowley can smell him, the most comforting thing of all. Even in the handcuffs his senses are sharper than humans'. There's nuances to the smell beyond 'masculine', between the scents that start with his sebaceous and apocrine glands and the salty smell of dried sweat. While nodding off he imagines almost cheerfully the aforementioned awkward Castiel telling someone 'I like to smell you' in an inappropriate situation in that film noir voice, diminished olfaction or not.

Crowley has no idea when Sam leaves him on account of Sam's practiced silence and his own unconsciousness. He wakes up to an echo of a dream. One he can't bring forward into recollection.
Chapter 12

Conferences in the library are apparently becoming a thing. Dean's uneasy with it, this transition from him and Sam on the road facing what comes at them to an actual organization. A historic organization. An organization with history, history he may or may not need to learn. That, and that this is what a secret society of highly skilled professionals actually looks like in the real world. Charlie's in flannel pajamas, Castiel and Sam have stubble and morning hair and Crowley is doodling.

There's a dream buster.

Dean hasn't had a lot of time to read up on the Men of Letters. He's been installing modern hardware, including Charlie's full sized computer to specs, when he's not beating the crap out of Kevin and Cas or with them in the shooting range. Cas is great with knives; he's great in close quarters. He hasn't adjusted to a human body with only human strength. Dean sees the pain he tries poorly – to hide when he goes down on the mat; when Dean lets him out of a hold. There's no cure for that pain but for Cas to start winning.

Kevin's different. Kevin's working through some anger. He's raw intention, back up to go another round.

"What if we could send an SOS to Ash?" Sam poses, bringing Dean's attention back to the meeting, mind off his protégées.

Dean looks to the angel next to him.

"You can't hear angel radio anymore, but you still know the frequencies and about whatever that stuff is I'm always tuning out, right Cas?"

Castiel wears a grim face.

"Yes. And I have no doubt in Charlie's ability to devise to broadcast on it." He shakes his head. "Even if Ash is monitoring that frequency, so is Metatron."

Charlie rubs her hands together, a deep breath lifting her shoulders as she gazes down at her tablet.

"It's somewhere to start. Whatever I need to do to contact Ash is going to be based on the same premises."

"Be better if we knew what Metatron knows," Dean guesses. "I mean Morse code? Probably. Modern languages? Way more than just his host's. I say Cas and I go sack his bookstore, and either get an interview with his partner in crime or cold clock him. Know your enemy."

Sam chuckles across the table from him, next to Crowley. Dean hasn't decided whether or not he's okay with the way they're basically glued. He doesn't mind hanging with Crowley when they're on good terms; he should be doing it. It's a low priority.

"I'm sorry, Dean. You going on a commando raid to a book warehouse to check off an angel read Little Women?"

Dean thinks about it. Shrugs, making a face.

"Point. I saw Tristessa in there. It won't be hell. And just because I bitched every fifteen pages

Sam holds his hands up. Dean grins in victory.

"…this is me deferring to you. Enjoy it while you can, dude."

"I read the real shit on the down-low, you Charles Dickens loving slut."

"What is that even supposed to—"

"Guys. Focus?" Kevin interjects, leaning in over the table, giving them *For fucking serious?* eyes. Despite following the conversation with raised eyebrows and an upturned lip, Charlie focuses first.

"You said Ash is working with what he knew in life. If he has a rig, if this angel radio is anything like a network, which the math Cas showed me so far tells me it probably is, I can find it and I can hack it."

"You *might* be able to hack it. Ash is definitely in your class," Sam says.

"If he's as smart as you say, he'll trace it to Earth. How many breaches does he expect someone to gamble at from down here?" Crowley poses. "Also: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Flowers of Evil, The Red and the Black.*"

*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, The War of the Worlds, Sultana's Dream,* Charlie says, segueing immediately: "Here's the plan: If he lets me in, or I win, I'll dump an encrypted data packet on his hard drive. While I'm crunching the math, Crowley, Sam and Kevin need to compile it all. Do you think anything on the tablets could help us, Kevin?"

Kevin raises a hand and rubs his temples, wetting his lips. Dean can see the thoughts running behind his eyes.

*The Birth of Tragedy, Germinal*— I think so. There's a section on the physics of Heaven, how to move through it. Since it was written for humans it might give us a new perspective, tell us something Cas doesn't know. I'm guessing you've pretty much taken moving through Heaven for granted since forever."

Castiel's eyebrows are almost meeting in the middle.

"…I. I… Yes. I have. I believe we are playing a game but there do not seem to be rules and the phrases are foreign."

"A game called 'Western hegemony dominating the American and European perspective on literature'," Crowley explains, gentling his voice. Dean gets the usual kick of resentment that's started to crop up when Crowley's lovey-dovey on Cas. "You needn't pay it any mind. I'll set you up with some Caribbean, African and East Asian novelists which, I think, would count as a victory as our fellows try to follow along in confusion."

Castiel himself looks more confused than before.

"I don't understand you any better, Crowley."

Dean claps a hand on his back, gives him a smile, ignores what those big, curious eyes do when
they turn on him full of hope.

"It'll come, duckie," Crowley promises, smirking from across the table.

"So will the end of reality as we know it," Sam says. The mood drops like a rock. "I think we're done here?"

"Yeah. We're done here," Dean agrees, getting up, eyes still on the puzzled former angel. His smile has changed in tenor but he keeps it on for Castiel's sake. "Come on Cas. Let's get packing."

Cas nods obediently, rising to follow Dean toward the bunk rooms. Dean thinks this'll be good. Maybe Cas doesn't know what's in the books but his organizational skills are great. Get his mind off his tanked combat efficacy. He can alphabetize them or sort them by country of origin while Dean…catalogs. His totally not-favorite job. He can and he will because Sam has already done it here at the bunker. He’ll know what Ash needs. Not an option to send him out.

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Sam waits until Kevin has gone to his door-sign-hung "Schizophrenia Room" and he's asked Crowley to go down to the archives. Then it's just him and Charlie.

"Sam Winchester. That doesn't look like a business face. Don't puppy-eyes me," Charlie states; expression falls into a pout. "It's way too effective. You look like a sad-faced internet meme."

Sam huffs a laugh, mouth open. Embarrassment catches up to him. He has to fidget himself back to comfortable and on point. By now Charlie has a sweet but a little intense wide-eyed listening expression on.

Sam approaches this from as far away from the point as he can.

"You're a lesbian right Charlie? I mean, signed and sealed." He's been assuming Charlie's on the same wavelength he is, but he doesn't have the most social skills ever.


Wait.

"Uh..."

Charlie taps on her tablet, turning it around to show him a brightly colored cartoon character wearing nothing but a denim vest, her boots and her fur. Sam's mouth falls open a little as his eyebrows narrow. It seems kind of really indecent for a kid's cartoon. He thinks he remembers her. Sonic the Hedgehog. Not his show.

"Is that a fox?" he tries.

Charlie rolls her eyes, bringing the tablet back to her.

"She's a squirrel, Sam. Hello? Acorn?"

Sam stops and thinks about it a second.

"Right," he admits. Next question. "Do you ever crush on guys? Or maybe there's one guy..."

Charlie's grinning like a kid at a carnival.
"I thought I'd be having this talk with Dean."

Sam lets himself worry about something besides his non-sex life for a minute.

"Something's up with Dean, Charlie, I just haven't gotten to spend a lot of time with him."

Charlie registers that; files it. She sticks to the first topic, aloud.

"Sure sometimes I think a guy is gorgeous. Like Nathan Fillion is so fetch. —you're supposed to say stop trying to... No. It's too late. Fetch happened. Your turn. What male actor would you fall over yourself meeting and-or make out with on the couch drunk at a party?"

"I guess Jet Li?"

"Nice. Most guys your age go for Solid Snake but you don't know him yet. He's a video game hero. And if you poll a slightly older crowd, I think it's Sean Connery."

Sam's face communicates how little that means to him or helps. Charlie observes him a minute and then sets in.

"So they've done double blind studies with who you'd actually get it on with. Lesbians and straight guys give positives when they smell something a chick wore, right? And probably there's more to it than that but there's some kind of genetic or learned biological component," she says. Sam settles for an info dump. "But it's not totally impossible to go for somebody of the other — same — sex. I hear sometimes when people are deep in the LBGTQ culture they may get this 'Ugh, traitor' reaction, like social pressure, like when atheists come out at church." Charlie makes a face but lets it pass, smiling bright. "You and me are fancy free. If you've got it on for Crowley: Get it. This is a judgment free zone. I can give Dean 'The Talk.'" Her brow riddles up as she second-thinks it. "I'm not saying it'll be exactly like with a woman, beyond the obvious external differences, but we are not defined by our biology."

Sam stares at her, disbelieving.

"Thanks, Charlie. That went further than I wanted it to go."

She waves it away.

"Unless you met a gorgeous bartender, it's mathematical reduction. The only other probable crush is you've been harboring a thing for Dean."

"—Charlie."

Another pout.

"What? You two are extra codependent. Plus Edlund fans write so much porn. Confession: Maybe I glanced at one or two and they weren't as far out of Earth orbit as I thought they would be."

"Going."

In fact, Sam gets right on going. Not looking back, wondering about not only what to do with that information but also 'obvious'.

"You're welcome!" Charlie calls cheerily from behind him.
Dean and Cas are long gone. The rest of them have been at work for two days, but minds need breaks.

Sam requested an alchemy lesson. Sam is getting an alchemy lesson. He's even learning. Really. Crowley is not a patient teacher and Sam thinks he'd find some uses for his knives if he had to repeat a lesson. Sam would learn astronomical correspondences quicker if they spent a few weeks on his arm in scabs. That is not his ideal scenario.

Crowley noticed somewhere next to right away Sam didn't just want an alchemy lesson. He's tolerating the fact. Brief, pointed looks unrelated to the components on the table or the tomes of correspondences lying open have made clear he expects Sam to come clean.

Now that he's gotten his privacy with one ex-King of Hell, hell if Sam knows how to start a conversation. He starts plenty of conversations. With Dean. That abysmal success rate and the fact that this is the first time he's gotten to kind of check Crowley out and make sure he's all in on this are stalling him.

That's a lie. They're just excuses to stall.

"Hit your head, Big and Tall?" Crowley interjects while Sam is metering out components, provoking a ruinous slip up.

"Hunh?" Sam manages, made ineloquent by his relief nothing just exploded.

Crowley's now-toneless voice is high on the creep factor.

"You keep looking at me like I've got something on my everything."

Sam sets his implements down with due caution, glancing sidelong at Crowley. His teeth are clenched. He forces himself to relax.

"—I...appreciate the way you cut out broadcasting the attraction. For me," he says. He incrementally finds boldness. "I've been thinking I'm not that enthusiastic about you practicing cutting me out."

Sam asks himself why he comes onto people like a controlling, psycho stalker every single start. Not excepting Jess. Excepting Cara Roberts, but they'd both seen the same three hundred miles of bad road – no attachment. Guaranteed.

Crowley scoffs it off.

"Vanity thy name is Moose. Who said I didn't put it behind me?"

For a panicked second Sam remembers Crowley is old and demons are fickle, even if Crowley has cut down on the fickle. He reclaims what little composure he had. Now or never – or at least now or a long, even more awkward time in the future.

"Did you put it behind you?" he asks, letting insistence into his voice, knowing its dirty pool.

Crowley's voice drops deep, full throated. Agonized.

"I'm not positive we need to have this conversation."

Sam puts his hand on the worktable, turning to face Crowley. The pain written into his expression is unmistakeable, burning with self-loathing; calling Sam a traitor.
Sam only has one answer:

"I need to have this conversation."

Crowley switches on ignoring him.

"Lesson's over. Clean up," Crowley says, frowning at their work on the table, not at Sam, tension across his brow.

"Hey."

Crowley shoots Sam a betrayed glare.

"Whatever's got into your head, it's the wrong idea." His voice is rougher than before, raked over hot coals.

Sam grits his teeth. He swallows. He holds his anger back.

"You wouldn't know. You're Dean-class blowing me off."

"It's the wrong idea because of who I am, and who I've been, and who you are," Crowley snarls. He leaves with the slam of the door.

Sam gives the leg of the work table a solid kick, listens to the legs scraping on the concrete and the bowls and bottles rattling. Guys. He forgot stupid, ingrained emotionally stunted bullshit usually comes with that package.

----

Crowley doesn't go on strolls outside the bunker often. Paranoia, generally, even though he's by now obscured on every level a being can obscure itself. Hands stuck in his jacket pockets, he's headed nowhere. Dirt roads and county roads and crops rolling with the wind look the same to him no matter the direction.

Winchesters are bafflingly stupid. They're probably Mensa candidates. That begs and pleads the question how stunted they are in common sense.

With initiative to focus on it, Crowley's brain presents the fact that common sense would handily get them killed. Instinct, reflexes, gut feelings – whatever it ought to be called, they've sacrificed any habit for upfront critical thinking they might otherwise have cultivated to it.

That's no explanation for the mystery of Sam deciding he wants him. In bed. Or somewhere else – on the floor, for a fuck in the shooting range; once these things get going it's a toss-up.

Sam Winchester is a seriously damaged human being. Lonely. Difficult to believe one of them wouldn't end up taking advantage, even if Crowley can't say who. Sam isn't trying to take advantage of him. Not right now; yet. Sam wants him, which is...terrible. Crowley is a living tribute to how terrible Crowley getting what he wants can be.

The demon will eventually have to go back to the bunker. Not because he couldn't walk off, right now, and start a new life somewhere else. There's a lot of buggered things like loyalty tied up with it. And Sam. Sam, who he's already spent too much time with. Sam who's inviting him to imagine about going flesh to flesh with those slabs of muscle that shame Greek statues. Sam with boyish, soulful eyes and that feral edge that turns them weapons, sharp and intent. A boy every definition of better than him; a man who's determined to wreck him.
Crowley doesn't want to be out in the elements. Mostly wind, a little humidity, and the smell of dirt and grass, but still elements in the original, organic combinations of the big four. He'd rather be back in the bunker. At any given time he'd more likely than not rather be horizontal, but especially right now, the *Dear Sir* line of the invitation pulled out of the tight paper envelope.

He saw Sam's soul. Pure. Resplendent. Bright and hot as a newborn star. He doesn't even have one. The filthy rag Sam wrung out is still the same dirty red. Crowley can call up an encyclopedia of reasons he can never touch a human again at a thought.

Problem outstanding: If anyone knows what kind of insane bulldog Sam Winchester is, it's demonkind and Crowley in specific. And then there's name of self-preservation. This would be cruel. Too cruel. Too much not too soon but ever. To know he's wanted. To know he was allowed. To carry that and carry everything else.

If he goes back to the bunker, Sam will be waiting for him. The smart move, because if Crowley could have his way he'd never be around Sam with less than one other person again. Definitely would give him the dodge completely today.

He's going to go back to the bunker. Sam's just going to have to suffer until he musters up the balls to have that conversation.

Not because he wants Sam to suffer, but because he's a coward.

----

Sam has stopped checking the clock, sitting in the library staring at the open Word document on his laptop adding information in starts, a plate with the crumbs of a sandwich scattered on it left ignored on the table.

He jerks back when he hears the door open, just centimeters but more than he almost ever would. He's relieved, too, because Crowley wouldn't skip town. Not with everything that's on the line. But Abaddon would eat Crowley alive in the most literal sense of the phrase. There's no specific reason to worry about that except that Crowley's paranoia is contagious.

"Sam," Crowley says from the bottom of the stairs, a room away. It's a polite request not to do this. Guilt twinges in Sam but his mind is already made up.

"No. Come here," he says, shutting the laptop, pushing it and the plate out of the way, toward the center of the table. He gets up, pushing the chair in, too, putting his hands in his pockets and tilting his head so he's that much shorter – which isn't much, but it's the thought.

Crowley wears a resentful, bulldog look as he comes up the stairs and walks, defiant, into Sam's space, looking up at him like a man who isn't going to go a round but not because he doesn't want to.

"I don't deserve to touch you or anyone," he says. Card on the table. Opening gambit.

Suddenly it gets easier. Maybe not for Crowley, but for Sam. He straightens, confident, expression neutral, gaze close on Crowley's. He has it. He can use it. Soften his voice up; lay it out there, because he definitely feels it.

"I'm pretty hung up on the idea of touching you."

His breath catches the way Crowley's face changes. The shock, yeah, the wariness, too, and that vulnerability he didn't just see after seven shots of blood. What he saw on Crowley's face in
Bobby's junkyard: Defense disappearing.

Fury rips past it, contorts Crowley into the demon he is, brings the rage broiling up, turns up the volume.

"You can barely imagine what these hands have done without straining yourself to imagine every other vessel."

Sam's voice doesn't change. Crowley doesn't have the same husky attractiveness when his face turns red and he's an inch off actual violence. That's how Sam knows he's serious about this; he seriously doesn't care, just smiles a little.

"Whatta you want to do to, me, Crowley? Take my guts out with your hands?"

"Of course I don't—" Crowley snaps like Sam's an idiot. The scowling demon opens his mouth, takes a deep breath and calms down, looking resentful, a little scared, but not angry. "Don't. Don't wear me down."

"That's sort of my entire plan," Sam says; doesn't have the eyes on. He's not just standing here trying to get laid. He'd be doing that somewhere else with a somebody else. "Be honest with me?"

He's so getting laid.

First clue: Angry demon grabbing him by the shirt. Then he has Crowley's head in his hand, one hand hauling him up by the jacket. It's vicious until Crowley starts to lose the anger, less snapping teeth and bitten lips and more glide, more give and take.

Sam pushes him back, shoves the jacket off, thinks fast like he's in a fight, wheels Crowley around, slams him into the edge of the table. Steps up on him. Apologizes with his mouth without saying a thing.

Crowley's hands slide behind himself, giving him traction on the surface of the table. Small push and he's seated on the edge. Sam steps in another step after him, holding their bodies close, one splayed on his lower back, Crowley's beard pricking his skin. Zero problems with the equipment Crowley's got on him when Sam's actually pressing into the heat of his crotch. He lets his hips thrust into Crowley's spread legs. The friction between two zippered denim flies and two cocks, both getting thick, show every sign of staying a turn on.

"I want you," Sam says against the lips he's sucking, back biting. Not I want you, now; I want you, period. The way Crowley growls Sam says he grasped the point. He wants Crowley and Crowley alone. He wants him because he's Crowley. The aggressive, possessive side of him makes that synonymous with 'Property of Sam Winchester' just like that. His heart is flying, emotions racing through his veins, lightness and joy co-abiding with insistent, carnivorous sexual intent drive him toward that state where the body under him becomes his to exhaust.

Crowley matches him, ultimately the stronger. Sam's never been so free with his own strength. Crowley has a handful of Sam's hair and a hand on Sam's chest, fingers crooked, fingertips digging in, dragging down the fabric; a button pops loose. He knows more about kissing than anybody Sam's been with. Naturally. Obviously. It's in the rhythm of their pliant mouths, in the times Crowley's tongue strokes deep and firm and the times it flirts, persistent kissing that doesn't lead on to drool.

Sam doesn't care about the effects of his stubble or Crowley's beard. That's wrong. He cares. He likes scraping up that patch of hair under Crowley's pet lip with his lower teeth. He likes that
Crowley's mustache is wet with saliva. He likes stroking his thumb against where Crowley's beard comes down from Crowley's cheek. Devil or not, Crowley is in the details. Sam doesn't know how to love less than completely.

**Right there** is where it's so great sex doesn't involve a lot of conversation.

Right now is when Sam would start shoving Crowley's clothes off if they weren't in the library where anybody could walk in at any time. After the long soulless stint he's literally famous (in some cities) for a lot of things, but foreplay isn't one of them – a strategy him and his body agree on.

No part of him wants to stop. That's why Crowley's shirt is pushed up his back while Sam's open hand covers a lot of flesh in a patternless hunger for contact. That's why he's still thrusting, grinding his cock against Crowley's.

Next he realizes he's not going to stop.

Giving himself the liberty lets him push up further, angle his hips better. Crowley's hand has dropped from his chest, grasps his ass, fingertips digging into the edge of a denim pocket. He holds himself close on Sam so he doesn't slide back out of contact on the table. Even with pleasure rising wave after wave, Sam's mind latches on to small details: his hard, flexing muscles massaging Crowley's softer body; the smell coming off Crowley now that he's turned on, new but still Crowley, not completely unfamiliar; Charlie's right that it's different, but no way it's unliveable; the sound of the table scraping the stone; Crowley's and his own gasps for air while their mouths give no quarter.

Sam never thought he'd be riding a high like this coming in his jeans. He doesn't know if they got loud, just that they're thrusting at a slower, erratic pace and they both sound relieved if the small sounds that escape between them are enough to go by. When they leave off kissing Sam doesn't want to let the moment pass, closes his eyes and rests his forehead against Crowley's, nuzzling at him without speaking.

"All right, Moose?" Crowley says but the way he says it is a 'hello' like he's just met him. Sam laughs, kissing at Crowley's beard. This is a him Crowley hasn't known. The situation is unfairly weighted that way. There's no actual difference between when Crowley comes on genuinely and comes on to intimidate somebody. Sam has a good idea of what to expect from being sexual with Crowley. Meanwhile, it's the same Sam as the predator that comes out in a fight that steers Sam's sexual instincts.

Not that anybody has ever complained.

Crowley knows him, but not in context.

Dishes shatter. Not the sound of ceramics falling; the smash of objects thrown on the floor pulverized to fragments and dust.

Kevin.

Great. Kevin. Already gone, but there goes Kevin's night.

"Prophet of The Lord. Moment was probably pivotal," Crowley murmurs, looking in the same direction as Sam.

Pivotal how? Pivotal in what direction? Or is that superstitious and it was just bad timing?
"...I can't even start that conversation until tomorrow. Or next week," Sam says, still catching his breath.

For the wrong reasons, he wishes Kevin was a bad shot.

Sam turns back; kisses Crowley. He has sufficient fucks to give, just totally the wrong kind for that building situation.

Eventually his cum has cooled off. It soaked into his jeans and it's sort of unpleasant, now, but at least it's not on the furniture.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Crowley asks, serious when the question could be spoken so many other ways. Sam has been around the block a few hundred years, but suddenly he's looking into Crowley's eyes and Crowley looks old. A lot older than Sam's ever seen on anybody's face but an angel's. He wonders things for another time.

He feels really fucking good and he lets it out, grinning.

"If it's up to me you'd move into my room tonight and we'd buy a dog tomorrow."

Crowley's eyebrows shoot up and they're saying Seriously, Sam? Sam realizes he's not looking at the logistics of this situation.

"...you have no reason not to do that," he says apologetically so Crowley doesn't have to.

Crowley snorts.

"No. I haven't. Not to say it doesn't sound a bit fast. Do I want to be in your bed tonight? Yes. Very much, Moose."

Sam racks his brain. He both wants that and it decreases the chances of Kevin going Natural Born Killers.

"...I haven't even been carrying condoms. With the trials."

Crowley looks very, very unimpressed in a way that makes Sam blush up to his ears and down to his neck.

"You move like a hurricane, you. I can do plenty without penetration."

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Sam's cock passes slickly further and shallower in Crowley's mouth, tasting of skin and semen and sweetly of precum. He can't go down on it like he's putting on a show, not like that, not right now, one arm wrapped under Sam's buttocks, one crooked, upper arm resting over Sam's thigh, handcuffs an afterthought, both hands pressed to Sam's skin; to his sides, grasping him firm, easy because Sam's a piece of granite.

Never in all his years did he see himself hugging Sam Winchester's hips and waist, hanging down to suck his cock. He wants it to mean more than it can. Sam could be a Hindu murti whose body should be washed, anointed, worshipped – but not by a demon. Not by the filthy, bottom dwelling ambulatory dead.

"Wow," Sam says amid an exhalation. His hips thrust in Crowley's embrace. Crowley can say he's sucked a lot of cocks, the variety of reasons innumerable. Nothing like this. Not making love to a
body. Simple and elegant, this, whether nursing the shaft or licking him dutifully, nuzzling his balls, bringing them briefly but skillfully into his mouth, or taking the organ into the embrace of this throat, face close and everything reverent.

Sam never decided what to do with his hands, curling and uncurling them in the air when he occasionally reaches down toward Crowley's head. Right now he's stroking himself, his pectorals and abdomen. Crowley's aware of it but occupied. He doesn't need to see Sam's eyes, can hear his breath panting through an open mouth, already watched him come. It was gorgeous, but at this moment he chooses to remain undistracted, passion better spent on Sam's body than mooning.

Sam comes with Wow and Fuck and a beautifully groaned What the fuck, Crowley. Crowley opened his throat and sank down as Sam started coming, letting his swallowing throat coax eruption after spurt from Sam's balls down his gullet. Real motivation not to do any throwing up tonight, whatever thoughts find him later.

"Would you call that a blowjob or a fuck?" Crowley asks lazily, voice wet and raw, smile not self-pleased, could be mistaken for it. He's pleased with Sam, the dazed look on his face and the boy's hands at rest on his body as he catches his breath.

Sam's face tells him it doesn't matter, longing clear. Crowley slips out of the embrace he shared with Sam's lower body and pushes himself up the bed, dragging the covers with him. Sam's on him with apparently characteristic aggression, kissing him, yes, but groping hands laying claim to his body with a vigor Crowley didn't expect, Sam just post-coital, but one he gratefully submits to.

Not much of a talker, Sam. Not in sex, it seems – but who really needs a chat during sex unless you're going about something kinky?

A long time passes before Sam exhausts himself. Crowley is tired, while possessed of a little more and preternatural stamina.

"It's good," Sam mutters, to himself or to Crowley, gazing on Crowley with that distant, shagged out look.

That's a punch to the gut. Crowley wants to take it gracefully, but the emotion is too much so he stays silent, though his eyebrows draw together and, oh, he must look desperate and look lost. No helping that.

"It's good," Sam repeats, eyes clearing, face a mess of emotions but begging among them.

Crowley's being held by a much larger, young, human man whose word he would die at and it is good. That's not what Sam is saying. He's saying he doesn't care about a damn thing Crowley's ever done when it comes to the two of them and sex and the emotions bound up with it so tightly, tonight.

"Jolly good," Crowley says, breaking a smile, if only just.

"'Jolly good'. You people actually say that?" Sam says with the same tired smile.

"I really don't," Crowley admits with cheer, partially false because the guilt is eating at the edges of him like acid.

"Roll over. I wanna...you know. Without a giant wet spot in the middle of my bed.

Crowley's first instinct is to protest. Declaring himself underserving will not deter Sam, so he doesn't, sucking it up and rolling over, shifting a little closer to the edge of the bed. Sam tucks his
body behind him, muscle pressed everywhere their bodies touch. Crowley inhales deep. He can
taste Sam's cum with clarity with the air running over it. It's impossibly hot, and then in short order
Sam Winchester is giving him a reach around, hand tremendous. The boy kisses his hair, thinning
there or not, a particularly masculine feature. It doesn't take much, just Crowley shutting his eyes
and surrendering to reality.

The fitted sheet is quite a mess.

Using the restroom, brushing teeth, all terribly mundane. Terrible in the way Crowley has to
concede these are little mundane things Sam will do along with him and they just had sex. Sam
touches his back while he's lathering up the toothpaste. He doesn't break, but he could. He wants to
fire a quip off when he's spit and rinsed but nothing comes to mind.

They lose their sweats, Crowley's borrowed and much too big. They avoid the wet spot. Crowley
genuinely thinks he might make it to sleep until he's actually crying. He can't scream at Sam You
can't just a forgive me. I haven't done enough. Or anything! You stupid tit. It lodges itself in his
throat but doesn't make it out, even if fury is all over his face in the dark. Sam touches his face and
knows.

"My bedroom; my choice," Sam says like a right bastard, no room for booking argument with that
tone.

He doesn't hold Crowley. Knows by honed instincts that with another touch, even one to his
shoulder, that they really will have a row if he tries. So Sam lies there, turned in, facing Crowley in
the dark beneath the covers. Crowley cries; he wants to tear his face off with just his fingernails.
The reasons he can't have sex with anyone but most of all Sam rise easily to. His lips flinch, but he
doesn't, doesn't yell.

They must go to sleep that way – Crowley must have exhausted himself – because that's how they
wake up, Sam on his side and Crowley with his salt-stripped sore cheeks lying on his back. Sam no
doubt woke first, but dozed. No creepy Castiel staring that Crowley can tell.

Sam sees Crowley's burned it all out of him for at least the morning. Next the demon is being
kissed, Crowley turning his face; Sam's hand resting on his stomach. Emotionally empty, Crowley
can only live in the present and let himself enjoy it.

One fact lingers on Crowley's mind from all his suffering in the dark.

"You haven't asked me about Bobby. If I...maltreated Bobby."

Sam shrugs against his body.

"I saw Bobby. He looked...good? On a scale of Hell. We've all been there."

Spoken like a man who knows just what he's talking about.

"We've all— We've—" Crowley's laughter refreshes him, even considering the topic. "Sorry. I'm
sorry. We have haven't we? You, me, Dean, Cas, Bobby. Like somewhere people go on holiday."

"Anything I should know I don't?" Sam asks carefully.

"Suppose not. Dragging people to Hell doesn't make them like you, it just makes them damned." Now Sam's staring at him stupidly. "—oh, come on. Charlie'd be ashamed of you. YouTube." The
joke passes. Crowley sighs, forlorn. "Still true."
"You didn't fast track him," Sam states. "Psychological torture, trying to make him think we'd turned against him, isolating him so he'd be vulnerable to persuasion. He isn't. Now he's in Heaven, where we need him. I'm mad, but I'm mad at old you. So are you."

Nothing Crowley can argue about that. He lets them have their way with each other. No sex, but a comfortable make-out to work up to breakfast.
Chapter 13

"Kevin says you're sleeping with Crowley."

Somehow Sam totally expected that when he picked up his cell. He grimaces, preparing for a rough conversation, evading with:

"This is news about Metatron how?"

It's less about getting Dean off topic and more about finding out how worked up Dean really is.

"How long have you been sleeping with Crowley, man?"

At that volume? Pretty worked up.

"If I don't answer that stopwatch literally and hang up? Not forty-eight hours and so not important or any of your business, Dean."

Sam keeps his mouth shut on I didn't know I was cockblocking you; breathes heavily through his nose and lets that one go – only because Dean got weird about Cas.

"He's not just a demon, he's a witch, Sam. Can we focus on how much you like pussy and why I might be kind of concerned you're having ass sex with freaking Crowley?"

"You are so lucky you're not— He can't plot against us, Dean. It's actually impossible."

Sam isn't even going to bother correcting the part about ass sex because, honestly, he's probably going to be so there's no point in getting even more pedantic. Dean couldn't use other terms. He's Dean. Which doesn't mean Sam doesn't want to punch his brother.

"So what? He can still plot for Crowley. He didn't get a do or die guarantee of protection out of that contract," Dean goes on. "Maybe we didn't close a loophole. Kevin calls me and says you and Crowley are banging and I think 'insurance'. Tell me that's too paranoid."

The tumblers fall into place and Dean makes sense. Now Sam just needs to cool down, more of a process than realizing he doesn't need to be angry.

"That's not too paranoid," he says reluctantly. "It's wrong, but it's not too paranoid. He… I'll tell you what I'm not head over heels about. Listing you a guy's weaknesses when you're in search and destroy mode. He tried to do everything but have sex with me." Al…right. Sam doesn't like how that came out. Sam really doesn't like how that came out. "He seriously couldn't. Freak out all you want, but not about that part. When you're not on the porch with a shotgun, we'll talk about it."

Dean's quiet on the other end of the line while Sam digests his own lingering unease.

"Okay. I'm gonna trust you. So let's talk about the other part of this: Kevin says you're sleeping with Crowley."

"Way to be homophobic, dude."

"He's like short. And kinda bald. And kind of tubby. And stuck up. And, oh yeah, one ninth demon. And comes off like a used car salesman. I mean, Sam. Dude. What are you even thinking?"
Sam sits open mouthed beside the phone, pulls it away to glare at it. If looks could kill across a cellular network he'd get somewhere. Now it's his voice that's up.

"I'm thinking about putting you into a choke hold until you pass out. And then leaving you in a cornfield somewhere in a twelve mile radius of this bunker. And when you wake up there some time in the next three months, I want you to remember this phone call."

Dean fails to realize how serious Sam is.

"He's like... old."

"Uh. Like at least four hundred years old? And then time passes way different in Hell. Are you high? Because you're on a reservation and for all I know it's one where pot is legal. Now I'm fantasizing about coldclocking you," Sam snaps. "Back off it. Say something so I'm not hanging up this angry, jerk."

There's a long silence on the line. Dean hates apologies. He's cooled down, and he sounds awkward as hell.

"...sorry. I'm sorry. I'm freaked out over here," he says, voice catching on forcing the words out. "He's... got that voice thing. Happy?"

"Not really 'happy'."

"Jowly is hot, especially now that he's doing the beard. —I am uncomfortable now. I'm gonna stop."

Sam rolls his eyes but sticks to steaming silently.

"Fine. Have you found anything out yet?"

"That Marv's buddy skipped town," Dean says, tone business. "Otherwise, honestly? We're in the middle of it. Full report later."

"Great. Keep on it. Keep completely out of my personal life."

Another lull. Sam's not sure what Dean's going to say next, or if he'll like it.

"Dude, you still gotta... With Kevin, you know?"

Right. That one. Dean has him there.

"I know. That may be respecting him never talking to me again outside of business. I'd never speak to me again."

"Okay. Just. Please don't let this get serious Sam," Dean says in that disappointed voice he uses for demon blood binges and forgetting pie.

"Talk to you when we've got news," Sam says, hanging up.

He stares at the phone a minute before pocketing it. Dean knows him better than what just came out of his mouth. Kevin is so far from talking to him he called Colorado. Crowley...has a hot, rugged thing going on that's still sexy even when he's not playing king of the mountain.

Apparently Crowley is a twelve pack of consent issues. Besides kicking himself inside his head, Sam doesn't know how to start on that.
It's on his mind the next time he sees Crowley, but Sam isn't the guy who has sex one time and then freaks out. He can't risk coming across as that guy. No way Crowley could handle that with what's already on his plate.

No need to hide or fake something. Sam goes all new relationship on sight, attraction amped up. Oxytocin. He doesn't even remember what he was making for dinner on the counter behind him. There's heavy kissing and Crowley's fingers are hooked in his belt loops; they're stomach to stomach. Sam likes Crowley's pudge – not totally gone, they never let him get emaciated. It's not three hundred sixty degrees. It's the way guys carry weight up front when they're older.

Sam's having a lot of thoughts about his teeth and Crowley's stomach all of a sudden, stealing his breath beyond just their kisses. Joy swells up with them. His thoughts aren't dodging the masculine, something like twenty years older parts of Crowley's familiar vessel – critical to 'more than a crush'.

When the sandwich burning in the toaster is actually on fire Sam has to deal with it, even though he breaks away grinning.

"Mmmn," Crowley hums contemplatively. "Fucking 'saving Creation'. Again. Can't we delegate some of it? Temp agencies, Sam. Other hunters. Me 'n your bed and a black bottle of ID BackSlide."

Sam doesn't know what's going through Crowley's head, but Crowley's moving forward with this. Being some kind of couple. Hearing it hits him with another rush. He's a little preoccupied to enjoy this one, beyond breathing in through it.

Sam gives up on blowing out the sandwich, pulls the toaster rack out and drops it all in the sink for a dousing. Crowley walks over and blows out the burning patch of cheese left at the bottom. Sam is trying to come up with ways to ignore the erection he's sporting that aren't getting the job done.

"Saving Creation. At the bare minimum a fifteen hours a day job. There's no condoms, and I'm not sacking Dean's room, no...'backslide'," he says. "Plus the nearest sex shop is like an hour away, because I googled, and the fact that you can list off brands proves my guess that you're too spoiled for the gas station."

"We're going to a sex shop?" Crowley asks with a sudden grin, for a minute the Crowley Sam saw on the road together.

Sam makes a face. He knew that one would perk Crowley right up.

"Not for...weird stuff. Just...not this trip, okay?"

Crowley's eyes drop to Sam's crotch, lit with interest. The way he's appraising the bulge in Sam's jeans leaves Sam light headed.

"Come on," the demon says with a directional nod of his head. "Polish your knob in the utility closet, that place is usually Kevin free. Then we can go back to saving Creation."

Sam considers arguing the disparity in giving oral sex, on principle, until he realizes, bewildered by his foresight, that when that disparity is being corrected Crowley is going to guide him through it. Maybe he just wants Crowley to talk him through it. Maybe he's just glad Lucifer never made him suck dick and he gets to have the one thing only with Crowley.

He wants this to go further. A whole lot further. He took advantage of Crowley, definitely. He's also a great boyfriend, so he's been told – rushing into relationships like a freight train or not.
He wishes he was a freight train, gauges all over the dash and warning lights flashing in emergencies. He's not exactly Stockholming Crowley. He's not exactly not.

Next Sam's jeans and boxers are puddled over his shoes, Crowley is on his knees and Sam is burning inside standing in a room of spare bulbs, coils of wire, an extra radio handset, and old boxes, one with pipes running up the walls, like he's Dean in high school. This time he has a hand on Crowley's head, fingers petting gratitude and encouragements. This time it's a blowjob, not a fuck, and Crowley is pulling tricks out like...a fucking centuries old demon. If warning lights are flashing they're lost in the fireworks show going off when he closes his eyes.

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Kevin joins Sam and Crowley for dinner.

Kevin can tell from Crowley's shock, unease and concern the demon didn't expect him to tonight, or ever. Sam is less surprised, but worried.

"This is the worst life of my life," Kevin says, taking a sip of his pop before he starts eating.

The hatred has evened into a steady burn. He wants to kill Crowley, but he's not going to. He wants to scream at Sam, but he's not going to. He wants to get trashed and forget all of it, but he's not going to. Yet. Because he's doing his fucking job and not fucking around with—

Check that. Reverse it. Eggs.

Charlie is in the 'coffee zone' with her computer and seventy-two hours without sleep. Apparently that's normal for hackers. If she eats she'll pass out, she's said. The delirium gets her neurons firing in unexpected patterns.

Kevin doesn't know whether he believes that'll really help their cause, but he's no computer hacker. Delirium and caffeine can admittedly be pretty useful for sticking to a single task more single-mindedly than when he's sober.

"I'm sorry you had to call Dean. That you can't trust me anymore," Sam says. "Kevin, that was the first time. Really. Honestly."

It's hard to know whether to take Sam at face value or not, either. The Winchesters have been faithful up to a point. Then suddenly Kevin is supposed to be free and clear, except Castiel is up in his face laying down non-negotiable terms. Next not only is Crowley hauled back to the bunker along with a half-drowned, strange angel but Sam is non-stop schoolgirling over Crowley a long time after Hadariel was handed off.

Kevin knows what he saw. He saw Crowley's legs hooked around Sam's thighs, Crowley's bare back with the red trails Sam's nails raked down it; Sam shoved up against Crowley kissing him like the demon held his last breath of air.

Like Kevin didn't get a whiff that the room stank like sex, too fresh for the air recycling to suck it away.

Crowley sits tense next to Sam, alternately looking at the prophet and averting his eyes toward his food, not shame-faced but uncertain.

Kevin has worked out when to call and when to fold. He can't go on like this. Not when he spends his time plastering walls with papers connected by tacks and threads, revelations seizing him at unexpected intervals, even leaving him on the floor. He works by the light of a single lamp, tablets
on his desk, angel tablet centered. Hours in there really will drive him crazy. Again. He can't spend the breaks he gets nervous and terrified.

"He doesn't need to wear the handcuffs. He has a contract. It's fine, Sam," he says.

Crowley is genuinely yoked. He's officially pathetic. Kevin believes what he's seen.

Crowley startles. Kevin has never seen his face like this: slack except for his worried, searching eyes. Kevin remembers Crowley pompous, greedy and condescending.

"Kev… in," Crowley says. The slip of his name couldn't have been intentional. Crowley looks desperate. "I don't even notice them anymore. Really."

Kevin doesn't appreciate the good will. He remembers his mother. Determined the two of them would survive, holding him while he slept as they moved from bolt hole to bolt hole, something he hadn't allowed since he was eleven. Tortured and murdered because she'd slighted Crowley too many times. He remembers Channing, head twisting, body collapsing.

"Seriously, Sam. Take the handcuffs off him," he says.

Sam complies, digging the small, elaborate demon-proofed key from his back pocket and turning the locks over. He removes them from Crowley's wrists and sets them on the table between their plates, looking tentatively at Kevin.

"I'm pretty sick of being kidnapped by demons," Kevin says while eating. "I wanna know somebody can hold the teke off so I can get a shot in."

"Sorry, teke?" Crowley ventures very carefully. Kevin holds off on
Obviously I don't mean the wood.

He smiles, even if it's only smug.

"Telekinesis. TK. PK. Psychokinesis."

"Right," Crowley says, still with that face.

Kevin's own expression tightens. The anger gets hotter, just for a moment.

"I'm tired of avoiding each other. I can't kill you. I'm always going to hate you," he says. Sighs. Makes it clear: "Quit with the kicked dog looks. Never call me Kev."

Crowley tightens his brow and hardens his eyes. He looks down at his plate, resolved, and returns to his food. That's an actual relief. Kevin didn't know how totally sick he was of Crowley pressuring him to let him do penance, the attention a heavy weight wearing him down since the angels fell.

"How's it going in there?" Sam asks with his own worried face. It doesn't look anything like Crowley's, face all drawn together where Crowley's falls open, empty.

"I'm making progress," he says. He's a perfectionist; he's not a recluse. It's good to talk. Even in front of Crowley. "Charlie and Castiel are a little past AP calculus and by 'a little' I mean Michio Kaku couldn't follow Cas off the bat. It's all partial differential equations. Theoretical physics. I mean there was already all this stuff about oscillations but most of that meant jack to me." Kevin wishes he could drag Sam away from here and have a conversation not about business, but he'll take anything. "Charlie bought Castiel a tablet – computer – and I'm feeding them the translations.
Or...Charlie is giving Cas the translation and what she's hearing from it and he's feeding it back to her from his point of view. Right now I hope we're not missing something staring us right in the face in all this."

"Hasn't discovered FarmVille yet has he? Never be useful again," Crowley says. Totally neutral. It's not a joke.

"Bejeweled three," Kevin says, grimacing. "It's pretty bad."

Crowley cracks a smile, not at Kevin but over Castiel. Kevin doesn't smile with him.

Reality sinks in with a serrated edge. Crowley pretty much loves Cas, how he thinks and most of the things he does, or at least how he does them. They may have their friction, but it runs both ways. Cas has been doing a lot of bonding suddenly-human to suddenly-human. It's different knowing it for a fact and grasping the emotional depth. Score another for Crowley.

Castiel feels almost nothing for Kevin, himself, outside of his view of him as a Prophet. They barely interact. Kevin is still harboring a lot of resentment for being bullied, but he's harboring a lot of resentment period.

Kevin doesn't know how long Charlie will stay. Dean is the only person who specifically prefers him to Crowley. Hell, even before Crowley Sam ditched him for six months doing he-doesn't-know-what.

He feels nothing but vindication hoping Crowley having sex with Sam will turn Dean off him completely. That wasn't Kevin Tran two years ago. It's where he is now.

Rationally, he gets it. The demon is tortured pretty much constantly; so is he. Empathy is easy, sympathy out of the question.

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Dean thinks he's gonna come out of this with asthma.

Some of these books haven't been touched in decades, and the Two Rivers Hotel and Casino hasn't exactly kept the sealing tight on the windows to keep the dust out. No environmentally conscious double paned glass around here.

He and Cas have reversed the original system. Dean is sorting books, looking for anything from Morse code forward. Spy thrillers. Corporate espionage. Romance novels starring hackers, which is apparently an occasional 'urban fantasy' thing. Fucking cyberpunk novelists handing it out like they're candy-covered strippers bursting out of birthday cakes. "Hard" sci-fi. "Soft" sci-fi. Dean is ready to Jay and Silent Bob these guys with door to door face punching. It's unfair, sure, but this is war.

Metatron went scattershot across the ages. There's biographies in here, too, and non-fiction books from physics to fly fishing. Luckily Metatron reviewing humans' understanding of physics isn't a threat.

Cas reads like a machine. Cas learns. Cas easily figures out what an angel could get out of this stuff.

Dean never appreciated Castiel's IQ is off the charts. Angels are going to re-vamp the whole concept of genius. He probably should have told Cas to shut up less, but the guy's brain wasn't useful before; sad but true.
It hurts to see how content Cas is now that he's in his element. Dean knew how much Cas loved TV. He should have bought the guy some books. Instead he let depressed, hopeless suicidal guy go on with no real outlet for way too long. One copy of *Snow Crash*. Dean just didn't piece it together.

Now they've got Charlie tablet to tablet.

"Good news is Metatron doesn't have 'Linux for Dummies' or anything else 'for Dummies' in here. The real A-bombs are the sci-fi novels," Dean says.

Castiel pushes a hand through his rumpled hair. After Metatron's literal BFF split town the water and electricity has been turned off in this place. They both look rough.

"I believe that the most prudent course of action would be to hide a message in a tremendous amount of useless data. If your friend knows what to look for, we can direct him to a secondary communication channel across which we transfer the dossier. Optimistically if Metatron does decipher the first message it will be too late to intercept the second."

"Right. I can probably get the information to him in raw code for MATLAB. Then Metatron wouldn't only have to figure out the programming language, first he'd have to figure out what program the data is a chunk of," Charlie says, as in her element as Cas, rattling away. "Ash would know right away, he could rebuild MATLAB around it. Mix that in with a thousand dead ends...I mean, I can put a whole movie like *Plan Nine From Outer Space* written as loaded into Virtual Dub. Chunks of *Baldur's Gate*. Half of Ubuntu. Making a lot of noise should be easy."

Dean hopes he's making a meaningful contribution, venturing:

"I'm taking a guess we can't trust the line is secure if Ash contacts us back. It'll have to be code words like 'Elvis green monkey shoes'."

"I have now read several novels where spies employ meaningful phrases and Dean has explained to me his and Sam's own codes. I don't believe there would be any way for Metatron to translate such a phrase except through telepathic contact with Ash," Castiel agrees.

Dean doesn't like the last part. He's not a huge fan of Castiel in his head and he *knows* Cas. It's a serious threat. If Ash – if they actually pull this off – or anybody he recruits to secure Heaven gets caught before they can form some kind of Rebel Alliance, the gig's done.

"The guy's wily. He's already underground, he can only go deeper," Dean tells Cas and Charlie and tells himself.

"I'm drawing up specs for the transmitter we have to build," Charlie says, smile the same forced optimism. "You'll probably have to figure out the most realistic way to build it."

Dean complies with a nod.

"My area. Plus me and Cas can crime spree our way back to Kansas to round up the junk."

"I'll do my best to be of assistance," Cas says, eyes narrowing as he tries to work out how much good he'll be.

"Later, bitches," Charlie says chunking the deuce, screen going black.

Dean looks at Cas. Castiel looks totally wiped.

"You need a break? Or should I bring the food to you?" he asks, knowing the answer.
"I'm becoming fatigued. A break would restore me to top efficiency," Castiel says after a moment of thought.

"Come on. We can hit the diner, grab four hours and hit the books again."

Dean's glad the Two Rivers tribe is being understanding and not kicking them off their land, even if there's suspicion on both sides. Charlie gave him a sweeper to check for bugs before he left. He's pretty sure there's no James Bond level tech that would slip past it around here.

"I'd like to purchase a newspaper from the gas station," Cas says. Dean knows what's up. Castiel's fallen brethren are never far from his mind.

"Sure thing. Let's go by there first. You can read it at dinner," he says. Musters a smile. "Hey, I'm sure everybody's doing fine."

"I wish I could go to them, Dean. I've been human before. I'm certain I could ease their transition," Castiel says, at least the fiftieth iteration.

Dean only has the one recycled answer:

"We do what we can," he says, clapping him on the shoulder.

Cas already had plenty to answer for before Metatron made him the keystone in a multidimensional catastrophe. If angels were demons they'd tear him apart and feast on his guts. Dean isn't sure they're not game for that. Demons came out of a pissed off angel.

That means keeping Cas from his family. The rest of his family. Dean's one more brother in a cast of thousands. He's exceptional because he taught Cas to act, talk and feel like a human. He and Sam used to be Castiel's only family that understood the ways he'd changed. They've lost that edge.

Dean fights the urge to yank the newspaper away from the guy when they're sitting at the table, Castiel riveted to a few short articles, reading them more than twice each. He can't escape the fear he's losing Cas. Not that any one thing has changed. Cas has only been totally cut off from Heaven a few times before; a lot of the time his head's been with the other angels. Literally. Now he's stuck on new 'My family needs me' ideas in a long series of total failures.

Dean just can't work up to pointing that out to him. Cas already knows. Putting it out in the open would be the same as saying he doesn't believe Cas can do anything right; not true or not. Cas used to think that about him. Dean doesn't want to owe him the same apology in this area.

He just wants the guy to focus and see his family needs him right here. His best chance at doing some good for once is right here. Dean has watched Cas disappear too many times to believe that if for a minute that if Cas thought that best chance was somewhere else Cas wouldn't be gone.

He could dig his fingernails into him now if Cas tried. Tell him he's not going anywhere. Tell him to bring him on for the ride. He would. He will. The idea of losing part of Sam to Crowley is freaking him out. Castiel ditching him is out of the question. If that's needy, or stalkerish, or admittedly kind of insane, Dean is out of fucks to give.

It's level headed, damn it. Cas crawls home dragging colossal, world-shaking problems behind him. Literally crawls. Now Cas is pretty destructible. Dean doesn't see the idiot making it home at all.

As long as he stays bitchy and stalkerish he won't have to look at any more serious issues.
He doesn't know how to.

After twenty-two hours of work and three hours of sleep, Sam is ready for a couple hours in the car. Crowley has noticed how road noise soothes Sam, the way he keeps his eyes set on the horizon when there's only the engine and tarmac and music on.

Which is why it's all too obvious Sam is getting more and more nervous as they put more miles on the new used car. Crowley tries to look out the window, or tune into the music, but he's failing and working himself into a state.

"Getting cold feet before the wedding?" he finally asks glibly, with more concern in his eyes than in his tone, insecurities rampant. Dragging him down toward despairing.

Sam looks surprised. Cringes.

"Not that part," he says, hurries to explain: "Except for on like two cases I've never been in a sex shop."

Crowley's eyebrows go up, his mouth forming an O.

Now he's purposed differently. Ramping down Sam's anxiety instead of building up his own.

"And you've only just realized what we look like standing side by side, am I right?" The bob of Sam's Adam's apple as the boy swallows confirms that's at least part of it. Crowley relaxes, grinning, supposing aloud: "I could be your 'daddy'; people wondering who's on top; people not wrong about bondage and my very nice collar."

Sam screws his face up, obviously unsure if he should be insulted or mad or violated, if any.

"At first that first sentence made me uncomfortable," he says, expression seguing to tired annoyance. "Then I realized you couldn't be my dad. You talk to me like I'm a human being."

"A whole field of possibilities just appeared, ripe as amber waves of grain."

Amber waves of grain are all around, bending with the wind. Crowley suspects Sam is much more pliant than he thinks he is, raised up with Dean who couldn't be more repressed about any aspect of his character.

"Dude. I'm not calling you 'daddy' for at least... Not ever," Sam says, gaping.

"You are. Wait for it," Crowley flirts harmlessly, smile tilting sidewards. It's pleasant to think about Sam stuck thinking about that. He's played that game for mutual pleasure and for the worst ills, but right now the idea of it is just about as much kink as Sam can take. He gives Sam an out before Sam's jitters become real twitching. He knows when to show his hand. "Want I should go in by myself? Quick, friendly transaction. No judgment, no surprises. Keep it all perfectly vanilla."

Now that's a sound of relief if Crowley's ever heard one. He hopes Sam doesn't collapse so far down in the seat he runs the car off the road.

"Yeah, actually," Sam admits. "I'm not ready to walk into a shop full of sex equipment and realize you know how to use it all. On me. In ways I couldn't come out with an A on in a multiple choice quiz."
The Winchester has that perplexed look on that he and Dean share when they're out of their element – basically any time they're not working at killing or fucking something.

"I won't be using anything on you until you get past the idea the idea is silly, or unmanly, or too urban for your...lifestyle. Long time off, darling. But you should have seen the things I owned."

Crowley realizes too late he's implied a vast deal more than Sam has explicitly offered. He suspects he knows where it came from, rubbing his temples, elbow on the windowsill as he admonishes himself. *Greedy, greedy bastard.*

Sam takes a short breath and lapses into silence. Crowley genuinely can't tell if the boy has a new case of nerves or is still working off the previous one.
Chapter 14

No matter what Crowley wants, what he thinks of it, or what he thinks of himself, Sam Winchester's want of him hasn't panned out into the crushing but only sensible scenario to hope for: Realizing he'd been thrill seeking and leaving off the whole thing.

Not even after Crowley let him stew in the car longer than necessary, reasonably hoping Sam would decide, after the distinct lack of conversation that filled their drive, he was letting the wrong one in.

Instead Sam's earlier nerves blew over when Crowley got back in the bucket seat and the threat of awkward social and financial transactions had passed.

A helplessness encroaches on Crowley when he faces the knowledge Sam means what he's about. Crowley desires him more dearly than he has the internal fortitude to turn him away.

He wants to be looked at the way Sam looks at him, like he's worth a damn. The fact that he isn't is irrelevant to that. Getting angry over the choices Sam is making – that he is making – has no effect on the physical reality beyond the moral complications.

They each fancy a fuck with the other.

What he's supposed to do when thirty year old body and gorgeous gets turned on except to indulge him lies beyond the demon, no matter that what Sam deserves and what he deserves aren't remotely comparable.

When they return to the bunker, after picking up paper towels and dish soap, Charlie is at the table, asks Sam to feed and water her if he's taking his bag to the kitchen because she's 'in the zone'. Sam looks query at Crowley, and Crowley nods, knowing they may end up embroiled in work again, but Sam wets his lips and says Go put that in my room before he peels off. Crowley lets his gaze linger, watching him go.

"Special shopping trip? What'd you get?" Charlie asks with an impish smile.

She's tolerable. Only-just, but entirely. He wouldn't have appreciated all her genuine good will months back

He remembers the first thing he got out of Sam.

"How do you pay sixty dollars for lube and condoms?" Crowley says, smirking back.

"How do you?" Charlie asks, assuming an all too innocent schoolgirl face.

Crowley considers the bag for a moment.

"Thin condoms, thick lube. The values scale independently."

"I know," Charlie says, fluttering her eyes. "—you want to keep the dildos clean but you don't want them to be all...condomy." She tilts her head to the side, scrunching her face. "And then it depends on the where." Ends with a grin.

Crowley reconsiders her with fresh interest.

"My god, you're hard to suss." He sighs, begging the sympathy of an understanding mate. "Dildos
are beyond the horizon line. If he doesn't come to his senses and stop all this, mind. Then it's going to be 'How did that cost two hundred dollars?' Well, it's hand blown glass, Sam."

All else, he's delighted to quip on the particular subject. Have an outlet. To have someone who probably doesn't quite share all his preferences but knows what he's talking about. Is sexually cultured.

"I'm not in the scene but I bought a dildo from Zetapawz and I do not regret it." The girl stops, corrects herself, straightening proudly: "Okay. I bought three. I'm not sorry. They're funky shaped."

"...excuse?"

"Ooooh, that is a conversation for later. You should go put all that in Sam's room, am I right?"

There's something Crowley's missing in the way she pronounces 'am I right'. He decides to retreat. Irrelevant that he could surely also make her retreat. There's more than one something about Charlie he's positive he's not ready to know yet. She's from America, yet another culture – a decidedly fresh generation.

Alone in Sam's room with the overhead light on, not one lamp, Crowley gets to look around without a human boy distractingly ready to go. Big leather armchair. Standing lamp beside it. Desk. Bookshelf. All in all more casual reading than Crowley expected. Escapism thy name is Sam. He actually is a Charles Dickens loving slut. That has to be all of them. There's the Harry Potter, The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo, Dune. The Bible. Collection of recent National Geographics. Two pieces of bright abstract art on the wall, one dominating the space above the bed. Bedside table with electric clock and another lamp and now the bag of lube and condoms. A fake plant, a tree, but a very nice one. Goes with the piece of nature photography on the adjacent walls, stele-like mountains covered with tenaciously clinging pines. China. Wulingyuan, if he's not mistaken.

Standing there, staring at it, Crowley is at liberty for his heart to break for the boy. Sam is trapped in America, the Abrahamic bastion of power when it came to and comes to belief in an oncoming Apocalypse. Another field of final battle lies between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but Muslim fervor wasn't up to the same fever pitch. The Hour came, the Hour passed. Iblis had his day. Was Sam the dajjal? Dean the Mahdi? Is Samuel's name, 'His name is God', at all equivalent to Safi, the imposter: 'Righteous', 'pious'? The Abrahamic faithful have never gotten over debating Free Will. The angels are of zero help in that respect. Crowley really doesn't intend to wade into it, but he doesn't think Kevin Tran is the same breed of prophet as Muhammad, Abraham, or Moses, peace be upon them and everything. He withholds opining on Jesus at all. Prophet? God in miniature? For various reasons, nothing to do with him.

Now there's Kevin. What kind of Prophet isn't handed down the Word but left to muddle through it on his own? As for peace, Kevin shan't ever have it.

What's for certain is Samuel Winchester may never have the chance to see China. India. The sun rise over the great savanna homeland of humankind. The Siberian tundra. The Amazon winding its long course through the jungles. Pink dolphins.

Except in pictures.

How in the world is Sam supposed to create a new world if he hasn't properly seen this one? The recipe for a tragedy. One Crowley can see, now, from only cursory appraisal, has to be amended –
if they can stabilize the afterlife and Abaddon doesn't have ambitions about the Cage. If they aren't all killed over it. If.

He wants to be the one to amend it. He wants to be able to give Sam something back on that scale, because no matter what Sam thinks he, on his own, simply isn't enough.

He leaves just the bedside lamp on when he goes.

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Charlie spurs a cosmos-related thought in Sam and Sam ends up spending two hours entering data into his compilation on three hours of sleep, after a few hours out. His breathing remains excited, pulse elevated, hormones in gear.

He hopes Crowley hasn't passed out on the couch in the rec room.

Then, waking him up doesn't sound so bad.

Crowley is awake, but deep into a documentary. Sam alerts him with with a murmured *Hey* and digs his hands into his shoulders from behind the couch.

"Nnn," Crowley groans, relaxing under it. "Moose. That...is a good start. The way between my thighs definitely includes my shoulders."

Sam lets that spin his head a minute and spends that same minute digging further into Crowley's formidable muscles. Crowley doesn't need pull ups or mile runs. He runs at high voltage he generates like he's his own nuclear reactor. Funny souls are spoken of that way, but so few humans are psychic.

Sam didn't know if Crowley would claim seniority. Or dominance. Or extent of practice. He let Sam pour out his passions on him in the library, but that's not the same as submission. Lying sweating in his bed with Crowley embracing him is a hard read.

*Wait,* Sam thinks while Crowley makes a second contented noise under his hands,

Sam needs to stop thinking in terms of dominance or submission. Now.

He never weighed them with the women he loved. That wasn't a consideration. Lead and follow are shifting dynamics based on who's having a bright idea at the moment, if they're not having it together at once, not who holds the reins.


Crowley is, in so many ways, *not* Lucifer. Even before Sam reversed Azazel's tactic and stabbed Crowley with dose after dose of his blood, although they shared an overbearing sense of entitlement.

"Bedroom, Sam?" Crowley says as Sam kneads his muscles, voice as low and smoky as it comes.

Here would be fine.


Sam takes his hands off Crowley. Crowley switches off the television.

Sam experiences a moment's dissociation walking with Crowley through the concrete and black
Who's driving? Him? His body? Is that really a question and if it's a question is it really a problem? He wants somebody like Crowley. Somebody who is Crowley. Crowley. His body wants sex. Also nonstop violence and maybe demon blood, but, today, and yesterday, and the day before, and a few days before that, sex.

Luck has it the answer is on hand. So they're slightly different people with a period of different experiences. For the body called Sam – composed, unlike Crowley's native form, from the four alchemical elements in harmony, for all purposes a golem – it was over a year, for the persistent Sam a lot longer. They both want Crowley. No conflicts, no problems.

Not tonight.

"Strip you naked and have passionate sex with you for your thoughts," Crowley says as glibly as if he'd said 'penny', side-eying him.

Sam smiles awkwardly.

"Vessel-resident debate. Which you would…actually totally understand. Took a vote. No issues."

Crowley looks at him with wonder. He's known Sam, and he's known the golem named Sam, but his eyes say he never realized it's not quite as simple as soul over matter. Sam remembers what Kevin said. That humans are purified into aether through a lifetime in their vessel…but maybe not every time. Thoughts about ectoplasm pass his mind: *Phlegm and melancholy?*

**Sex,** his body says, not in words but in a terrific hormone dump. Sam breaks into laughter, pulling Crowley in by the back of his head and kissing him. No more problems getting to his room. Door shut. Door locked. Lights already down. Crowley shoved up against the door. Hungry kisses. Sam can get anybody's clothes off without losing track of mouths on mouths: effortlessly strips his own shirt off over his head, unbuttons Crowley's while Crowley's hands pull his head down and Sam tilts it for free, comfortable access.

Sam yanks his own brown leather belt through the loops while Crowley shrugs his shirt off his shoulders.

Undershirt. Naturally. Wisps of chest hair just rising from the collar. Sam unbuttons Crowley's fly, pulls it down with the quick, metal sound of a zipper, while Crowley rolls the undershirt off over his head. They're both breathing hard, scant space between them. Sam reaches up, lays his fingertips on Crowley's lower lip with spellbound fascination. That mouth not even days ago gave succor to his cock, but there's a man here. Demon. One with arresting eyes and thick brows who parts his lips and sucks Sam's index finger in, gaze knowing and promising, tongue toying with his finger, wet smacks when the suction breaks.

Sam can't take it, pops his finger free with a kissing sound. Spins Crowley around and walks the grinning demon toward the bed, hands on his body, nipping at his lower lip, Crowley with that mischievous smile showing just his upper teeth.

"Covers," Sam says with authority. Mostly he wants his own pants off somewhere in the vicinity of 'now'. He watches Crowley turn the covers back, which basically means he watches Crowley's ass. No lie. There's a lot of skin above that, Crowley's shoulders wide. The demon turns around, duty performed, amusement on his face. Sam, lost his shoes, his pants, his socks...everything but his boxers. Those aren't making a serious effort at hiding he's turned on. The lack of constraint on his dick was a primary goal.
He watches the demon. Watches him pull off his shoes, his socks. Watches him push his black denim jeans down over his hips to his feet. It's boxer briefs, comfortable and cotton to battle the rough denim. Sam can see his cock pressed to his body through them; his balls. He's one hundred percent okay with that. Apparently.

Smile on his face he bullies Crowley's space with his taller body, tackles him to the bed. Crowley's disbelieving laughter against his mouth tells him this is the right track. Crowley is big, too. Broad across. Sam may be huge set against any standards, but the demon can comfortably hold Sam's mass. Sam doesn't have to clutch him up against him or rest on an arm to take the weight off.

There's a minute where, kissing and biting at lips and jaws, their two bodies have no interests but grinding together, each of them with hands coursing over the other, Crowley underneath Sam taking the brunt of his aggression and throwing it back, strong and solid. Two bodies in hard contact just like in the library.

"Don't blow it," Crowley breaks off to mutter. Not "sex" but "your load" is implicit in the tone.

Sam backs off, heaving and against his instincts. Dips in, kisses Crowley again. Gets rid of his boxers, their naked bodies shared more than a day past. Freight train or not, one car is still following the next one in order, all driven by the same momentum.

He's the one that falls into the pillows. Crowley climbs over him, naked. Gravity has just enough effect on Crowley to impress on Sam he's the more mature man. The demon knows it. Flaunts it. Grins not like Lucifer, victorious, but with high self-esteem – not in the plethora of areas his self-esteem has been completely wrecked in; he knows why Sam is groaning beseechingly under him. That smutty grin breaking up his beard, just for starters.

When Crowley has grasped Sam's head in one hand and has lot the other free to explore the sculpted ridges of Sam's body, Crowley is lying between Sam's legs, but even with their cocks pressed close together between their bellies, Sam's reassured from Crowley's relaxed body he could throw him off if he wanted – as far as he wanted.

Crowley's hand starts to slide off his shoulder, down his arm; that throws a switch. Suddenly Sam growls *Don't hold me down*, anger and threat, heartbeat kicking up a notch. Crowley gently guides his hand across Sam's skin, back to his shoulder. The demon murmurs a silky but not seductive *You can hold me down all you want*. Carnal longings leap up in Sam, the promise of power electrifying. He doesn't let himself think about that. Doesn't touch it. He rolls Crowley over to escape the cagey feeling and lets a hand ride over the demon's stomach to his side, drags it down to Crowley's hip, digs it in there, thumb against his hipbone. He groans encouragement and demand, one more time, when Crowley lifts his hips at that cue, spreads his thighs.

Crowley snatches the condom and has his hands behind Sam's neck. Sam hears the wrapper tear while his mouth is bearing down on the demon under him. He knows Crowley didn't reach that far; pursues Crowley's mouth more aggressively, just for a minute, getting over the idea of psychokinesis as an extension of Crowley's hand. Not a threat. Then he takes the condom from him, thumb and forefinger; takes a breath, flipping it over right side up in his fingers and rolling it down over the head of his cock.

He shuts his eyes and just breathes, unfurling the surprisingly smooth, thin latex down to the base of his dick, hyperaware of Crowley's body heat. When he looks down at Crowley he sees Crowley breathing heavy, nostrils flaring, eyes lidded and mouth set firm. He has the same focus, the same intensity, as if he's on the edge of violence – like Sam. He's rugged in ways Sam isn't, beard peppered grey, lines worn into his face. There's a thrill remembering Crowley is older not by a few decades but by those untold centuries. *Sam's, now, indefinitely*. The thrill sets Sam moving, sends
his eyes to the lube. For a second his body tells him he can call it to hand. He can't and he reaches for it, instead.

Crowley smirks at the sounds eked out of Sam when he's slicking it on, little catches of breath. Sam reads that as a challenge, notches his brow, annoyed because, yeah, he's going through with it. What did Crowley think? Then Crowley flicks the bottle open himself, wets his fingers and is still holding Sam's eyes, smirk just getting wider when Sam goes dizzy at Crowley's hand sliding down between his own legs. Crowley wins. Sam closes his eyes and searches for oxygen. Maybe he's not as comfortable with Crowley's body as he wanted to think; maybe that's not bad, exciting instead.

"Don't be pigheaded, Moose, everybody at the party gets a prize," Crowley croons, rubbing it in while he's rubbing it in. The husky voice goes straight to Sam's cock – and his face, apparently, from the same leap in heat. Crowley's low chuckling rolling over him spurs him into action.

It's not just him moving but Crowley, too, his hand on Crowley's chest, Crowley's touching his back, then Sam's hip; bodies negotiating, lips pressed together again; Crowley's hand on his cock guiding it down. Sam didn't expect Crowley's body to give way like it does, smoothly, but that's how it is. He makes some kind of possibly-embarrassing noise but his ears are on Crowley's deep, slow groan, his cock is awash in pleasure. Suddenly he's back in control.

His hips strike up a rhythm, moving just as smoothly in and out. He thinks yeah, alright, whatever they bought it works great; the condom isn't dulling anything, and the plunge through Crowley's tight asshole into his hot, smooth bowels begs the question why Sam never did this before, with a woman, before Lucifer, because there's obvious pleasure on Crowley's end. Credit where credit is due. Sometime. Later. Right now he has a guy underneath him who looks incredible. Sam hangs back from Crowley's mouth, watches him pant through it, vessel's temperature ratcheted up, demon or not. Appreciates the way his beard hugs close to the skin of his neck. Eyes raised to Crowley's eat up their slight narrowing as whatever sensations flow through his hips, worry lines streaking away from his pursed lower eyelids. The hair of Crowley's chest is curls and feels pretty damn good on Sam's skin.

Sam kisses him, not as long as he could; wants to suck at his earlobe; wants to bite his neck and jaw; wants Crowley's teeth on him, too; presses the demon into the mattress with a hand on his chest but just long enough to stoke the idea he's flirting with danger – not from Crowley, from himself; he doesn't trust himself to really hold Crowley down. Yet. Otherwise his hands are everywhere, pushing up the skin of Crowley's belly he wants his teeth on with his thumb; tilting Crowley's head back to lick a stripe up his neck; sliding a hand under him, getting a handful of his ass, grinning at the sound out of Crowley. He never drops his rhythm, stays up against his demon, spreads his own thighs, pushes Crowley's wider, higher up.

He comes. For what it is it couldn't get much better. Wanting to come up in Crowley gets the better of drawing it out. There's a lad, Crowley says just to say something; just to give Sam the gravel of his voice while cum is washing up through Sam's dick in waves. Left breathing on top of Crowley after his hips jerk against him a few last instinct-driven times, he's grateful Crowley looks quietly proud of him. Not perverse. He's afraid to admit 'enamored'.

He wants to attack Crowley's body in all kinds of sexual, Crowley-wins-out ways. Sam is a guy for after-play. He's exhausted. Crowley knows what Crowley's about, calls another condom to hand. Sam slides out of him; rolls off him; lies on but beside him in the dim, yellow light of the lamp. He discards his own condom in the direction of the trash can and watches Crowley bring himself off, how he licks his lips, how his hips thrust into his lube-slicked palm; listens to the sounds coming out of his throat. He's smiling sleepily watching Crowley come, face going through the bliss and relief of an orgasm.
Sam drags the covers over them while Crowley catches his breath and tosses his condom in the same direction. Crowley snaps and the light goes out.

No hygiene break. Nothing between the two of them and sleep. Sam learned that lesson. The sweat and the semen on them can wait until morning. Has to if Sam wants to convince Crowley this was right. Different, but right. Sam and his body agree on that. That's not what Crowley thinks, but Sam thinks it's what he feels. Sam help them both if he's wrong. God's done meddling.

Sam bumps his head against Crowley's and mutters nonsense like *Hey* or just hums, combs his fingers through Crowley's bangs, slides his hand over Crowley's abdomen to weave his fingers together with the hand resting on Crowley's stomach, kisses his jaw and ear. He can feel conflict passing over the man's face. It never takes over. He doesn't let himself start to drift until he's sure Crowley is out cold.
The memories follow Crowley in the morning. Big, rough hands on his flesh; Sam's tongue lapping against his skin followed by the scrape of his teeth; taking his own taste of Sam's flesh; fucking himself on his slippery fingers with the boy swooning in disbelief above him; the satisfaction of his thick dick plowing inside him – no matter what's said some sex eases loneliness; the pleasing sound of Sam's balls slapping against his ass; the adrenaline excitement of a massive body bearing down on him, Sam proving Sam's strength to Sam but not exploiting it; that whole body in motion against him; the boy's brow in knots, mouth hanging open, wincing eyes on Crowley, lust-blown. He would, all things being equal, enjoy a repeat of that performance and much more.

Crowley has no other pleasant memories of being physically taken by another man. Demons are as Hell does. Unlike Sam, his memories fail to attach any significance but rage and deeper rage to demonic infighting, only that afterward it had to be carefully gauged if or how vengeance should be extracted in time. Seducing the odd mark? All business and their pleasure.

His ease with Sam's well-intended physical enthusiasm plays in in his mind alongside Sam's diligence at calming him, leading him into hazy, directionless dreams.

So he dreams, but only beside Sam.

Those memories mingle with certain sex of his past, encyclopedically revisited since Sam asked of Meg. Exploitation. Violation. Disembowelment. The suffering of helpless souls in Hell and equally helpless demons.

Integrity, Dean said. He's struggled to believe he has it. Integrity tortures him today.

Charlie, Kevin and Sam look at him like they'd never met him when he says he'll take his turn scrubbing down the toilets and showers. He shares in their sentiment. He feels like a stranger, scowling as he reads the backs of cleaning supplies. Each astringent scent is more obnoxious than the last. Whether in his homes or in the dissection laboratory he never lacked for people to do menial tasks of this nature. On the lam, he simply didn't feed his vessel and bathed it in public showers.

His power has risen in the past weeks. He could no doubt attend these tasks telekinetically. That would be antithetical to the exercise: Reducing and grounding himself. He's begun translocating freely within the building. He could not get back into it without ringing if he relocated outside, but he doesn't think he can muster significant distance yet, anyway. Definitely not state to state. His telekinetic influence? That has nearly normalized – in range, not strength.

His demonic essence had shriveled up and hardened, tight-packed and unexpendable. Within another moment it would have achieved fusion, a soul born, Sam Winchester's dead body beside him, and the tapestry of reality irrevocably transfiguring.
That future averted, Crowley refuses to allow himself to settle comfortably back into his power. The sound of a harpy's neck snapping reminds him with blah blah blah responsibility.

When the privilege and power ingrained part of himself raises Toilet brushes? Is this what we've been reduced to? he can rebut with the sentiment it's a promotion. He now pays even closer attention to his actions and their consequences. He always did love planning steps ahead.

His mind hasn't allowed him to rest since he (eventually) vacated Sam's bed. Didn't he stand up to Lucifer, Heaven, legions of contentious demons, Dick Roman, the Winchesters and to Kevin Tran's remarkably stubborn resistance? Subvert a soul-intoxicated Castiel?

Now there's Sam Winchester. He hasn't excuses for giving in to Sam. The act is synonymous with getting what he wants. The act is synonymous with showing Sam what Sam wants to see.

His forgiveness of Crowley the demon can't, can't share.

It breeds distrust of himself. *Greed is your sin. Greedy letch.*

Only reasonable to distrust himself. He remains a demon. Believing he has all the good intentions in the world, he'll subvert his own, new-minted conscience if he can faster and more thoroughly than a human. He balks at the horror of experiencing his old joys.

It's only reasonable to distrust his actions with Sam. Towering, introspective, dimpled, fantastic shag Sam.

Sleeves rolled up above his elbows, he feels a light tingle from the chemicals making no headway reacting with and eroding his skin as he scrubs off the cleaner he left to set in the showers. No reason to bother with gloves. In this stone pit he's the best candidate for this task, air choked with fumes despite the evacuation fan. Human cells haven't evolved from being impaired and dying away at the same rate as the less specialized or unified bacteria and molds.

All to say he's avoiding the subject. He wishes to keep exactly what he took Sam up on.

*You're fucking impossible to live with, you know that?* he thinks strictly to himself. He doesn't have a contentious vessel. Crowley has been dealing with Crowley well beyond the limit of tolerance anyone could have for Crowley.

He didn't want to become sexual with Sam. He doesn't want to be. Not because of Sam's body, of course. He could spend months focused on nothing besides it. Not because of Sam's personality, which is unexpectedly charming once he no longer has to deal with a belligerent ambition to murder him. Not because of Sam's attention, thought-stealing.

Because Sam chases away living his guilt. Because Sam doesn't really understand what produced the sex they've had.

He remembers pleading Sam's name at the top of the stairs, the entrance to the bunker, looking down at someone he never meant to touch, knowing Sam had been waiting hours while he walked Kansas afraid of what he would and wouldn't do.

He'd predicted Sam would be waiting. He simply should have stayed out the night.

When he contends with it in his mind, his capitulation disgusts him. He used to be a being that could, as well as honor a contract, hold firm to a refusal. Without integrity, there's nothing to build upon. He has become hundreds of, a thousand different personalities over a long life. He has no desire to watch himself transmuted into the person he's playing now.
It should shame him. It does.

He doesn't despise the idea of subjugation at Sam's hands. To suffer his miseries alone and be the boy's when Sam desires him. That isn't Crowley. It could be Thomas Clarkson. He doubts Sam would adopt calling him something appropriate. "Dog." "Roach" sounds apt. "Worm."

He fancies Roach if he has to select one.

Except he's cleaning a bathroom, not scumming it up, so "Maggot." That's the one. Maggot. Cleanly at first and then pernicious if allowed to feed too long.

—Sam would be furious with him if he was in his head right now. Sam wants Crowley. Crowley would tell Sam to fuck right off. He'll have to be Crowley or he's going to become something Sam never wanted, and Crowley swallowed up. Disappeared. Black bagged.

That may go over just as Dean would fancy. Like a lead zeppelin.

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Sam's side of Ash's information package is finished. He recounted every detail leading up to the present conflict he could remember. Ash is getting sent the Edlund books, but those leave out some vital details. Like the ones that make Sam unsympathetic. There's a totally different narrative about the powers Ruby taught him. Coherent but incorrect.

That doesn't mean Sam gets to relax. Instead, he's combing the national news and calling hunters and Aaron for news on Hell. He's digging through genealogies to try and find the living members or legacies of the native nations' hidden society of medicine people.

He doesn't even know where to start with Africa, but he can name all the Loa and Orisha and if he's lucky he'll find Houngan, Mambo, Santero or Santera on the books he can somehow prove his credentials to in the southern states or the Caribbean who's keeping track of more.

He has the work of years ahead of him while somewhere clocks are counting down to new disasters.

He's reading through old records, taking notes on the pad on his knee, when Crowley sits down in the matching chair adjacent to him. He's immediately put on the alert. Crowley's face has closed off, steel. He's watching Sam closely, sober gaze unnerving. Fear freezes Sam's chest; solid ice. Fear of what?

"After deliberation, I've discovered it unwise to be your bitch," Crowley says coolly.

This is going to be a downhill conversation. Sam's first thought: Oh god, he knows.

He should have admitted to Crowley what he'd heard himself say on the phone with Dean. Not go on like he didn't feel something was off.

He takes a breath, wearing concern. It's not the time to be guilty. That's insulting. He doesn't feel like he got caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. More like he ripped an unnumbered page from Lucifer's book.

"I should have listened. You said 'No'. You couldn't have made that any clearer."

He can't count the times Crowley said no, but remembers like it's been said aloud again: Don't. Don't wear me down.
"You oversized bastard!" Crowley roars, mouth snarling, teeth bared, change spontaneous. Sam's muscles tense. "Figured that out and kept right on, did you? I'm a bleeding moron, trusting you!"

The legal pad falls off Sam's knee. He doesn't move, but panic stopped paralyzing him years ago. He keeps breathing.

"I didn't realize, Crowley. Not until later. Yeah, I did 'keep right on'."

Sam doesn't move while thinking those scimitars are very sharp and, flying off their shattered rack in no particular direction, he's better off staying where he is and letting probability do its job.

The clatter to the hardwood floor. Sam sees gouges nicked in the finish where one landed his side of the bookshelf.

It's blanket policy to ignore people yelling. Sam hopes Charlie has tuned into that.

Kevin probably hopes one of them gets killed. Sam doesn't know if the kid cares which.

"Plan to just go ahead day in and out?" Crowley accuses with venom, upper lip curled. "Make a happy, mindless little Crowley for yourself?"


"Princess in the tower, me. Can't and won't save myself. No trouble in my King collecting the prize. Perfectly within your right, innit? My mistake," Crowley hisses, pique spent, still going in at Sam but not wildly.

Sam had been certain Crowley would break from rejection if he put on the breaks. Thoughts turned back, he can't make sense of what he'd been thinking anymore.

Sam hopes. The adrenaline turns time choppy, unpredictably slower and faster.

"Dude—Crowley. I fucked up. Completely fucked up."

"My head telling me you deserve someone to worship you, you Christian martyr. You just eating it up. Enjoy yourself, Sam? Get a good time from me?"

Crowley looks like he could throw himself out of the chair at any moment. Sam's instincts remind him that's a good sign. As long as he looks like that, Crowley isn't planning on crushing him into the floor with TK.

"No. —yeah, I did, it's been good when we're together. That's been awesome. I thought we both— Not when I realized how hard I leaned on you. I don't want anybody to worship me," Sam snaps, his own temper rising, anger at himself sloshing together with answering Crowley's anger. It's that or backing down. Crowley's not right; not totally. Sam wants him to hear that. Just that part.

It's terrifying to realize Crowley kept going not because Sam strengthened him. Not because he would accept love; even a modicum of love. Some broken part of him couldn't stand by 'No'. The crying man in Sam's bed, furious with himself, had never been chased away. He'd been silenced.

Crowley shuts up, silence of a different nature. His eyes put Sam on trial.

Sam exhales his own anger, fear and self-reproach shivering through his chest. He throws his hands out in frustration with himself.
"I thought if I backed off it you'd think I don't want you. You're who I want. I don't just stumble across somebody like you every couple months. That's not like saying what I pulled wasn't way far from okay. It was way far from okay."

"I should by rights delete your number from my mobile," Crowley says, intonation obscure. His eyes remain hard. "You're damn right consent under duress isn't consent. Legally speaking."

Sam puts the word he's been avoiding to it: Rape.

It didn't feel like that. He knew Crowley wanted him. Abstractly. He would've sworn crossing that Rubicon would – should – change something inside a person they couldn't come back from.

"Getting it now, are we?" Crowley says darkly, rage subtly altering all his features.

"Yeah," Sam says. His eyes are hot. Not teary, but hot. He blinks like it'll clear them but the heat seeps back.

"Git," Crowley says, nothing changing about him.

"Do you want me to...?" Sam doesn't get out get out of your sight, but he implies enough.

Crowley laughs, light striking up in his eyes.

"Actually I want you to sit right here and keep at what you were doing. Day in the life of Crowley. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, but seems eminently fair."

Sam assents without speaking, looking away and retrieving his legal pad, breath coming fast and eyes stinging...but that is what Crowley feels. He's a criminal.

Crowley disappears.

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Crowley chooses not to use ear muffs on the shooting range. The pistol's rapport doesn't sting his ears.

He finds it therapeutic to put bullets into something. He's not imagining any one thing while punching holes through a target on the lines or one bullet through the hole before.

He's been shooting guns since guns were come up with.

The tears and wet breathing are a matter of course by now, vessel venting stress hormones it's producing faster than it can withstand.

He loathes himself down to the last aethereal milligram.

He loathed making himself clear to Sam. As another bullet punches through the target he knows he stood by his first, better instincts.

That's the fellow Sam fancies.
Chapter 16

Dean doesn't know what he walked into.

Crowley and Kevin are standing in proximity of each other. Sam adopted Crowley's morose look. Sam and Crowley are not glued together. Crowley looks put together, professional. He greets them when they enter with: "Dean. Cas." Charlie has a smile on. A despite-everything smile.

"Want me to help carry that in?" Sam asks, gesturing to the equipment in Dean and Castiel's arms.

"Yeah," Dean says. "Thanks." He watches Sam leave with suspicion, but there's a job to do. He focuses "Where are we building this, Charlie?"

Charlie's brow goes up.

"Here in the library? There's not a bigger room with an open floor. Pick an alcove?"

Dean picks the alcove to the left of the door and sets down his haul, Castiel mimicking him.

"If everybody comes out and gets something, then two more trips," Dean says.

They're coordinated, despite the people strung out like high tension wires. It takes the two round trips and the components from Radio Shack, Best Buy, a university engineering lab, a couple of hardware stores, a junkyard and three cell towers. It took a matter of hours to install a hitch on baby's underside. Stealing an old country trailer and not getting shot was the point of concern.

"This is the part where I shower, piss, eat… Sleep off the interstate crime spree." Dean informs the crowd. "You can start in on this or we can start tomorrow."

So far Kevin, Crowley and Sam haven't looked at each other. Once. Not weird at all.

Once he and Cas got going, they didn't stop until they pulled up on the dirt road outside. That legitimately sucked, considering climbing a cell tower in the dark and lowering heavy shit down to Cas via pulley rendered him next to comatose.

Cas can drive. On straight roads. Around Lebanon. "The interstate is just as straight, Dean," Cas promised. What if he went too fast? Started fishtailing? Fucked up? Dean did not find the couple of hours Cas drove restful.

He breaks the land speed record for passing out on a bed. Doesn't touch the pillows or pull the covers down; just throws himself on it. Next sweet, sweet unconsciousness.

He wakes up six hours later, eleven o'clock at night, to every muscle in his body saturated with pain; makes a disgruntled face; moves anyway. The endorphin high got him through the tough parts. It's gone, now.

He hates being cut out of the loop more than he needs to sleep.

He picks a victim and then he's on his way down the hall to Crowley's room. He knocks. Crowley tells him through the door that it's unlocked. He finds the demon reading a book on his bed, no longer looking detached and professional but miserable and testy.

Dean drops down on the bed next to him without an invitation, squints at the book, then at the demon.
"Alright. What the fuck is going on?"

"You think I'm the weakest link?" Crowley asks, brow rising; unimpressed and tapping one finger on his thigh.

Dean rolls his eyes. Stays serious. Stays focused.

"Kevin's turned into a sarcastic asshole, Sam's gonna be a little bitch and Charlie probably doesn't know. Dish."

Crowley smiles, showing off a straight row of pearly teeth.

"How was your little interlude with Cas? Play naughty librarian?"

Dean gets annoyed and looks annoyed.

"How about: If your jack-off fantasies include me, don't clue me in."

Crowley shrugs, expression shifting to skepticism.

"Everyone knows, Dean. Sam knows. Charlie knows. God help me, I know. Can't have an ordinary conversation with Cas without you coiling up and rattling your tail at me."

Leaving now would be Dean's choice course of action if he didn't expect to get the dodge everywhere else. He scowls at the equally resentful-looking demon on the bed.

"You're all full of shit. I don't sit around and think about...banging Cas. You and Sam, though. You actually stuck it to each other. I come back everybody's got ants biting their balls and you two are literally closer to Kevin."

Crowley's face opens up. He sighs. Dean disenjoys that pitying look more than anything else so far.

"Tit for tat, Squirrel. You're asking for a bucket of tat. You want me to grass on every person in the building and my sex life, then I get full disclosure on your behavior toward Castiel." Crowley smiles, subdued but sly. "Girl time. Natter on just you and me. You know I'll make good."

The idea is offensive on at least four levels. Number one is that Crowley can talk circles around him. Dean doesn't plan to chicken out now that he's not only got a bite but landed the fish.

"...give me five minutes. I need liquor," he says. "See if I can dig up some nail polish out there, huh?"

Dean leaves knowing this will suck more than anything has sucked in recent history. Since what they're calling Angelfall. Day on the calendar. Living meteorites burned into his memory and Sammy maybe dying in his arms. Again. He refuses to touch the relief flooding his sternum. He lets it pass while he grabs up a full bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

Crowley has stopped bitching about their firewater. Dean started looking a shelf up, Knob Creek tonight. That's as far as it goes. He's not touching the Scotch on the top shelf. It tastes like somebody let sewer water into the fucking cask. They went one round with Scotch. Not good enough for Crowley, disgusting in Dean and Sam's book.

Dean puts down nine fingers of whiskey in silence. He lets them settle into his blood, carrying him one step away from the bunker, his problems, Sam's problems, and the world crushing down on their sanctuary's walls.
Crowley leans against the cheap headboard and sips his at leisure. He'd have to go hard if he wanted to get drunk.

"Tell Uncle Crowley what's under your skin," Crowley flirts in that deep, raspy voice, finally setting his novel aside. Dean shudders internally, invisibly, a wave of emotion – mostly fear – stuttering through his chest.

"Seriously, Crowley?" he accuses. Seriously. Naturally. He grits his teeth. Now that he's on the verge of getting out what's hung like a specter over him going on a year a panicky thrill rolls over his stomach. "I don't know, okay? I don't have the first fucking clue about me and Cas. If he up and disappears on me again I swear to me I'll kill the son of a bitch. That freaks me out. I don't get like that about nobody but Sam. If we're gonna get horizontal? Not on the list of concerns."

"Because…?" Crowley asks, luring Dean forward with a two-fingered beckoning gesture.

Dean bets Crowley's too miserable to mock him. There's the life experience factor, too, but maybe more important than that the fact that Crowley knows him. It's not like being stuck with a doctor, explaining his shit from beginning to end, simultaneously imbedding it in lies.

"I spent a year just killing. Every kind of monster. Night and day. Lucky to grab an hour of sleep – ever," he says, terse. "Then I come back. At first I'm having flashbacks. Shit like that. The internet calls that 'acute stress disorder.' Now it's something else. Next step forward." No need to explain that one. He gets defensive, angry Crowley's patiently hearing him out. "Like apparently a lot of dudes in my situation, I need the little blue pills," he snaps. "That's not me. It ain't happening. I'm not…going to some Podunk clinic. I'd appreciate a big shut the fuck up about me getting up on Cas unless you've got some sage wisdom to pass down about a lot of half-ass jerking off."

Crowley wears an understanding touch of a smile at the corners of his lips – friendly, but turning Dean furious.

"Condolences, my darling. I don't envy you. So. You want adult advice. Suppose you'll still get the rest of your tat, me today." Crowley pauses, brow drawn together as he thinks it over. Dean calms down a little, but only just. He addresses Dean seriously. "Man up, Squirrel. I don't mean get your nuts in order. Tell the thick-headed bastard you want to grow old with him or…whatever it is you do want. Make it clear in small words. He's Cas. He doesn't know what he does to you. Want to fuck him sometime? What does it matter? Resolving your ex-angel flight risk will do wonders for your stress, which as it goes might do something for your cock." Crowley chuckles hollowly. "Lucky Sam, hm? That body doesn't care about him."

"Your turn," Dean grits out. "Spill it."

All the mirth falls from Crowley's face. He doesn't look miserable; a blank slate.

"Sam and I are negotiating what constitutes appropriate sexual advances."

"What'd you do?" Dean growls.

"I'm choosing to not be offended by that question," Crowley hisses, forehead tightening into a scowl. Dean startles. Crowley's hard eyes are a tough read. "Sam? It's already forgiven; not forgotten. He's forgiven me for…Well. A new morning, another chance." His look goes distant as he makes a serpentine, dissatisfied motion with his head. "Youth of America. He's never had an appropriate role model. His brother used to lie about his identity to get into strangers' beds. —a true story. Your father never taught you two a damn thing about sexual conduct and misconduct besides 'use a condom'. None of which excuses him; I expect him to take responsibility." Crowley
wets his lips, eyes focusing on Dean's. "Kevin realized he'd rather have a demon bodyguard than no demon bodyguard. Zero percent reduction in hatred."

"That summary could be more detailed."

"Summed up you'd prefer help with your dilemma versus a position by position recount of me and your little brother in sexual congress," the demon says, voice cool.

At second thought, Dean cringes.

"Good call."

Crowley gives Dean a pointed look, softening his voice, looking tired.

"While you're doing everything you can fathom to avoid declaring your eternal, undying bromance with Castiel, you'd do us all a favor focusing your attentions on Kevin. The child needs you desperately."

"Okay," Dean says after a moment, unable to argue either part.

He pours himself another three fingers and knocks it back. He leaves the bottle with Crowley, mind heavy with questions he won't ask Sam and things he's not ready to say to Cas. Kevin? Kevin he bets he can do some good for sooner.

He thought he'd walk out of Crowley's room shitting on himself for telling Crowley his way too personal problems. So much for that. He's glad. He's around ninety percent that Crowley won't spill to somebody else. General rule: The stranded demon wants to stay on his good side.

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"This is going to look so totally Star Wars," Charlie says, pushing up her welding mask to wipe perspiration out of her eyes. She would have dime tossed Dean for the position but honestly? He's more hackish until the machine actually turns on.

"Star Wars? I think it would need more glowing bulbs," Kevin says, inside the skeleton of their angel radio transmitter following Dean's wiring instructions off a crumpled piece of ruled paper.

"No. She means how the original lightsabers were built out of camera parts. Potato for an asteroid. Threw together some cut up, used army shelters," Dean says, gesticulating to indicate budget-meeting improvisation as he sits aside disassembling Playstation 2s.

Charlie beams with pride. She wasn't sure about Dean and Sam at first. Sketch level? Over nine thousand. Now she can't imagine life without them. After submitting to the inevitable – her inability to tune out the real real world – she barely remembers ordinary life. Following a paradigm shift this huge she can look back and see the contributions she made to the expansion of Richard Roman Enterprises in her own work. How things got out of control in Moondoor because she selfishly disbelieved the wall. It's a retcon of epic proportions, but she's had time to adjust, now.

All the important muggles in her life are just as important. She's a real girl now with real friends she totally Skypes with. The twist is when she turned on the television to learn thousands of angels had plummeted from the stratosphere to Earth she thought Shoot. What are we going to do about this? What about Dean's Castiel? before anything else.

Dean's Castiel is studiously modifying circuit boards on the library table. Sam has gone to town for odds and ends and don't expect him back, to which Dean mimed 'sippy sippy'. Crowley – Sam's
Crowley? Uncertain – threw up his hands at the tedious electrical work after Castiel corrected his actions for the third time and told them to call him down if or when they needed telekinesis. Because that's a thing. Levitating multiple components together until they can be fixed in place.

Which all begs a question.

Charlie flips her mask back up, looking Dean's way.

"Hold on. Do you think we can use this to dial out to, say, Arkhmoor?"

The bunker itself is equipped to boost transmissions. Making a ham radio that broadcasts on the angels' frequencies is slightly more complex. Charlie mourns she doesn't have the first idea how fairies communicate.

"I've never heard of Arkhmoor," Castiel says, stopping his work, turning in his chair to look between Dean and Charlie in confusion.

Dean shakes his head.

"You wouldn't have. It's in another reality that, uh, may be called Avalon. I'm not sure they like your type." Dean catches himself at the wince on Castiel's face. "—are too enthusiastic about angels," he amends unhelpfully, damage done. "Charlie got some fairy on Charlie action not so long ago."

"Gilda," Charlie sighs. "She is choice."

Charlie remembers her first look at Gilda, a snapshot in her memory: the fairy's large, searching brown eyes, dark olive skin, the sheen on her lips, her apologetic smile through her sadness and waves and waves of curls. She remembers her arm around Gilda's back, their bodies close, Gilda's kisses…

"Are you completely serious?" Kevin asks, turning away from his task as well. "I've seen a lot of things I can never unsee, but fairies?"

Right. Welding. She had totally been adding some housing for the radio's component parts a minute ago.

"Mix of douchebags and wicked hot babes— Actually some of those are douchebags," Dean explains. "According to RoboSam one shyster Leprechaun claimed to be able to pop Sam's soul out of Hell's lockbox, no problem." Dean's deep in concentration; licks his lips. His eyes have narrowed on Charlie, catching her gaze; her own eyes widen. "Charlie, you feeling my vibe?"

"The Hollow Forest is forever in my debt," she repeats aloud for the peanut gallery. "I was sort of hoping that debt would result in a little vacation and sexy fun times for Charlie. Which I haven't thought about once. At all. Constantly. In my bed."

Castiel looks as baffled as he looked to begin with, head tilted to the side.

"I don't understand. I am over six hundred million years old in your perception of time. If fairies exist and have interactions with humanity, as a Watcher I should know about them. Although my memory has grown faulty in comparison to before, I knew the Enochian names of each of God's creatures, even those humans have never discovered."

"So these aren't God's creatures," Dean says with a grin. "Sounds like we've got an eight hundred pound gorilla in our corner. And we're in luck. Sam and I have a fairy handbook he shelved
somewhere around here. No comm tower needed."

"I still don't understand how…” Castiel says, but he trails off in thought.

"When were you going to tell me that?” Charlie demands, making a face.

Dean looks startled, putting one and one together, brow inching up toward his hairline.

"I totally forgot?"

"Ugh." Charlie rolls her eyes, flipping her hood back down.

That way he can't see her smiling behind it.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warning: Triggers.

Crowley assesses the situation from the door. Nice bar, decorated like he's stepped back in time a century. A few people talking low but the between-hours crowd sparring. An escaped gorilla on one of the iron-backed, cushioned bar chairs. That's the one he's here for.

He doesn't get a good look at the boy until he comes round beside him; leans over to look up at him. Just brooding. Not drunk. That's the best possible scenario. Crowley knows Winchesters and alcohol. Sam makes a face at his glass instead of Crowley.

"This seat open, stranger?"

The boy has dug up some animation, turning worried eyes on Crowley.

"How did you get here?"

"Please. This isn't even twenty miles," Crowley says. He advantages himself of the other chair, not keen on spraining his neck with eye contact. "Like that awful Céline Dion song, it's all coming back to me now. I could make London. Mind, I'd sprain something. Blood. All orifices. What are we drinking?"

One, embarrassed laugh makes slip of Sam.

"Not much. By volume," he says, "Without the alchemical uppers, I'm like a…I'm pathetic. When I'm drunk. 'Sloppy' doesn't cover it. It's mortifying."

"Don't worry, I am—" Crowley halts, squinting down the bar. Malibu, Jim Beam, Captain Morgan. No friends of his. "—apporting you somewhere I can drink, MegaZord."

Sam sits back, too perplexed to start a debate.

"Did you just—"

Crowley flashes a smile, raising his hand, gives the bartender a killer smile. He jumps queues. After all, he's not actually British.

"Excuse me. He needs to close his tab."

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"Can't go to any of my old haunts. This will do us."

Sam doesn't bother asking where they are, studying the windowless building with its heavy oak door and thinking it's not the kind of place he'd ever enter off a case for strategic reasons alone.

"Is this some kind of…"
"Beer garden? Yes."

Sam mouths Oh, following Crowley inside, abashed. There are no flashing lights, strippers, no cigarette smoke...It isn't not even 'posh'. Just a stocked bar hung with hundreds of glinting beer glasses, refrigerated units full of beer across one wall and a series of modest tables and chairs – plus glass windows looking out on a tabled courtyard within a high wooden fence where ordinary people are engaged in conversation.

"I mean really?" Crowley asks, looking over his shoulder at Sam. "You two...never once? You just drink that piss day in and out?" The answer is obvious on Sam's face. Crowley makes a frustrated sound, gives the bartenders an 'I tip like it is a strip club' smile and picks a table, sitting himself down on one side, picking up one of the stacks of printouts piled upon it.

Sam swallows, following his example. He's picked up a sheet labeled "small bottles"; flicks his thumb against the corner and estimates four pages. He studies it like there'll be an exam, category after category. Local, porters, bitters, dunkels, blondes, ciders, witbiers... There's another stack of sheets for 'large bottles' and Crowley's, at a glance, is listing 'drafts'. He looks up, lost, at Crowley, casting a surreptitious glance at the bartenders to make sure they don't have eyes on him.

Crowley begins to laugh. After he starts to laugh he doesn't stop. He just keeps laughing until he wipes at his eyes, shaking his head. Sam is paralyzed in the same expression he began at until the demon smooths the breasts of his own jacket down, grinning brazenly.

"Thanks," Sam snaps, voice hushed. "Now everybody is staring at me."

"All ten people. It's seven o'clock. Who in their right mind looks that traumatized over beer?"

He definitely didn't get snapped to wherever in the United States they now are for Crowley to turn the crap he's been giving himself into depression. He doesn't keep the resentment from his low voice.

"You think I'm traumatized over beer?"

"Shh," Crowley says; sudden compassion. It's not fair that breaks him, resentment cracking and crumbling away. If Crowley was treating him like a kid...but he's not, sound affection. "No, Moose," he goes on. "Point of fact. I think you're traumatized and also distraught over beer. Fair?"

"Sure. Whatever."

Crowley reaches across to the next table, picking up a matching printout, handing Sam the drafts list.

"Pick a draft. No other point. Food on the last page. Try something German. Me, I'm having the Lagavulin thirty from the bar. I'd recommend it but you boys made your feelings on Scotch clear."

Sam flips to the page that lists the menu and the high octane highlights.

"Ninety dollars...?"

"A shot," Crowley boasts. "Makes most Scotch taste like tapwater." Sam gets concerned; Crowley's quick to placate. "Don't fret. Hard earned hustling just yesterday. Darts, if you can believe it. I reckoned the difference between pocket money and those poor sods' with their ruined credit's unwitting donations to humanity's defense."

"You're back to living rich?"
Sam feels stupid when Crowley gives him that look that says Sam, and Dean, are appallingly below par.

"Moron. I'm taking you out," the demon says, offended.

"Didn't we break up?" Sam asks. Were they dating? Were they even together? Like, together?

"On a man date," Crowley corrects patiently.

"I don't get you, dude. I wouldn't talk to me." Sam hesitates, feeling sick. The waiter appears, friendly and relaxed. He orders, forcing a smile. His expression crumbles when the waiter turns his back; walks away. "...and I'm lying. It didn't matter what Lucifer did. I got angry, but then it was still Lucifer and I just pretended it didn't happen."

Crowley lays down his menu, tucking them all in a neat stack at one edge of the table.

"None of that from my quarter, you enormous arsehole. I would've...I forgot, in all that desperate for you to trust me, that you might slip up. Which you advantaged yourself of brilliantly. I could tell myself 'He had no idea whatever', but that's not true. You did exactly as you meant to."

Sam takes a few deep breaths.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," he says quietly. "I didn't think that's who I was. I mean, obviously it's not my first power trip. The more he thinks about it the creepier and creepier it feels to have been waiting for Crowley to have to come through the door after that long walk. Not concerned; stalker. "I thought that was over. I kicked drinking blood. I manage my anger." That's not it, though. It's not the part that's getting deeper and deeper under his skin, a poisonous splinter. "Now I've been sitting at that bar thinking Heaven purified me; that makes me more like Lucifer than before this started."

"Let's understate how I really resented Castiel declaring himself my new God. I didn't. Resent you," Crowley says without pride. "If I did just what you got from me and fucked like a slag, slept at your feet, was branded with your name...that wouldn't be Crowley. I wanted that, Sam. Brand new me, put in my place." Sam remembers holding Crowley down; the thrill of testing Crowley's the 'no limits' Crowley promised in his sex-roughened voice. "You still wronged me. I had other, higher priorities. I couldn't advantage myself of the opportunity and pretend it was penance. Then there's Crowley. I need that particular wily bastard."

Sam stares, still sick with himself at first. Next he tries to make sense of what Crowley said.

"Confession. I don't get it. I know Crowley isn't the name you were born with, but..."

The waiter interrupts them again, a tall glass of amber beer with two inches of head for Sam and a rib eye sandwich; Crowley's drink which could buy a stack of rib eye sandwiches.

"You want a story?" the demon offers. "It's a long story. Whether or not you behaved poorly, it's damned uneven what I know about you compared to what you don't know about me. Read those books. Understand your enemy...and all their deeply personal secret feelings on top of already comprehensive personal experience with them."

Sam feels violated the same way he feels violated every single time he even thinks about Chuck's publications. He knows, after investigating further when Charlie expressed knowledge of the Apocalypse, that Chuck disappeared and the rest of his works were published post-humorously by his publisher. It owned the rights and with the e-book model taking off it took a fresh gasp after bankruptcy.
"When you put it like that, uh, I think you owe me a lot of stories, Crowley," he says, gaping. Of course Crowley read them. And that got Sarah and the others killed. That...makes the book situation a thousand times worse, forever. They have a lot more enemies out there.

Crowley holds a hand up in surrender, granting the point. He takes a sip of his Scotch, wetting his lips.

"One of God's chosen people, me. Israelite. I've been scores of different demons," he says. "You are how you spend your time and what's on your mind. We go through phases like everyone else.

"We've Lilith, and she's — she was — an African original. Mint. She heard Lucifer despite the cage. She committed evil in his name. She went to Hell, which you and I now know was created to contain him."

Sam sits back in his chair, tuning out the bar, sipping on his beer, listening closely. He doesn't know what story he expected, but he didn't expect it to go hand in hand with a lesson in Hell's history.

"The Israelites knew about demons," Crowley says, tipping his glass toward Sam in punctuation, fast on the uptake. "There's all the apocryphal theorizing you can read for yourself if you have trouble getting to sleep. The E! True Hollywood Story has historically been dished out on a need to know basis. We didn't need to know, because we had our instructions for clean living.

"God, my god and yours, made the covenant with Abraham and so on and so forth, went through all the trouble of the Exodus, et cetera. Until we merry few. We were perfectly aware of the pagan gods' powers back then, because they were powerful and pervasive beyond our lands. Henotheists. You don't have to look hard: No other gods before Me, not that there weren't alternatives. Second Kings three, twenty-seven. Chemosh gives our God a good punch to the face. Looking at our current bind, still a highlight of the book."

Crowley can only make the whiskey last so long. He flags the waiter, ordering something on tap. Sam's beer is running low. Sam asks for another round. Sam can't hold off his skeptical look when the waiter has taken Crowley's snifter off to the bar. "Belgian. Has a punch," Crowley says, "Although German will do."

Crowley waits on the beer. Considering the topic of conversation, Sam gets that, using the chance to finish off his own.

"I had the one God all my life. I died for dealing with demons," he says when they're re-situated. "If you practiced witchcraft, people were eager with the stoning. My temper. Somebody winds up dead. Wasn't subtle. Flying colors on the three witness legal standard.

"Go downstairs. Same place, same business, different lingo. Mind you, not everyone an Israelite. Lilith had her successes before God ran little experiment, us, and then went public and started selling shares. Textbook knowledge in Hell, once they dragged you down, that we came from Lucifer. Except no one 'spoke' to Lucifer except Lilith and, over the first millennia, the Knights, chosen one by one. For all anyone knew it was a fanatical belief and Knighthood was a stylized power grab. Me? I made sure to be no one in particular. You know my feelings on risk management."

Sam chuckles. He has a comfortable buzz going. He's not completely sure what to anticipate from a drink between five and fourteen percent.

"You failed. Epically. King of Hell."
"Right," Crowley says, flashing his snake oil smile. "That's only the preface. I have talent. It's a curse. When you have talent in Hell, somebody above you's going to use it. You don't get a choice. You may get something much more unpleasant." Sam reads honesty in Crowley's total lack of concern. Maybe he regrets what he did to other demons, Sam knows what Crowley did to Meg, but here's a reminder Crowley's still a demon, himself. Crowley doesn't miss a beat:

"That went all directions. Right before I worked the crossroads, I worked in sowing discord. Starting wars. Hilariously, under Abaddon, but not intimately in any sense. Different regions, different dispatchers.

"Lilith calls me to her in secret. It staggered me Lilith even knew my name. I didn't know who her talent scouts were until ages later. She says to me, must have been the fourteen hundreds, 'Rosier, Belial has outlived his usefulness.' Outrageous, unthinkable thing to put in anybody's ear. The very idea of executing a Knight. We all knew Belial had come to a dangerous intersection, skimming the cream off the top, but the Knights had clout. Even Lilith oughtn't say that aloud.

"The queen is the queen. I devise to stage my own death. Tricky business. I idle in this human and that about two-hundred years. Get the 'go', whole black op. Found a temperamental bastard taken to whoring with a devout wife." Sam hears the brogue slipping into his voice. Thinks Method actor. "She's guaranteed to disappear to Heaven. I kill her, have me-self torn apart by Hellhounds. Have me dear son Gavin elsewise taken care of. Come to Hell, stash Fergus and myself under the right torturer. The real Fergus is buried deep and molicated by Lilith's best. Terrible business. I come out a new demon."

Crowley smirks without pride; drinks deep. The regret in his eyes passes. He maintains his focus, vowels coming and going.

"By this time Belial's been executed by the other Knights. Crossroads demons are fighting amongst themselves for top position. No one would be comfortable with someone being installed. Makes everyone insecure to do it direct like. Lilith had good intelligence. I'm a sure bet. Nobody closes deals like me. I come into my new position, lock it up. Sort out the mess. King of the Crossroads, purveyor of tailor-fit false miracles. If anyone suspects, no one dares suspect aloud."

Crowley finishes his beer. He sets it on the table with finality, orders one more, looking like the memories have caught up. Sam almost refuses a third when the waiter asks but then smiles and shrugs.

"So you're..." Sam grows self-conscious as Crowley adopts a waiting expression. "—super old."

Definitely buzzed.

"Rude," Crowley protests without offense. "Also, hardly. Look at Castiel. He's geriatric. Lilith must have been eighty, ninety thousand. Christians make the Bible sound like ancient times. I'm a little over three thousand. Mum and I were that wrong sort who convinced God to leave his people to the Philistines until they shaped up. You'd know it for leading into the Samson business."

Sam nods, digesting it all – Crowley's history, the sandwich, the beer poisoning his bloodstream.

"You couldn't have been Crowley until the twentieth century."

"Hell doesn't have him. Aleister Crowley. Egyptian property, I think," Crowley says. "But the sensation he caused. Took the name. I had adopted the standard British accent by then. Had to phase out the Scottish slowly at first. Make it believable. Once you're a 'king' or 'archduke' or 'marquis' or can securely walk around tacking on a title at all, 'By the by, fluent in Chinese, Xhosa,
Enochian – in fact, just name a language; 'Oh, don't actually look like the rest of you lot,' suddenly gets a pass.

"How I smoke, red – sort of a mark of Cain. If you're an Israelite gone to Hell, God really wants to thrash you. Not that any of us few left would tattle to other demons."

Sam hasn't touched his third beer yet. He eyes it, approximates, decides he's definitely more resilient than that and picks it up to take a drink.

"Thank you," he says afterward. "I mean, for trusting me." He doesn't expect to ever know Crowley's Hebrew name, but the information is dangerous enough if Crowley ever chose to return to Hell. Demons could dig. Sam's beginning to understand the ins and outs of spellcraft. He catches himself smiling. "It's like a hundred dollars off your five cents per word debt, but thanks."

Crowley's regard is calm and serious. Sam swallows, chest tight. The guilt he nursed for days comes back over him, a morass of regret.

"I know who you are at your best." There's no hesitation; no doubt in his words. "We're a long way from you breaking into my house and trying to blow my head off with your present."

Sam should say something, but emotion swells. Part of him can't understand the faith Dean, Crowley and the others are putting in him. When that part comes to the forefront, Kevin looks like the only sane person in the bunker.

Crowley glances away, eyes skirting across their surroundings; looks back more serious than before.

"Want we should start seeing each other?"

That's easy when who deserves what is subtracted from the equation.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "I really do."

Crowley loosens up, takes a drink, cants his head toward Sam, warning:

"I don't put out on the first date – which this isn't."

Sam smiles again. This time he wins the quirk of Crowley's lips.

"I'm okay with that. More than okay." He's not used to it, but he should get used to it. Dating. Utilitarian, here. Trust exercises. More than that. Sam bet Crowley doesn't know if he can accept having somebody's affection any more than before. Even knowing that, he speaks with confidence: "It's going to get better. I hope I'm part of the reason."

Crowley's startled look stays frozen on his face for seconds. The hurt breaks through. This time Sam allows it to take its toll. They sit drinking their beers, both draining them to the bottom. Sam may have slightly miss-estimated ten point seven percent alcohol by volume and the amount of beer in the glasses. It's too late to turn back now.

"You're amazing," Crowley says a few minutes later, mystification genuine. "Aren't slowed down by no God and no plan, by the overwhelming corruption on every level. Ridiculous."

Sam lifts his brow. He knows better.

"I love Dean," he explains. He feels it in his body, too. Qualifiers: "His sense of humor's from
elementary school, and he's an alcoholic. He has that serial killer vibe. He sucks at communicating. He's a slob, the way he eats is disgusting and his idea of affection centers on insulting me. He's selfless to the point I can't protect him, and that sucks." That's not the important part. It's not important, either, that Dean has punched him when he's angry a lot of times, but Sam doesn't want to explain their history or their father right now. He gets to the point:

"He does what he thinks is right, no matter what. When I'm a wreck, he turns that smile on and sometimes, for a minute I'm okay again. When I can't be, he keeps me on my feet. He's human. He's more human than anybody, especially when I'm not." Sam shrugs. "I knew Lucifer like...six times as long and nothing; there wasn't a single thing he could say or do to me that made me think for a minute Dean isn't worth putting up with Dean. That's how I do it. Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory – Dean's the same man. I believe in that. Even if sometimes he's thought protecting me means not trusting or believing in me. That's human, too."

Maybe he said a little much.

"You're getting pissed, sweetie," Crowley demurs. "I need to get you home."

Sam wrinkles his nose.

"You're not my...Bobby. —which means you have four times the chance of keeping me sober. I want that. I get killer hangovers."

Crowley grins.

"Wake up every two, three hours and drink a glass of water. The actual hangover cure. Your body can't use it until you actually get all the alcohol through the liver and out. Obviously I don't have the problem; I've had ages of casual sex with people who do."

"I'm pretty competitive in 'How many people have you slept with'...which is uncomfortable," Sam admits.

Now Crowley wrinkles his brow; grows frank.

"Heard you joined an orgy in Washington state. Killed two witches. Went on with the orgy. Scandalous. Had a complaint reach my desk about that one. Investigative reporter did some interviews. Tens all around."

Sam should be taken aback; instead he's starting to remember that. Vividly.

"I'm ready to go now. And for date dates."

—where he's pretty sure most people don't compare sexual indiscretions.

"That was a highlight in all the managing Cas and the Campbells nonsense," Crowley says blamelessly; ticks his head to the side. "And it was a lowlight. Put it in my head to be worry about what Cas had done. But you were...too effective to examine it closely. World ending and everything."

"Right." Sam hasn't thought about it in a long time, but he has new perspectives on that year since it all happened. Pieces click. He offers: "You had to cover for him for that. Again."

"It was all terrible," Crowley admits, pain tugging at his expression. "Thinking back...Eve should be alive. And her children. Criminal what we did." His voice falls quiet. "You were right we all got it right. Nobody knew better. Saved billions of lives. Just could have gotten it so much 'righter'."
Hindsight could put your eyes out." He takes a breath, martials his expression, looks expectant: "Ready to go?"

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Sam wishes he had a camera to capture Dean's face with when Dean buzzes them in.

"Oh god, you're back to fucking Crowley," he says like the world is ending.

Sam remembers their phone conversation as he and the demon head down the stairs.

"Dean..."

"He's Crowley!" Dean defends, scowling.

Once on the main floor, the man in question gestures to himself with both hands.

"Me: Intelligent, witty, damned handsome, sharp dressed, have manners, shag like a freak, boyfriend." He turns his hands over in the opposite direction. "You: Don't get a say. Seven points for Crowley. Dean Winchester: Zero."

Dean throws his own hands out, offering up the example in his appalled voice.

"See. Crowley."

Crowley has on a sharkish grin. Sam looks at him, smirking as, even one step past tipsy, he realizes they're play acting. Which is in an intoxicated state especially adorable. He looks innocently to Dean.

"Definitely see Crowley."

Dean moans, slaps his hands on his thighs, and goes back to the library table where he's working on a piece of the radio, falling into his chair.

"I'd stage a hunger strike but I love food too much."

"With that kind of stick-to-it'ness I'm genuinely stunned we still have an Earth," Crowley says as they follow him forward.

Sam used to think of Dean as just easy. By now he'll admit Dean has a talent. He's a convincing enemy, right now. He also picked up a security guard through a lesbian.

Sam uses the opening, saying in solidarity:

"Next time we have time you wanna go see a movie?"

Crowley's smile shifts, thoughtful.

"Be delighted," he says graciously.

Crowley gives Sam a nod, Sam returns a wave of his hand. Crowley disappears. That one is going to take getting used to.

"Thanks, man," Sam says, taking a seat across from Dean, studying what his brother's doing. His job was package assembly. He meant to help out building the radio, but his confidence in leading this initiative tanked.
"Don't thank me," Dean gripes. "I didn't wanna get Navy SEALed and wake up in a field." He stops fiddling, looking up. "He went and brought you back from a bar." Approval. "He's also an annoying little shit and I have no idea what you're thinking." Disapproval.

Sam doesn't know how much of a confession Dean wants to hear.

"I'm not fucking him. I'm dating him. I screwed up pretty hard."

"I know. Sort of," Dean says, surprising Sam. He goes back to keeping his hands busy. "I asked him. I had to interrogate somebody about why everybody was acting whack. I don't know what you did. I don't have to know. Just...keep your nose clean, huh? Don't be shady."

Sam never imagined he'd be the one getting the *If you hurt him, I'll kill you* talk. He's grateful that Dean holds him to a standard. It'd be nice if Dean watched out for Crowley, too, but Sam doesn't know how much to expect.

He really, really loves Dean. He does.

"After the radio goes up, I wanna go work a job. With you."

"You can't just ask everybody out. Damn, Sam. I'm your brother. How much did you drink?"

Right. Too much emoting.

"I'm not cornering you with my feelings. You're safe, dude," he promises. "I need to get my head straight. Doing something illegal and violent with you usually helps. Blanket disclaimer: Crowley's sold me on negotiations with monsters with shit childhoods. Which I immediately fucked up when I made the call to go to the harpies home ground armed. Work in progress."

Dean's head jerks up, hands falling fisted onto the table on either side of his rig.

"You lying son of a bitch. I knew it! Those weren't freakin' velociraptors!"

Sam's mouth drops open.

"You actually believed that? Wow, Dean. Just...wow."

"I hate you," Dean snaps. "That's a bridge too far. That's the thirty-eighth parallel. Do not fuck around about velociraptors. That movie changed *lives*, Sam."

"You look like you have the radio under control. You need coffee?" Sam placates.

"Your giant ham hocks would just get in the way. Yes. I do. Fuel me," Dean says, still glaring.

Sam gentles up, sweetens, pesters.

"Calm down there little buddy."

Dean slams his fist down, making the table jump. Not a threat. One hundred percent obfuscated embarrassment.

"*Get in the kitchen.* Get in the actual kitchen!"
Chapter 18

Charlie throws her hands into the air.

"We are live. High fives people. Bro fists."

She makes a point of collecting either or from everyone gathered behind her and Castiel, except Castiel, before focusing back on her monitor. Castiel is using Dean's laptop, his head tilted far to the left, brow furrowed at the straight line across the black rectangle embedded in the user interface.

"There may be no activity, but the diagnostics reports tell me we're on the public frequency. I knew it would be like this, but it's hard to believe there's...That it's all gone."

Crowley puts a hand on his shoulder, causing him to straighten his head and look back.

"Maybe not forever," he reminds him dutifully. Castiel's face falls from perplexity to grim sorrow.

"Your support is appreciated but Sam's ambition takes priority. We protect the souls."

Crowley offers a tight smile, claps his shoulder once and withdraws the support while Castiel's attention returns to the screen. Dean, beside Crowley, broods at Crowley aggressively. Crowley aspires that his own expression makes do in place of smacking the back of his head.

Dean doesn't need to get laid. Crowley wouldn't even quip it. Dean needs to stop projecting and address Castiel personally. By the time the demon has a chance to take him aside and explain that acknowledging Dean's problem doesn't mean he'll be anything but as affectionate as he pleases it will have blown over for both of them.

"I'll just quintuple check we're ready to transmit," Charlie says with intensity, vision tunneling to the screen in front of her.

Sam has turned away from the readouts to face their hulking angel radio, his hands on his hips and face screwed up.

"I gotta hand it to you guys. I'm more frightened looking at this thing than most things that have tried to kill me."

Dean's sour mood gives way to glee. He folds his arms over his chest; lifts his chin.

"I'm looking into a human processing mod. It'll be ripping out your guts and replacing them with cyborg parts before you know it."

"Those water cooling tubes definitely could be used for people juicing," Kevin agrees.

"Isn't it perfect?" Charlie asks without shifting her gaze, proud as a mother.

Bookshelves were dragged aside to keep precious materials from being damaged by the ceiling-high colossus now dominating the library. Blue light glows from within a rust-corroded scrap metal frame spray painted black when its engineers felt like carrying pieces outside or left degraded by the elements when they didn't. Tubes glowing blue and red bulge outward, looping through holes in the frame, securing additional space inside. Radio components rise upward jaggedly from the body, attached to an antenna booster Crowley frankly does not understand.
“It doesn’t match the aesthetic of the room, no,” he says, prim, putting no dent Charlie's cheer.

“It would not be out of place in a science fiction horror film,” Cas says.

Kevin speaks up, cautious but genuine.

“If you like those I have a lot to show you.”

Castiel smiles back at him. Crowley notes the complete lack of hostility on Dean's part when Kevin bonds with Cas. The child has realized Castiel doesn't understand human politics enough to be on a 'side' when it comes to Crowley or to have meant him harm and is acting accordingly.

Charlie shoots a few questions to Castiel before announcing:

"The transmission is ready for broadcast. Cross your fingers, apply your holy unctions. And...We are broadcasting, while keeping our eyes peeled for jamming."

Crowley scoffs. From his perspective very little has changed. Numbers are racing by in places they weren't before and the black box in the interface reflects the noise on the inaudible channel.

"My heart is racing."

"Mine kind of is. Not a big fan of waiting games," Sam says, frowning.

Dean grunts solidarity.

"No contender edges out the hands on approach."

Kevin scratches his perpetually ragged beard.

"In theory? In movies? I like this kind of thing. In the real world weeks of work boils down to staring at two computer screens hoping nothing happens."

"What can I say? It's a thrill a minute in my line of work," Charlie says, for a moment her smile blinding; it disappears, she pouts, makes eyes. "...somebody mainline me some coffee."

----

Crowley expects to spend the quality time between him and himself Dean and Sam are leaving him in their days away reflecting on his crimes in solitude while combining witchcraft and alchemical work and basic life skills into some kind of useful products. Starting off: Colloidal silver laden aerosol for what can't stand to be touched by silver or will be poisoned lungs-to-bloodstream. More iron bullets what won't wreck a gun barrel that can kill a hellhound or any number of other creatures for the smooth bore pistols from the Men of Letters' armory. The supply is low. Hex bags for cursing to be stashed away awaiting human threats because the boys aren't here to protest.

He went with Sam to the cinema. Crowley fancies spy thrillers, war films and SWAT teams – it's no secret something about bureaucracy running like clockwork and the art of sabotage gets him off; also certain comedies; also excessively emotional television movies, which is beside the point. Sam fancies 'nothing that resembles my real life right now'; he looked skeptical of lighter fare. Crowley supposed from that that movies that provoke touching or cuddling were out. An amenable action thriller existed.

They walked to a nearby coffee shop, a cool night breeze harrying the trees. Drank coffee and shared a piece of chocolate cake more like fudge divided by layers of mousse with an
embarrassment of icing that fell somewhere between 'heavenly' and utterly disgusting. Reminded Crowley of his last date. Didn't have to pretend anything cuter than wanting to go a round with it. Talked about cinema. Sam's knowledge belongs to someone a generation before him, consisting of classic mainstream television shows and films, and then he's covered a more eclectic selection, films like *Tokyo Story*, *Wings of Desire* and *Faraway, So Close!*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Mulholland Drive* that he was exposed to through his deceased girlfriend.

"Aber noch niemandem ist es gelungen, ein Epos des Friedens. Yet still no one has ever succeeded in an epic of peace," Crowley quoted. The idea means something drastically different to him now. In 1987 it was a genuine pleasure to gloat angels would never save humanity from depravity. "I used to make the Cannes Film Festival with regularity. Lot of desperate people in that business. Artists…"

"We're never, ever letting Cas see either of Wim Wenders' angel pieces. Ever," Sam asserted.

With a wince Crowley had to agree they weren't. Close enough to home to turn Castiel's guilt and malaise into something much more dangerous. Even hitting that dark note, Crowley appreciates sharing something with another being. Sentiments.

Crowley desires more. More outings. More intimacy. Contact. He plans to take solace in the time apart despite that. There's only so much body-of-a-Greek-god he can expect himself to handle with fresh memories of the boy's cock down his throat and up his arse, Sam spooning him while he pulled him off, everything body heat and resistibly firm body. He doesn't want to fuck; feels a world too debased, doesn't trust his own motives, all that. Best to clear his head.

He has his breakfast, then coffee improved with whiskey while he reads the news off his phone. He establishes his workspace for his aerosol baubles, more like flea bombs or smoke grenades than bottles of mace.

Then Castiel.

The man isn't subtle, big, nervous hope-filled eyes on Crowley as he closes the pharmacy door behind him. Crowley exhales his precocious irritation and safely separates his ingredients.

"Dean says you've regained much of your functional capacity," Castiel says politely.

"Dean says a lot of things, most of which only you listen to."

"I want to go see them."

Crowley pauses, evaluating Castiel with narrowed eyes, then shrugs off his words.

"Ask Dean to drive you when he's back."

"Dean is recalcitrant to even *speak* about the other angels. I already know he'd refuse," Castiel says, voice still courteous, eyes still pleading. "They have dedicated websites, now, and some of them have blogs, but…"

"It's not the same as seeing them whole and hardy in the flesh. I get it," Crowley says with patience practiced just for Castiel, likely to fall off into yelling at any moment. "We are wearing the two faces most likely to start a riot. Maybe if you didn't have that anti-possession tattoo I'd…ride you there, pop you out if you got in trouble. Neither of us can afford to get made, definitely not at the same time."

"Crowley. Please?"
Crowley has no desire to be in the middle of an argument between Castiel and Dean. He already hears Dean threatening to collar him. The Winchester's mother bear initiatives follow a distinct Dean-knows-best pattern. A drunk Sam said as much himself. On the other hand, Cas isn't a child and doesn't need a permission slip from anyone to leave the bunker.

Cas is using the Bette Davis eyes to full effect. Now Crowley can hear Kim Carnes in his head. The accuracy of certain lines is physically painful on account of how tight his brow has winced.

He lets the expression fall from his face; anger at Castiel's manipulations boil up.

"They've only been gone five hours," he roars; Cas flinches but doesn't step back – insulting. "You don't understand, featherbrain. If you're identified as the culprit behind the God Crisis, you'll be charged with murder in every state and country where you appeared and caused deaths! You're well under the statute of limitations for property damage. You'll be liable for that, too. Then there's the likelihood the United Nations will prosecute you for crimes against humanity because the murders were demonstrably systematic."

"Oh," Castiel says softly, stunned like a child.

Crowley clenches his jaw, brings his anger down; remains terse.

"Hunter's justice and human justice are different beasts. If Dean and Sam weren't soft on you, you wouldn't have escaped hunter's justice, either," he warns. Shakes his head. "Don't let it crawl too far under your skin. Except for Kevin and including Charlie we should all be jailed for life, or on death row."

Cas has the face of a goddamn adult, now. Crowley prefers it.

"It's not that I haven't considered that my actions were criminal. I always assumed justice was waiting for me in Heaven, not here on Earth," he says.

"You were out of human jurisdiction. Now you aren't."

Castiel's gaze has latched onto him like he's the only person on Earth. Crowley considers phoning Dean but fobbing him off changes it from relating to Cas as he pleases to when he pleases and involves the degrading idea that Dean has a proprietary claim.

"Considering your own situation, do you believe that I deserve human justice?" Cas asks seriously. Crowley thinks the man might walk down to the nearest police station if he said 'Yes'.

"Human justice wasn't created to deal with either of us," he says, instead. "I'm pointing you toward Alison Renteln's *The Cultural Defense*, although with our egregious crimes that would amount to flavor text in the record of the sentencing proceedings."

Castiel's brow furrows.

"I have no understanding of human law except what I've viewed on television."

"Then you're an average American. You ought read up. I, on the other hand, ambition to stay current with the laws of as many countries as I can manage."

Cas stands there without speaking. More is coming. It has only to build up to critical pressure. Crowley almost returns to work before Cas comes out with it:

"I don't want to see them any less."
"Of course you don't," Crowley grouses without giving ground. Cas stands there looking between the door and Crowley, undecided. If Crowley gives it a minute he'll retreat, but he's going to be throwing out the sorrowful, wistful looks until the end of the world comes round again.

"Fine. As long as you don't disappear from apportation range and we leave when I say so. I pick the location."

"Of course," Castiel agrees eagerly. He's so damn earnest. He's just as earnest when he's apologizing or refusing to apologize, later, for completely disregarding what he previously agreed to.

Crowley grimaces; massages his own temples.

"Go shave, love. Dress down. We'll pick you up some aviators. Those are sunglasses. They'll obscure the shape of your face. Try not to talk. I'll go change and practice regretting this for the rest of my life."

----

Filtered sunlight pours down from the shopping mall atrium, reflecting off the grey-flecked white tiles, polished benches, and painted metal rails. The voices of hundreds of humans speaking at once roar incoherent in the open air. Crowley can't tell a former angel from any other human. Cas can, speaking names to Crowley when he recognizes a brother or sister. Crowley can't see his eyes behind the aviators. It's a sure bet they're soulful, even teary, although Crowley doesn't hear the hoarseness of emotion in Cas's deep voice. Crowley's own sunglasses deter easy recognition.

Crowley just went and purchased them malted milkshakes to create an excuse to sit indefinitely on the second floor bench. Cas is horrible company, not talking unless he sees someone from the nearby housing community. His good looks stopped compensating for that an hour ago. It's not the same anymore, besides. A landslide of reasons deter him from imagining how Castiel fucks – except recognizing Castiel would have been the dominating cuss he can easily be if he'd thought it would get him further than appealing to Crowley's humanity. It's a coin toss which way he'd go in bed with who.

That sorted, Crowley is left alone to his other desires while sipping his Java shake.

Sam's fantasy, to be enough to rescue him from the loathing of everyone he's ever been, is kind on the face of it. If anyone could overpower black memories of a cruel history through persistence, he'd be the one. Buying Catholic indulgences with performances of acts of the sexual nature fits into his budget. Coming down to breakfast to be pulled into someone's arms, sorrows chased away amid kissing, not protesting that his mood is low again...All simple. All cheap.

To have rejected that recourse means the misery came back in force. The tears. The self-hatred roiling in his breast. He's exhausted of all of it. Its indefinite tenure threatens to produce unimaginable fatigue over the coming months. He doesn't deserve to be rescued or to give it the dodge, but the support he can't turn down. Not if he wants to be worth a damn to the cause. Sam passionately desires to lend it. Crowley only wants the boy stay clear of provoking the greedy, hedonistic, demonic part of him that lacks resolve.

If Sam were to indulge him in what's safe and reasonable, he would himself rather sleep in Sam's bed, maybe Sam's arms, than get up to anything smutty. To respond to the humanity of that repast, to not be alone, to dream because the demon is buried – not selflessly but to better soak up the pleasure. Dean has drilled into Sam's head that a variety of habits are effeminizing; Crowley has the inkling having a cuddle with a grown man fits the bill. Dean can fuck right off, but Crowley
thinks there's a right time and atmosphere to sell it to Sam.

Sell it.

There's a bitter taste in Crowley's mouth despite the sweet of the shake.

"Farris. In the t-shirt with the multicolored print," Cas says. Crowley follows the direction Cas is facing. The woman is a Latina with black, pixie cut hair. She's carrying a shopping bag branded with the name of a boutique shop. She's comfortable in her surroundings, but like Cas stops and studies unremarkable things or follows the strangers passing her with such an intense gaze she turns around to watch them walk away.

She'll pass close to them. Crowley hopes Cas won't do anything outstandingly moronic.

He doesn't have to. The woman, canny to her surroundings, stops and looks at him.

"Do I know you?" she says. Crowley would like to hit the abort button, apport, but that would burn Castiel's face into her memory.

Crowley rests his arm loosely over Castiel's shoulder.

"You from Milwaukee?" he asks, changing aspects; casually American. He sucks up his shake through his straw; pulls a smile straight across his lips. "Rich brought me down here to finally meet his family."

"Yes. We're from Wisconsin," Castiel says in apologetic tones, mimicking Crowley's higher pitch and his accent like a budgerigar.

"...my mistake," Farris says. Her regard has cooled from curious to stoic. A few moments and she might have it.

"Come on, babe, I still have to find something to bring your mom," Crowley says, energetic and blunt; the American way. He waits for Cas to rise; smiles at Farris again. "Beautiful city. You're lucky to live here."

Fingers linked with Cas's and...walk away.

"She knows, doesn't she?" Cas asks further down the second floor balcony, voice back in register, troubled but still drinking his milkshake.

"If she doesn't yet, she'll likely figure it out. You, I don't think me. Let's make for that department store and disappear among the clothes. Break up the lines of sight."

Castiel obediently allows Crowley to guide him by the hand, exactly like a child again. He's good. The damndest thing is he doesn't know he's good. Crowley remembers his switch from grim defiance to beseeching eyes the moment Cas knew he knew Cas had the tablet inside him. In the arena of securing his own emotional security, Cas is like the thing from The Thing. Continuously assimilating data, deploying probabilistically advantageous strategies based on environmental cues. Every living thing does that, but not with the rapidity of Castiel in his element.

Crowley thanks himself for practicing this being perfectly horrible. His temper is at lull. He stops and buys Castiel one of those modern paste-on tattoos from a coin operated machine, pocketing it without explanation. Later, after he finishes yelling at the idiot at the top of his lungs inside the bunker, he can barter with it to make peace, not because Cas is actually childish – only a fool would be taken in by that – but because the mechanism should be sufficiently novel.
Dean sings along to Motörhead as the Impala sails down a stretch of hot asphalt somewhere in Tennessee. Sam watches trees and fields pass outside the window, smiling to himself out of Dean's sight. As long as the engine's combusting, the Impala is untouchable, a world apart. The empty back seat feels right. Sam pretends for a minute that they never grew into men; that people wait to be rescued ahead of them but the fate of the planet will never hinge on their actions.

Like they're almost real people.

What pulls Sam back from his fantasy isn't Dean singing louder to the next song but a sudden, shaper awareness of the air conditioner blowing through the short hairs at the nape of his neck. He remembers the sound of scissors severing hairs, the towel thrown around his neck snowed over with fine, loose strands. He reaches up to touch the back of his head, hearing Crowley say *Luck's on my side; I still remember how to do this myself.*

_Not comforting words five minutes in._

If there's a proverbial crossroads between a dependent and independent Crowley, Sam wants independent. Separation is a good thing. Sam doesn't prefer Crowley undistracted from his crushing history, but Cas and Charlie are there and Kevin doesn't actively want to kill him.

Dean's singing lapses.

"How you feel about stopping to eat?"

"Sure," Sam says, looking across the bench seat at his brother. "Yeah."

Dean is as alive as he's ever been in the past six years, give or take. Sam's happy with it. For him.

They pull off at the next exit with a couple fast food joints. Dean refuses to eat at Wendy's, pointing out he'd come out better actually being robbed than paying for a burger. They end up at Taco Bell, using the drive through but sitting in the Impala eating in the parking lot. Dean tells him he's mentally deficient for ordering off the cantina menu with the jacked up prices. Sam retorts what he's eating is actual food.

"You're making a big deal out of nothing. It's a couple of dollars more."

"We've been eating this shit all our lives. Feeding two people at a drive through should never cost twenty bucks."

"This may shock you, but some people actually want to make a living wage."

"That shocks me. I tried that once. Nothing beats fraud."

Sam doesn't bother explaining that for people to be defrauded to exist someone somewhere in the chain has to be making money legitimately. Dean willfully doesn't factor in those variables.

"I was starting to think I'd never get back out here," Dean says, ripping a bite off his taco, bite stuffed into one bulging side of his mouth. "Getting up to larceny with Cas was great and all. It's not hunting."

Dean wins a smile from Sam.

"With any luck we'll put your life in danger by tomorrow afternoon."
Dean pumps the air with a 'jackpot' motion, chewing too much taco to talk around it. He coerces the mouthful into his stomach with the addition of soda.

"Two weeks until MoonDoor," Dean exults.

Sam's smile brightens.

"That's right, Reinhold the Bloodened."

Charlie has driven off to a couple events, LARP or otherwise, since she moved in indefinitely, despite abdicating the throne. He and Dean haven't felt the same liberty, Sam hunting with Crowley, sacrificing a sheep; both of them training Cas and Kevin and hammering together a beehive (although Cas had mastered the basic techniques by the end). A real vacation? Sam digs the idea. Kevin's down with it. A wizard. Cas understands they'll be pretending to be fantasy characters and the fighting isn't real. The consensus is it'll be good for his imagination as long as they watch him until it's clear he won't actually assault and batter anyone. Sam has no doubt Cas has the right idea. It comes down to a few years among humans versus four million as a living weapon.

Crowley? Keeping an eye on the real world.

I'd be brilliant at that, he said. Let's agree as a secret society not to put me anywhere in a congregation with photos tweeted where Abaddon might slaughter three score people to end me.

Mood killer.

"Okay," Dean says, bunching up his taco wrappers. "Need to piss? No? North Carolina here we come."

----

Sam suspects they'd be enjoying the North Carolina summer: traveling its forests and fields, roadside flowers in bloom, the Blue Ridge Mountains rising in the distance...if they could see any of that through the drenching remains of Hurricane Erin passing slowly overhead.

They arrive soggy in their motel room, throwing their duffels on the bed, shaking themselves out and wiping the water back through their hair.

"Nothing should dump that much water on me in thirty feet. A god, somewhere, should fix that shit," Dean says, gesticulating toward the door while he goes to get a hand towel.

"And the bidding for Dean Winchester's immortal soul opens at no more than two inches of rain."

"To hell with that. After everything we've been through? I'm keeping it, buddy. Casa Dean. Turn right at Asgard."

Sam looks skeptically at his older brother, who's scrubbing his hair and brushing his shoulders off, mouth hanging open on the verge of several unkind, baby brother shots.

"—I'll make sure, to, uh, visit, man," he says, instead, snapping his jaw shut and, laptop tucked under his arm, dropping his bag between the far bed and the wall.

"You don't wanna live at Casa Dean when you kick it for good?" Dean protests, looking back at Sam over his shoulder.
Sam's brows rise of their own accord.

"No. Probably not."

"Jeez. Harsh." Dean throws the used towel under the bathroom counter.

"Hey," Sam says, cheerful, as he leans down to plug in his power cord. "Think you could make that McDonalds up the road?"

Dean lets his bitchy groan go on – and on.

"Uncool, Sam."

Sam holds his hand up in Dean's direction.

"I already have my laptop out. I'm working here, dude."

"You're still wet," Dean snaps. It doesn't matter. He's grabbing up the keys and heading out the door. He arrives back twenty minutes later, drenched again, expression flat like a doused cat but on task because he doesn't want to hear he's being a little bitch about it. He drops Sam's bag on the table and sits dripping across from him, getting his game on, no more bonding time. Abruptly professional. "What'd Garth have to say about the hunter who was snuffed on this job?"

"That we need to get access to the autopsy?" Sam remembers off the top. "Not much. He came to investigate the deaths at the local steel tube manufactory, he saw, he drove his car into the wall of a commercial bank and died."

Dean rubs his nose; starts digging his food out while studying Sam

"He wasn't off the clock, wasting away in Margaritaville?"

Sam glances at his laptop screen.

"Obviously I don't have the toxicology report, but I don't think so. Get this. Three days after his accident? A woman was electrocuted by the bank's ATM. Dead on arrival. The metal casing became conductive after years of the machine being safely earthed. They investigated if the crash could have been the cause. Another side of the building, and no."

"And the deaths at the plant...two involved the tube mill line, one involved a forklift and one in the..." Dean snaps his fingers twice. "Coating line."

"Okay. I'm impressed."

Dean shrugs off the compliment.

"I lived north of Indianapolis. I looked into a lot of industry jobs."

That's the closest Dean's come to mentioning Lisa and Ben in three years. Sam thinks it was by accident. He focuses on the case.

"So we have six deaths involving five different types of machines."

Dean thinks about it a minute; bursts out:

"William Shatner!"
Sam stares.

"William Shatner?"

Sam recoils as Dean looks at him like he's stupid or crazy.

"'Nightmare at 20,000 Feet.' Gremlins."

"Why would I remember that from 'William Shat—Don't look at me like that. You don't know me."

The least plausible defense in the world.

"You sorry son of a bitch. I can see behind your eyes. You're just thinking about, admittedly badass, mechanized puppets. You have no culture."

"Gremlins," Sam says. "Supposedly imps keeping up with the times. I don't know, Dean. Imps have been in the lore since there's been lore. They're like the dinky fifth cousin of other soul feeders. They're soul nibblers, and they usually roll solo. Pretty harmless. Ugly, but...harmless. The only story I've heard about anyone hunting an imp was from Garth. It ended with the homeowner beating the hunter off the property with an umbrella to help the thing escape."

Dean leans back in his chair, rips off a bite of burger and grins ear to ear, chewing.

"You're saying we could be looking at an impfestation."

Sam's expression shutters. He closes his laptop and reaches over to pick up some fries, staring across the table at his older brother.

"...Dean? Go stand in the rain and think about what you've done."

----

With the deaths over a span of three months, most of the bodies have already been sent to their eternal resting place. The motel is only a mile from the factory, but the police station isn't far, cheerfully next to a funeral home and across the street from a church, all three landscaped with healthy green lawns. Sam blows off Dean's Full service!

They stand in the lobby while a brown haired officer in her thirties offers to take over before they're finished speaking to reception. She leads them into the hallway, turning around, serious and expectant.

"You're the Winchesters."

"We're not—What?" Dean fumbles.

"You're Sam and Dean Winchester. Don't—You don't need to show me the badges again." She waves away the beginning of the gestures. "Come on. Let's secure a room. I'll bring you the case files."

Each taking a side of an interrogation table while they're left waiting in defiance of being interrogated, Sam leans in; Dean matches him, their voices hushed.

"This is not good."

Dean's stunned face concurs.
"Should we get out of here?" he says.

"I don't know, should we?"

Officer Sellers returns, manila folders under her arms, closing the door and giving them both a smile.

"Here they are," she says, laying them on the table. "We knew that wasn't you. The crime spree two years ago."

"We?" Sam ventures cautiously.

"Supernatural fans. The books?"

Dean leans away from the woman, looking as traumatized as Sam's feeling.

"Oh, god, kill me now."

Officer Sellers stands at the end of the table, brisk and professional.

"We've closed half of our forums, the main forum, ours, the people who know, is hand coded and password locked and now we're running it off a secure server. Harry and Ed post there—"

"Who?" Dean interjects.

Sam casts a look his way.

"Harry and Ed. The Ghostfacers."

Dean clears his throat.

"Tell me some good news, here, officer."

Officer Sellers looks like she's wracking her brain. Sam takes no reassurance from that.

"We stopped seeding torrents of the books. We've been sending out fake C&Ds from the 'publisher' to people. We can't get the publisher to stop selling the e-books. Right now they're buried among a lot of bad horror? Even after all that, people can get them for free pretty easily. It's not good news. We're buying time before the world knows monsters are out there. The best news is the huge amount of pornography that comes up when you Google you guys."

"Wow. That…" Sam stops, legitimately stymied.

Dean looks incredulous, slowly shaking his head.

"God bless horny, horny slash fans. Sam. I may actually give your hand to Becky."

Sam shoots a look Dean's way.

"I know you're on a case, and pressed for time here, but, guys, we need to know what to do. After that false God racked up a body count, and now, with Angelfall…"

Dean clears his throat. Again.

Officer Sellers receives an unceremonious dose of holy water. She laughs, caught in a moment of disbelief. Asks for a dagger. Scores her arm. Sam takes the dagger back, sufficiently impressed.
"Short version?" Dean says. "That 'false God' thing was a huge…terrible, really terrible train wreck, but the alternative was the actual Apocalypse all over again. Angelfall? That's the product of some douchery. It's a problem."

He looks across the table at Sam. Sam shrugs. He doesn't know how much to give away or not give away. He's siding with not. That's as much as they can give anyone.

"Here," Officer Sellers says, pulling out a notepad and pen and writing studiously. She rips the page out and slides it across the table to Sam. "This is our URL. And the password." It's an admirable over-twenty-irregular-characters. "I'm not asking you to post. But we have access to resources you don't." She smiles, pats the case files on the table, lifts her brow. "I'll leave you two with this. Bring it to my desk when you're done."

"Thank you, Officer Sellers," Sam says stiltedly.

"My pleasure."

Dean stares dumbly at the closed door. Sam cringes.

"I know Cas gave you the heads up, but I'm not ready for The Winchester Gospel," he says.

"There has to be a rule somewhere that the truth stays put until you're dead for good," Dean demands.

Sam turns a sympathetic look on his brother.

"Plus, 'Gospel' means 'good news'. We don't have any."

"I tell you what," Dean says, voice thick. "We focus on the case and we pretend that never happened. Until we get home."

Right now, Sam definitely likes the idea of twenty feet of steel reinforced, magically impenetrable concrete more than the sound of 'home'.

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Wahid Karim, killed in the line of duty, the plant workers and the victim of the ATM all exhibit tiny puncture wounds. Feasible claw marks from a tiny monster scrambling to guzzle their last breaths.

Dean refuses to drive Baby anywhere near the scenes of the crimes. That turns into walk in the storm in the dark to the plant beneath umbrellas completely not up to the task. Sam walks into a puddle calf deep. Dean's umbrella is blown out of his hands. If the plant wasn't shut down they wouldn't be successfully infiltrating anything. They take off their squelching shoes and their socks and leave their umbrellas against the wall where they break inside.

No guns. Iron knives. That's a real joy when their enemies are a foot tall with angry teeth and machinery grinds around them, exploding, throwing off shrapnel that stabs on impact and slices from underfoot – machinery that snags clothes, almost turning Dean to chum before Sam hacks his brother's shirt off. Not without breaking the skin.

When Sam stabs the last imp to the ground and Dean hacks it apart with greater than necessary force they fall back panting onto the floor, looking at each other in relief while they pant.

"Bag these midget fuckers up and burn them?"
"Dean you *know* you can't say—" Sam gives up, breathing too heavily. "Yeah. Yeah, that sounds right. What about the imp at the ATM?"

"Betting it hauled ass home. If it didn't it's gonna be deterred without a gang of buddies. I think we can, uh, we can actually tip off Officer Sellers. I guess. Actually. You know, let her know how to put it down if it shows up." Dean looks dumbfounded just saying that. "Pretty sure she can handle herself."

No explanations needed. It's never been quite that easy.

Never before.

They pull the power on the machines. Get to the door where they disarmed the security system and broke in, leaving a trail of sanguine footprints. Their shoes, socks and umbrellas are torn to shreds. They add them to the trashbag of imps where Dean's blood-stained shirt has been laid to rest.

"How are we gonna burn this shit in this storm?" Dean bitches at the sky while they wade back toward the motel.

"Accelerant and a trashcan? There'll have to be stuff that catches in the rest of the trash."

Dean whines. Looks down. Almost kicks a rock before he has second thoughts about what that could do to his freely bleeding foot.

"Our lives are glorious, Sam. I completely understand why anybody would want to read about us. The same reason you read tabloids. You feel better about yourself."

"Hey," Sam says, uselessly pushing back his sodden hair. "When did you last get a tetanus shot?"

Miserable, Dean sneers down at the heavy bag of rent flesh.

"Fucking Steven Spielberg fuckers."
Castiel resigned himself to the future where Dean returns from his hunting trip where the news that he may have stirred up whispers of his own survival, to be broken diplomatically by their resident demon, will produce an altercation. He is watching television when Dean storms in, looming over the couch and over him; dictatorial – bellowing *Cas!*

"Yes, Dean?" he asks with quiet restraint, squinting at the fury on the man's face. Dean will use his words as weapons. Castiel will remain at the disadvantage because he has yet to master the nuances of human communication. He hates this Dean, in human hyperbole.

Dean doesn't lower his volume:

"You explain to me how you went out there and let your family see your face."

"I asked Crowley to take me, and Crowley consented."

Better not to attempt an interpretation of Dean's employment of 'how'. Crowley also yelled at him, before and afterward. Crowley yells. Castiel doesn't find that hurtful. Crowley lives with a presiding anger inside him. When he yells it is to state in plain terms what has infuriated him. Dean can be hurtful. He's even hurtful on purpose.

"How could you do that? I'd take a piece of this out of Crowley but Crowley's real sweet on you. He let you go Charlie Sheen crazy. This shit stopped working on *me* three years ago you son of a bitch!"

'How', again. 'Why' Castiel can answer easily. He answers 'why' instead, becoming hard like the firmament in poise and in voice. Dean's anger has never been placated by apologies. Frankly, Castiel doesn't see what he has to apologize for.

"Crowley understood that I needed to see my siblings," he says. "Your belligerence toward my interactions with Crowley, my friend, toward the natural fact that I love my family...I don't know how you expect me to behave, Dean. It's as if you're purposefully making it difficult to comprehend you."

"Don't put this on me—" Castiel withholds, as usual, that he didn't put any responsibility on Dean. "—you're the one who's sticking his hand in a fucking hornet nest. You could have been killed by those people!"

Castiel grits his teeth in irritation.

"Crowley wouldn't have allowed that, and I am under no conditions helpless without Crowley, or you."

"You say that, but you're just one guy. A pair of handcuffs. One bullet. Shit, fists and feet, Cas. You can't just pretend you're still an angel!"

"Dean," he says with gravity he hasn't used against Dean in some time. "Stop talking. Shut up."

Dean does. Castiel doesn't want Dean to grow accustomed to him asserting authority. If given the chance Dean will produce techniques to defy him, and already, sometimes, continues on unchecked.
Castiel rises from the couch and walks to thumb off the television despite the remote control beside him. He and Dean are killers. Simply rising to confront him could become violent on the part of either party. He turns, adamantly, to Dean.

"I needed to see them," he insists. "I see photographs, I read their testimonials, and I may know that they're alive…but until Metatron played me for a fool I was part of them. We could choose at any time to resonate together. You cannot comprehend that experience. You don't understand what that is. You can't. You and Sam are close enough to share a Heaven, as binary stars share a system, but souls remain solitary. I am less now. I'm alone."

Dean nods along in a manner projecting his refusal to listen closely to the content of Castiel's words. He ambles two steps closer, accusation in his gaze.

"Thanks. Thank you, Cas. I'm real glad to know that you feel totally abandoned here in the bunker with us. With me. I feel better, now. Do whatever the fuck you want."

Castiel answers with narrowed eyes and his own two steps.

"Stop perverting my words."

They're standing furiously close now, their teeth clenched, their eyes violent. In his mind they've already engaged in combat. Dean remains the superior combatant, but it no longer means Castiel always 'goes to the mat'.

"Fine," Dean barks in his face.

The fight drops off Dean. He starts breathing hard, a tremor running through his body as his blood sugar plummets from its fighting volume and the adrenaline becomes useless.

Castiel, unused to being weakened by the same reaction, experiences the same effects as he takes one step back, the two of them relentlessly stone faced – seething anger could chiseled into marble.

"I told you," Dean grits out, as tightly guarded as he's ever been. "I need you. But I don't know what that means. The idea of you disappearing on me? Again? I know that scares the hell out of me."

Castiel lets himself wonder over Dean's words, listening to them again, in parts, in his head, seeking to decipher them.

"I have no intention of leaving, Dean," he says.

Dean presses his lips together, voice deep throated, accusative:

"Until you're gone."

Castiel realizes this is no longer worth defending. He has historically been highly unreliable.

"I have a room here, Dean, and my bees," he searches to explain. "This is the best place for me. If you didn't come here directly from Crowley, Charlie may have told you we received the code phrase back from Ash. We have no reason to suspect Metatron's interference. I feel that I'm finally doing good work."

"Damn it, Cas!" Dean, full of exasperation. The threat of escalation to violence appears to have been averted. In his mind, Castiel tries several guesses as to why he's being damned. "I don't even make the list, huh?"
Now Dean's eyelids grow flushed, his eyes watery. Castiel begins to worry.

"You are…mobile…my bees are not."

"Cas," Dean snaps. "I love you."

That has always been implicit. That has never been misunderstood. Castiel loves humanity. He especially loved Bobby, loves Crowley, loves Sam, but Dean more, tremendously and completely. He has expressed as much. Hasn't he? Castiel thinks about human film and television. To pronounce love for another person increases in seriousness by degrees. Dean is as severe as Castiel has ever seen him.

"Should we kiss?" he tries.

Dean's head jerks back. Castiel is uncertain if he was not that serious as Dean passes through different expression of incredulity. He is afraid that Dean finally looks horrified:

"Hell if I know."

"That's what this declaration typically progresses to in your media," Castiel says as quietly and apologetically as he's able, hoping Dean understands he has nothing else to base his behavior on.

"Having sex didn't keep you from leaving Daphne," Dean says after seconds pass. He sounds defeated; hopeless. Castiel suddenly and intensely hates that it is on account of his actions. He has had time to decipher the gist of Dean's uneven communication.

"No. It didn't. That has nothing to do with us. I understand, Dean. You don't feel I'm expressing my love for you. If having sex is an appropriate—"

He doesn't get to finish his sentence, drawn into a hug like falling into water, Dean's arms gliding against his sides, engulfing him, his face against Dean's shoulder, Dean wrapped around him. He raises his own arms out of Dean's way, rests them on Dean's shoulders, crossed behind his neck. He lets himself rest against his friend.

Powerful emotions rise without warning, old companions. They are the same emotions Dean has always provoked, except his body is small now and his many senses attuned to only Dean.

"Just…stay, Cas. With me," Dean says, damp words spoken against Castiel's neck.

Castiel's body understands. Pulls closer, arms tightening. He does kiss Dean, his collarbone, through his shirt.

They have nowhere else to be. Castiel finds that soaking in his own emotions toward Dean for an indefinite time arresting. Understanding Dean is enjoying the same experience soothes the pain of the lonely void inside him. It snaps into place for him why humans so repetitively engage in sex. He desired Daphne, physically, and felt great affection. He would gladly and with curiosity surely have enjoyed sex with Meg. Dean is different. More. Obviously sex gives humans something enjoyable to do besides stand with each other while sharing this experience.

Dean finally steps away. He's teary, but he's smiling a worn smile. He looks his age. Almost eighty, which was once a very short time for Castiel but has been, in Dean's perception of time, long. Castiel smiles, too, undeniably happy. The expression comes easily.

"I will have sex with you, Dean," he reassures him. "I find you physically stimulating."
Dean bursts into laughter, pressing his hand to his face, then wiping his eyes with it.

"I've got a lot of shit I'm working through," Dean says. Castiel watches him work through a high degree of hesitation in front of him before Dean gulps a breath, looking very serious and somewhat nervous. "Not that you aren't, uh, 'physically stimulating', Cas. Just my sex drive is fifty-fifty right now. More like thirty-seventy. God if that bastard's ever watching and my paid account at BustysAsian Beauties knows I've tried." The nervousness is broken up by a smile. "I found a prime skin mag in the archives and I only used it to smokescreen Sam. It's a crime."

"I know your sex drive is important to you," Castiel sympathizes carefully.

A smirking Dean reaches up, takes Castiel's chin in his hand, brushing his thumb across his lips. Castiel feels it on every dry ridge and sweeping across the edges where the skin of his lips becomes the skin of his face.

"You make me wanna be a better man," he says, his gaze on Castiel the gaze Castiel has shared with him numberless times; shakes his head, drops his hand; chuckles to himself. He claps him on the shoulder and even if Castiel is unable to share in his joke it still elevates him to see Dean happy.

"Thank you," he says. Pauses to make sure he can't catch what he missed. "I think."

Dean looks to the blank television screen, back to Castiel.

"What were you watching?"

"TNT. A Bones marathon. She's a forensic anthropologist. I relate with her difficulty at socialization."

Dean makes the face he makes when he's going to follow along with Castiel, Bobby or Sam.

"Cool. I'm gonna make us some popcorn. Grab us some pop."

Castiel smiles again because he understands the nuance of this. Dean enjoys giving people food. He looks back at the couch as Dean turns and leaves, gait loose and easy. Exhaling he takes his seat, turning the television back on by remote. He has an erection but that's unimportant. He wants to watch television with Dean.

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The Men of Letter's global incident map includes the normal rings as markers joined by little plastic figures of swordsmen, archers and cavalry in blue, black, red and green. The desk beneath the map of the continental United States on the wall is covered with print-outs of news articles, sorted and stacked.

"So you're been playing MoonDoor across seven continents why?" Sam asks, arms folded, full on the dinner Crowley told him to eat before Sam interrogated him.

"Because your little toy figures are what I have. The different colors or armaments represent political blocs. The rings are where I expect the bombs to fall first," he says tapping the air to direct attention to each. "If you've been reading the news every day – and I have – you'd know political tensions are, globally, escalating with a rapidity that puts the turmoil of the past few years to shame. I need to know where Abaddon is striking." Crowley picks up then raps on the map with a pointer stick, inside the circle lying on top of Iran. "Israel. Will launch a nuclear attack on Iran. Iran's ally North Korea will swear support. The United States will back Israel. Saudi Arabia and
China will be vexed. What about Russia? The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation ties its interests to China. Following me so far?"

A shot of adrenaline hits Sam, his eyes widening. Crowley is somber, waiting eyes matched with Sam's.

"Yeah," Sam says, confused but paying closer attention to the map.

"Now, will North Korea exploit the United States' attention on Israel to invade South Korea? They will with a little push," Crowley continues. "As goes Saudi Arabia so goes the Peninsula Shield Force. But where do they go? And where China? I'm not quite sure. India is for Korean reunification. That could tip China and India to support North Korean forces or sue for a South Korean bloodless surrender. Japan is likely to defend South Korea based on its security treaty with the United States and its current tensions with China over East China Sea. But wait. India and Japan have a cooperation agreement.

"Australia is going to fall on the side of South Korea. They're in bed together in trade. That means no Australians in the Middle East. Sweeping back West, the United Kingdom is sour on Israel and getting on well with Palestine even though they don't recognize it as a state. But split from the US? Especially with continental Europe sweet on Israel? Israel is middling unpopular among the Canadian citizenry but money talks. Israel and Canada are chatty. Brazil provides arms to Israel already, although it recognizes Palestine as a separate state. Venezuela is on a typical news day deeply moved by Iran standing firm against Western imperialism. They've also a large financial investment in Brazil. Blah blah blah. Blah."


"This all depends on Israel nuking Iran," he says, mouth dry. "You're sure that's going to happen?"

"Positive, Moose. This is our jam. All this—" He circles his pointer over the Middle East. "—is Abrahamic infighting. And the United States? Well. Nothing Hell loves more than a good Crusade. That's Abaddon's exact specialty." He sets his pointer down and gestures to the largest of continents. "I haven't begun on Africa. That will systematically go right to hell, figuratively and literally speaking. First in order of threats to strategic resources to push the major powers one way or another; then for its own sake."

Sam grows more frustrated the more he thinks on it, throws his arms out, beseeching Crowley with a look of incredulity.

"Why? I mean, she's a demon. Okay. Of war, I guess, kind of…" Lucidity dawns as his internal revulsion passes. "All these people are going to die so Hell stops fighting about Lucifer."

"What else matters?" Crowley says dryly. Frowns; cocks his head. "Actually, the one other thing. Demons aren't interested in humans looking into demons. Humans have started. If I was Rosier I'd be fucking some public official as we speak. Faster, Pussycat. Kill. Kill."

"It gets worse, right?" Sam asks, going with his gut. "Like Kali said, pews everywhere filled up. A boom for temples and mosques, too. Everybody's looking for an answer. What happened to God? Why is he gone? It's always the same kind of people that are the first to claim to know."

"You've got your plotting voice on," Crowley says, eyeing Sam, his own voice reverberating low. "I like that. All manly and responsible."
Sam loses his train of thought, eyes searching the map and Crowley while heat soaks into his belly.

"Uh," he stalls. Blinks away the distraction. "So...like I was gonna say." Right. Like he was going
to say, now with fresh certainty: "We've secured Heaven. For now. We hope. I still don't know
what to do with these souls, but we have to neutralize Abaddon."

Crowley frowns. He waves it off.

"Let's hold that thought," he bids. "You and me. This. This is too much Crowley and Lilith, Jolly
Green. Fancy we go out? We could bowl."

Right. Okay.

Sam's mind relocates. Do people do that? Bowl? Hypothetically. What kind of people? People
bowl in The Deer Hunter, Teen Wolf, The Big Lebowski...

"I can't bowl, Crowley. I've never even been in a bowling alley."

Crowley grins a cheeky grin.

"Play with big balls. Drink beer. Likely have billiards. Drink beer. Don't join a game with
businessmen and pull a mark. Drink beer. Besides the terrible, terrible shoes I'd enjoy completely
crushing you at it."

Oh. Alright, then.

"We're going."

"Thought we would be," Crowley exults. "Should we bring along Charlie? Don't think she'll be a
third wheel. She's competitive, and I bet she knows how to bowl."

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It's twelve twenty-two am. The building smells like pizza, nachos and floor wax. The lights are
out, the black lights on. Crowley hears thunder from the lanes; pins sent flying on collision;
laughter and talk, alcohol loosening lips. Charlie is chatting up a girl three lanes down.

Crowley is kissing Sam, clutching a handful of his shirt, pulling them together between the plastic
seats. Sam's hand cups his face. It isn't their first kiss since, they shared days waiting to see the
data successfully transferred. It's by far their most thorough.

Sam loves getting in and sucking at somebody's mouth, teeth grazing Crowley's beard. He doesn't
care if noses mash – how bodies join. He pushes it. Metaphors about devouring a partner are never
so apt. Crowley says it enough, but Sam really is enormous. His hand is, flesh tough from a
lifetime at war, his thumb pressing into Crowley's cheek.

Sam was awful at bowling, then he wasn't. Crowley cheated – flicking pins over – for the purpose
of getting caught. Charlie has a victory dance. Crowley didn't cheat at billiards, which became
intense and drew an audience. He did destroy two iPhones that snapped pictures of them with his
mind. All told? A splendid idea on his part. Despite resistance, he allows himself to reap the
reward.
Chapter 20

Charlie rests her chin on her palm and her elbow on the table, blowing hair out of her face.

"What I'm hearing is that we're totally unprepared to kill the Queen of Hell. Not even if we could get Abaddon alone with Crowley and the Colt. She's basically a twentieth level Anti-Paladin or Blackguard, or paladin variant from *Unearthed Arcana* and nobody wants that." Charlie sticks her lower lip out and looks sullenly at Kevin. "Do you think she gets sneak attack bonuses?"

"I'm going with yes," he says, leaning back in his chair, hanging his arms over the arms. "So, Crowley's kind of a straight class psion who failed all his saves on Energy Drain and is still down eight levels."

Charlie groans, flipping aimlessly back and forth between screens on her tablet, looking unhappy about it.

"Mmm, nobody can cast greater restoration. We need a cleric of at least thirteenth level." A glance to Castiel. A look to Kevin. "Our cleric is now a fourth or like seventh level fighter. Total suckage. Plus Crowley's undead and I don't think that would have worked out in our favor." Charlie jerks upright, frown deepening. "—shame on me. I'm totally off the mark. He was a monster with fighter levels. Like a sword archon."

Sam feels in kinship with Castiel, Crowley and Dean as they stare blankly at Kevin and Charlie.

"So after reading the books, I know Sam had mad levels in psionic warrior but now he has zero power points," Kevin says. "Maybe he was operating off some kind of *Vampire the Masquerade* blood pool, but something about that doesn't sound right. The blood's nothing. He used the blood to accrue psionic energy, but I still think he's psionic, full stop."

"If one of you makes them shut up, I'll give you a fantastic back massage. Unbelievable," Crowley announces to the room.

"Revenge of the nerds, can it over there. I don't know about this back massage but I'm seriously done listening to this. It doesn't sound like progress," Dean says.

"They are correct," Castiel says. "I was, depending on your use of the word, an archon."

Dean turns his 'fed up' face on Cas.

"Cas, I swear to god. There is a time and a place to play Dungeons and Dragons and no. You people don't even have dice."

"I have Dicenomicon on my tablet," Charlie pipes up.

"...I swear to god," Dean growls.

"Sam, what does he mean by that?" Cas asks, turning to him, fretting.

"That he's about to get physical," Sam says, smiling at Castiel's past-necessary concern. "It's a warning. I swear to god I'm going to duct tape both your mouths shut."

"Kevin was saying that the demon blood's a wild goose," Charlie translates with the flavor of disapproving tedium. "I honestly think you got that part."
Sam focuses. It's been months and he's not happy to give the progress report.

"I've been practicing magic. Meditation. Alchemy. I'm taking books on this to bed. There's a lot of invoking this, calling out the divine properties of that. I'm not even on square one on Henry used his soul to power a spell." He slumps back in his chair with an expression of annoyance, throwing his hands up. "Hell, he traveled through time. That's angel level mojo. That burns out Cas. I know I've got the power. I know my way around teke. So, I bought some tennis balls to try and float them. I sit in my room and...eventually I feel like an idiot. The car's fine but somebody hoisted the engine out. If I'm psychic then somebody let my body know that."

Dean frowns, crossing his arms.

"Henry didn't just jump through time, Sam. He used a spell, right?"

"Right. I should at least be able to pull off something like that; except I'm not Henry," Sam says. "Think about it. Azazel didn't know who Mom would have me with when they made the deal. Lucifer's line comes through Mom. Michael's line through Dad, through Henry, because of Heaven. My body ended up engineered to deliver way more power than Cas's. So did yours...but I've had all the switches thrown." He tallies it up on his fingers. "I channeled Azazel's power through his blood. Having those visions...that must have been the way Azazel found the right mothers, Dean. Drinking an average demon didn't give me the same abilities, but it fueled me up. Lucifer himself could use his power right through this body. Why the hell can't I?"

"You talked about a you-body disconnect, pet," Crowley says apologetically. "Maybe it refuses to recognize you as its owner. Maybe you aren't. Isn't it with angels more that Lucifer just needed your permission to come in because it was occupied, like in a vampire film?"

"Lucifer didn't care when we lost the body." Sam swallows, struggling to form words he doesn't expect the others to understand, speaking more quietly. "He folded his wings around me and he...kept me out of the fire. I wasn't a stowaway. It was me that he...What you said, Crowley, a while ago. I'm Lucifer's inheritor. Not the chassis. It's just a great chassis."

Castiel, hand folded on the table, speaks up.

"Psychics command their souls' potential under their own will, including bringing them in closer communion with their bodies. It is possible Azazel was born as a human psychic and retained his techniques beyond death. Usually psychic or 'psionic' abilities are a fact of birth, but obviously these Men of Letters discovered a way to circumvent this."

Sam nods, looking at him more closely. He begins to picture a workaround, details unrefined.

"The last time we faced off against each other—when you took down the wall—if I could go back to that place inside me..."

"Sammy, that almost killed you," Dean interjects, warning laced with the threat of action.

"I obliterated your consciousness as you recognize it," Castiel agrees. "It's a miracle it took you as long as it did to go insane."

"Don't, Cas. It wasn't. It wasn't a miracle. You know that for a fact. We maxed out that credit card. It was me, just like when I took out Famine. I'm just...stubborn?" Sam says, feeling anything but overconfident in or even sure of the nature of his power. "I'm different now. Starting with pure, but that came with a whole new class of endurance tests. You've gotta trust me on this, guys." For starters, trust would be its own source of fortitude. Dean is still easing in to the idea he should
work with and not for Sam. "Dean," he says. "If I pull this off, then I can show you how to."

Dean's eyebrows inch up.

"Excuse me for not leaping on that."

"Right, Dean. If you'd had the Michael experience and you were ready to do this you wouldn't jump into it like a swimming pool of whiskey."

"Shut up." Dean glowers at the table; eyes flicker back up to Sam. "I don't like you high on this King of Hell crap, Sam."

"Try this on, dude. Two-point-o. Soul versions. If I'm the King of Hell...you're the General of Heaven. 'Sam starring as Lucifer. Dean starring as Michael.' Maybe Gabriel got it a centimeter off target. Maybe we let Cas and Crowley have our jobs. No offense guys, but now look at them. That's our fault. It's our problem."

"I'm the..." Dean's face twists with anger, with disgust. Sam knows at first sight it's the same anger Dean always gets on him when people tell him he's saddled with potential. His expression drops, sulky and miserable now. "Shit, Sam. You're right. You're actually freakin' right." He unfolds his arms, thumps his index finger on the table, commands anybody's wandering attention:

"Remember when Zach sent me back to the future? To this year. There weren't any angels. They were gone. Cas was human, and it was me. I was the guy between Hell and Earth. You may remember the end of that story. Lucifer broke my neck. It sure as hell's not gonna go down like that this year."

Sam inhales deep, looking at his brother with surprise, respect, and new scrutiny, but also expectation.

"I take it I'm in the clear to take my protein pills and put my helmet on? If I had the first idea how to 'obliterate my consciousness as I recognize it.'"

Sam realizes how unusually quiet Crowley has been beside him only when the demon speaks up:

"I know one plant that might have the power."

Now expectation rests on Crowley, everyone slouched at the library table in their own way, including the demon, who's taking his turn at folded arms and squinting at the table but into the distance in his mind.

"There is a cactus. Peruvian. Bolivian. I remember it especially. The Cactus of the Four Winds -- or 'roads'. Guess the mnemonic. A night blooming cactus. The subject's inner mien unfurls like the flowers' petals in the moonlight. Problem outstanding: I'm not an Andean shaman. I couldn't even pull off 'pretend Andean witch'."

"But you could get this cactus?" Charlie presses.

"San Pedro in the colloquial Spanish. Saint Peter -- like the one at the Gates of Heaven. Yes. I could get it. It's more complicated than that. I'd need to know the preparation. If it's to be mixed with other plants. I don't know the ceremony. I'd consult with a shaman..." He gives a dramatized wide-eyed expression. "Wait. That's right. There's a sure way to get exorcised." Frowns. "The Andean witches are Catholic enough they'll sell me like meat."

"It's not like I haven't done this before," Sam prods with optimism. "I just need a kick to bring me
"Like in Inception," Castiel provides.

Dean stares at Castiel, uncomprehending; shakes off the 'strange' of that and focuses back on Sam.

"Let's not forget stubborn or not last time you 'did this' you hallucinated for a year, then tried to die on me in a psychiatric hospital."

Sam takes a second, making a mental note to mark this event in the notes he's been keeping on Cas. Cas pulling out a situationally appropriate media reference Dean didn't catch. He asks Cas about his dreams and qualitative changes in his emotions, but tracking real behavioral changes is key to figuring out what a soul might be doing to him.

Right. Hallucinated for a year. Almost died.

"...yeah. So? This time I'm not going in blind. We get the cactus," he says, clearly not reassuring Dean at all. It doesn't reassure him much, either. Whatever the terrain of his subconscious, today, it doesn't look anything like it did three years ago.

"Appropriating the rituals of foreign cultures without an expert on hand to monitor your condition? Genius. You moderns feel entitled to the wisdom of the ages and you expect it to work for you like an app for your Android. This is just how I want to lose you, Moose. Poisoning you to death myself because you're a bleeding self-entitled middle class American."

Sam turns to gape at Crowley.

"Okay, dude. Insulting."

Crowley sits unmoved.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?" His attention drops from Sam, Crowley apparently impervious to Sam's fuming – that ticks his temper up one more notch. "Does anyone else here speak Spanish? Kevin? Charlie?"

"Yes. Yes, I speak Spanish," Charlie says, breaking into a smile. "Also I had a blazing sexual affair with a married Brazilian woman named Ana Luiza who hadn't had an orgasm in three years until I rocked the cunnilingus. ...you needed to know that. I'm very proud."

Sam forgets he was angry at Crowley. Dean is nodding with an expression that says 'not bad'. Castiel and Kevin are caught in thought.

"Let's search the books. Internet," Crowley interrupts, scanning the rest of his company incredulously. "See if I can get Moose something other than a bed in the ICU."

Sam and Castiel take on the English texts that hold promise, Sam in the records and Cas on his tablet. There will be nothing in the 'Old World' material. Dean spends most of the stint putting dinner together.

"No," Crowley growls after hours on Sam's laptop. "No, no, no, no. No. Mescaline thrill seekers. Something has a bit of mescaline they tune out all the rest. The rotten thing is the scientists do just the same." Crowley is gesticulating in the expressive way he takes on when energized. "We need to brew cimora, the shamanic preparation of supporting plants. The good news: We have candidates. The best news: Probably can't poison you to death. The bad news? We don't know which conjure what experience."
"Okay," Sam says, keeping focused because in his experience Crowley can keep a bead on professional while he goes off ranting. "How do we find out?"

Castiel speaks up.

"Mescalito. The books I found online, although poorly sourced or highly speculative, suggest there is a spirit tied to this plant. I have…never attempted communion with Earth spirits. It was beyond my purview."

"That comes down to putting a cactus down in front of Sam and saying 'Sam wants to be a magician? Sam better be a magician,'" Crowley says thinly. Sam's breath catches; he feels warm, happy, even if Crowley can be really annoying when he hits that snobbish tone. He wants nothing but the best. For Sam. In front of everyone. Sam doesn't have words for how covertly his father or Dean, taking after John, sought the same.

He's caught in a memory of learning of his father's pride in him as far from John as he could be: at an airport; learning from Dean his father frequented Palo Alto, would have intervened if Sam's life took a wrong turn; his father's proud and tearful eyes in a cemetery in Wyoming. He fights away the memory of John's dead body on the hospital floor.

The good feeling sticks with him; he takes the pain along with it. It's the same pain that came when Jess or Amelia surprised him – the thorns that break through always slightly different memories – but there's less of it each year and that has to be a good thing.

"The accounts we've read sound like whatever cocktail's in this plant this is the horse to bet on," he says, stronger, more grounded, knowing Crowley's right: Crowley wants all the best for him, and he's going to find it, but this comes down to him. "I'm doing this. Whatever I have to do. I'll fast. I'll meditate. I'll sweat. I'll talk to a plant. Because nuclear war."

Charlie makes a face.

"Nuclear war kind of trumps everything."

"Sam shows amazing resilience in the face of spiritual trials. This will be substantially more structured than any of the foolhardy mechanisms by which he has bootstrapped his way to triumph before," Castiel says with an amiable smile. Dean looks pretty skeptical of him.

"What's next? Where do we get all this stuff?" Kevin says.

"I go to Peru," Crowley says, smile patently false.

Sam latches on.

"…you said making London would wreck you."

"Right. Not a lot's changed, darling. Don't worry your head over it," Crowley says; Sam thinks Crowley's lucky Charlie turned off the temper. "I can harvest a cactus or three wrecked," he promises, expression sweeter, more sincere, resonating with Sam's pleasure with him. Crowley's brow draws in. "I'm more concerned about navigating the social milieu as a 'blanco'. My body can have a refreshing coma in a hotel room in Lima and with all imaginable distaste I'll borrow someone local. I've lifted so many feeding tube machines and saline bags they should hand me a degree in nursing." He pauses, cynicism vanished. Sam pins his look for frightened. "—they'll be put back this time."

Sam closes his book and shelves it, coming around to Crowley's chair, easing him back against
him, hands lying across his shoulders, folded on his chest. Crowley's head tips back, rests against Sam's abdomen, curious but compliant.

"...so we're going to a jubilee and you're risking your life in Peru. You should probably rest up for that."

There's no mystery about Sam's smile, tired and grateful and making a compelling argument Crowley deserves a prize.

Dean doesn't even tell them to get a room. Charlie set the atmosphere to indiscretion. That doesn't reset until a change of setting.

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Sam's cotton shirt, rippled like raindrop struck water, has a wrinkle for every muscle the fabric bunched against as Crowley's hand pushed up his body. Jeans rub across jeans, rhythmic friction slowed by the dense material's drag. Crowley passes a hand through Sam's loose hair. Sam smiles down at him with a boyish upturn of his lips, intermittent kisses casual – for Sam Winchester. When he catches Crowley's lower lip in his teeth he draws out letting it slip past that smile; kisses him again.

Sam kisses down his neck. That means one thing in this mood. Crowley clenches the age worn fabric of the t-shirt his hands; lets Sam suck bruises to the surface of his skin, suck hard so the capillaries break for any time at all. Fleeting purple and black tattoos will rise to the surface, turning brown by morning. Crowley drops his hands and gets a handful of Sam's jeans at each side, pulling the denim tight, pulling Sam's his hips down while Sam grinds down on him slow, their flies rough on their cocks; Crowley's beard rough on Sam's lips.

Sam breaks off, takes some time to catch his breath. Crowley releases his grasp, hands sliding up over shirt, muscle and skin, hanging loosely from Sam's shoulders. His eyes don't lie.

"I'm sorry I'm asking you to do this," Sam murmurs, regret real. "You're scared. For me. About possessing somebody again."

"It's a preposterous, foolhardy Winchester idea," Crowley says, sour despite their intimacy because Sam's correct.

Sam chuckles, proud where he oughtn't be.

"The only kind me and Dean have."

A part of Crowley wants to berate him for deciding on deconstructing his mind.

Crowley lets his hands slide loosely down Sam's arms, over gymnasium toned, battle-tested muscles. Thinks about watching Sam work out, but it's not at the top of his mind.

"I just wish you'd..."

Sam licks his lips above him and Crowley's desire to review what Sam already knows vanishes with that touch of tongue. He doesn't really want to think about what he'll spend hours thinking about. They're caught up in each other's legs, a delight to drag them each against another. Sam sweeps his hand over Crowley's head, disheveling his bangs. His cock's in a sweet spot and he presses up slow from beneath Crowley's balls. The demon whines in protest. He'd like to think it a throaty, manly whine.
"That's what I thought," Sam flirts.

Crowley scowls through his flush and heavy breathing.

"Moron."

Sam pecks his lips, for a Samuel definition of pecks that includes suction. Crowley lets himself be assuaged. He isn't really. It's a terrible business but it will be a terrible business tomorrow.

Now a butterfly sensation, or swarm of locusts in his stomach he tries to dispense with and fails.

"Samantha, you mind awfully if I stay the night? In some state of dress."

Sam looks surprised.

"Sure." A furrowed brow. "I mean, no. Of course I don't mind." Pause. "You know I'm not like an all-night cuddler?"

"I know," Crowley says. "But I sleep better next to you."

Good prelude. Erections lubricate most relational interactions, and Crowley isn't asking for anything Sam wouldn't already give. He's made certain of that with himself. One of the first kind acts Sam offered was sitting him to sleep.

Sam gets shy – that boyish, enthusiastic shy of someone with two serious relationships in going on thirty one years on Earth.

"That's kind of romantic."

"Kind of?" Crowley wonders, lowers his voice to Bartholomew's so-pleasing, Crowley inherited rumble. "You want to be romanced?" He rolls an unresisting Sam over, lies staring into the boy's open expression, his wondering eyes. Romantic? His feelings are, leaving no room for pretense, just an enraptured hint of a smile:

"When I'm next to you, I'm a man again. The darkness beyond my death comes onto me, but I listen to you breathing. I'm alive. The guilt claws me apart; I bleed the same hot blood you injected into my helpless body, but it's the blood that brought me back from the dead. Next to you I close my eyes and I dream. In my dreams I'm not a demon at all. You give that to me for those precious few hours your heart is beating beside me."

Sam's wide eyes and shallow breath betray a man electrified but paralyzed with unexpended energies.

"Shit, Crowley," he breathes. Holds back. He could say things now that Crowley couldn't bear hear, but he doesn't. He's kissed for it; gently; reverently. Sam is only human, has a complicated history with wielding power, has an abundance which will always pose a certain risk – none of that dampens the zealous adoration Crowley worked himself into.

"God..." Sam says after he's been thoroughly kissed, kissed like they're cinema characters from a 1940's drama, like Crowley's the gentleman he can be. The boy looks lost, looks emotional, but not in any way Crowley would take back. "I'm going to sleep now," Sam says. "...I'm pretending to go to sleep now. I'm gonna get undressed and pretend to go to sleep."

"Fair," Crowley gloats. "I'm going to get undressed and really go to sleep, when I can manage."
"Plan," Sam affirms. Sam's human, can't have the better of his body. They both shed clothes. Crowley doesn't miss Sam's mournful look toward the bedside table before he breathes in and climbs under the covers, reaching to turn off the lamp.

He'll wait until Crowley is really out. Cringe if the drawer makes a sound. Beat off in the dark into a condom. Or maybe a discarded sock. Cast looks at Crowley's shadowed, sleeping body, and masturbate, which being permissible, permitted with a knowing look, is hugely flattering.

A silence hangs in the air, so pregnant as to give Crowley pause. They aren't touching but he can sense the tension, the uncertainty off Sam. It's the way he lies so still; the pace of his heart and of his breath.

"Crowley—" Sam's brow has wrinkled up what Crowley would call 'soulfully'; Crowley can see well in the shadows "—you can just move your clothes in here. We don't have to make that a milestone if you don't want to. We just pick up your clothes and we move them."

"When you put it like that," Crowley says. He didn't imagine it as so easy; he didn't factor in they're both that practical men.

Without words, with just a long series of bothered expressions, Sam has thoroughly driven in the 'pathetic' of his monk's cell home. What remaining fears he had of playing a slow series of tricks on Sam dissolve. The reality is it will be a weight off Sam's mind. The guilt of worming, of slithering his way into Sam's space and the pollution of his filthy touch on Sam's body descend on him; he gives them their way.

Sam, aware, slides an arm under him and hauls him against him; rests calm and lets the demon's mind flog itself for pleasure taken tonight, drift from crime to atrocity and every reason, sin by sin, that he's not to be allowed Sam, memories that leave him shuddering even as sleep creeps over him – sleep no longer needed; treasured as respite.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Warning: Heavy Triggers.

The substance set before Sam has the color and consistency of snot. Flecked with rough ground herbs Sam reminds himself that he has already taken African dream root, unpalatable but effective.

The coffee mug decorated in sharpie with the jaguar and the hummingbird and spirals of descent stylistically Incan sits on a cloth littered with carefully chosen objects; his own approximation of an Andean magician or sorcerer or curandero's mesa. Sam's pistol sits there, an empty bottle of beer, one picture of Jessica, his father's journal, a toy soldier from a small local store, the amulet from his duffle he'll never show to Dean, lucky tinctures from the pharmacy, holy water, a small wooden cross, Crowley's old tie – pilfered...a vial of Crowley's almost-purified blood, not pilfered. The mesa a portrait of Sam's divine identity.

Crowley knows now what he didn't before. He saw Sam's distant, buried longing as the blood ran from his clenched fist, but he placed the vial in Sam's hand all the same. Shrugged. Sam wanted to kiss him, right then then, and swear he would never break his skin with his teeth, that hickies are just hot. Except if he did have to say it, it wouldn't be true.

A chill lies over the room that once belonged to Crowley, the bed pushed into the corner against the wall. There is only the bed and the old, built in sink – all Sam needs, the one for comfort and other for sudden purging. He chose Crowley's former room because the sheets are clean, the chamber aired out. Nothing of Crowley remains here. Crowley never invested in the space at all.

Days ago Sam battled in MoonDoor. The refreshment afforded him by an honest-to-god vacation has stayed with him through his preparations, happy memories sustaining him while meditating and fasting. Every desire he's had to worry and nurse over his boyfriend, who's manfully ignoring the bad shape he returned from Peru in, has had to be left aside in lieu of seclusion, meditation, preparations and then seclusion and meditation again.

Sam is pretty sure Crowley will let him take care of him if they're alone, but that's pending on Sam coming out of this whole and sane. The demon has been having nosebleeds and sudden spells of exhaustion. Sam disenjoyed plenty of time to think on it once it came down to fasting and abstinence; he's positive at least half of it's psychosomatic – self-destructive penance for possessing strangers.

The cimora goes down his throat like slime from Ghostbusters in one long drink. Sam closes his eyes, praying aloud: "Thank you, Mescalito, and your assistants, for guiding me to receive your wisdom. I bare myself to you, in need of your healing."

He sucks saliva into his mouth and swallows the last of the plant boiled for twenty-one hours in a cast iron pot over their stove, temperature carefully monitored, never boiling.

Sam rises and moves to the bed. He has a wait, maybe forty minutes, maybe sixty. He's in the hands of San Pedro now. Remember these things can't be rushed, Crowley warned from experience. The mesa may mean more, may provide clues and guidance, may hold secrets he has
no comprehension of now, but not until his consciousness changes.

He lies staring at the ceiling. He hasn't been in a bed alone since Crowley's clothes finally had a home in a drawer. He remembers the third night, over a week ago. The minutes in which his world changed into something new and strange.

Sam halts at the door. Crowley lies in bed beneath the blankets, shirtless, reading a Kindle Charlie handed off, light restricted to the lamp and the light built into the device's black leather cover. Sam stops so long the demon looks up, asking if there's a problem with only his eyebrows. Sam doesn't want to say Yeah, there's a guy. He's in my bed. He doesn't need to say it because Crowley is something like fifteen times his age. He breathes despite the tightness in his chest; swallows as he shuts the door.

"Let me guess," Crowley says, smile delighted. Delighted and cheeky. Sam makes a face but waits for it. "You've never come in on me undressed already," he pronounces accurately; beams when he sees he's right. "Come to bed, duckling. You'll survive."

"No. I won't. I'm gonna have a stroke. Just to wipe the smile off your face," Sam says but with that smile that used to only come out when digging at Dean. The effect is blunted seeing he's stripping his shirt off over his head. He pulls it off his arms and tosses it in his standing laundry hamper. His body is doing a lot of things at once: being startled, cranking it up a few degrees, putting him through the same disorientation that swamped him when Crowley lubed his own ass.

He strips down to his boxers like he would anyway; sucks on his lower lip; gets some kind of hold of himself and climbs under the covers. Crowley is watching him with casual and appreciative amusement that has more of an effect on Sam's cock than any other factor.

Even looking annoyed, Sam orients himself and he leans across, his hand slides to the back of Crowley's neck, brushing across the stubble beneath his jaw. He kisses him. Not a long kiss; not a sexual kiss; that one that says 'Glad to see you' that's been only for Jess. Only for Amelia.

When he starts making himself comfortable on his side of the bed, pushing around pillows, he hasn't totally shaken his nerves but they're not giving him a problem.

"Not the same," Crowley agrees to words Sam never said, attention back on his book while Sam settled in. "Not that I can commiserate. You're absolutely gorgeous – and I've had plenty of men to judge by."

"I don't know what it is," Sam admits. "I really do wanna have a lot of sex with you."

Crowley flashes him a grin.

"That's what matters." His brow draws and lips purse as he considers that. "That, and, of course, not constantly fighting or wearing on each other's nerves." He looks satisfied with the assessment, expression loosening; expression casually expressionless. "If you find the right girl maybe there'll be no contest. I'm willing to risk it if you are, Moose."

"Who am I sleeping next to?" Sam says, feeling lighter, smiling to himself grudgingly and lopsidedly even as he turns off the lamp, room going dark except for the Kindle.

It's not like there's been a sudden shortage of women in the world outside the bunker. There is no shortage of women in MoonDoor. That's for damn sure. Playing assassins, Sam and Charlie, Aughane and Ri'enthah, almost slayed the leaders of the Warriors of Yesteryear until a hidden archer in an actual deer stand in an actual tree delivered non-fatal wounds with suction cup tipped
arrows, bringing them into captivity.

She had all the right curves and she cared who saw them and, wow, she cared Sam saw them. Sam would call his knowledge of corsets skeletal at best. He had as much trouble as anybody else not marveling over the way those breasts sat in their two leather cups, gripped firm but sitting like two soft, perfect...breasts.

He doesn't have a lot on Dean except not being a total pig for everybody to see.

His hormones said he'd eat her out for six hours and the rest of him said...Nah.

Nah. 'Nah' like flipping television channels. Even when Charlie broke character privately in their cages to detail she was a mixed martial arts champion and she so never came to MoonDoor to get laid.

The thing is, he's pretty sure Crowley wouldn't care. Maybe a little – maybe grumpy for fifteen minutes – but not care. Sam's even kind of worried those fifteen minutes would be over missing a three-way.

They can never talk about it. About Sam having women if he wants women. About Crowley giving Sam women. About anything resembling that. The minute something like that comes up Sam's trapped between lying and admitting he's life-ordering, future-dictating in love.

That can't happen. Not because of Sam. Crowley would lose it. Whatever that would look like, it'd be ugly.

Crowley made it crystal among his more secret ambitions he wants to be his conscious-free, liberty-denied sex slave. Sam understands where that comes from. No absolution; pure subordination. Sam refuses to play guessing games over how long he would have stayed in the dark if Crowley hadn't brought it back in line while a demon was as a demon does: Finds a purpose and commits until a new opportunity appears.

Accepting love is way down on Crowley's 'can do' list.

Surprising everybody except Dean, the only person besides Charlie who got laid at MoonDoor was Cas. He returned to them perplexed and disheveled and looking short on sleep the next morning, with Dean there to straighten his costume up.

"She ate her dinner off my body. I don't know why she would do that but the carnivorous implications were somehow arousing. The hood of her clitoris was pierced. There was a diamond. I used condoms the way you showed me. I...learned many sexual positions I believe Daphne was unaware of, but I haven't chipped off all the congealed candle wax."

"Knew she was gonna freak," Dean announced with that proud-of-you-son smile Sam knows way better than he wants to. "Cas, you're one lucky son of a bitch."

Kevin stared at the once-angel.

"Fyi, I didn't want to know any of that."

"I apologize, Kevin," Castiel said, realization sudden.

Sam and Charlie went for manful back clapping.

Sam doesn't know what his own sex life is actually going to look like. He can go two decades
without having sex. He's uninvested in Crowley putting out versus Crowley being there. The only important thing is Crowley's with him.

He wonders if he's starting to have the faintest early reaction to the sacred cactus in his feet, but it's nothing profound.

"I've meant to say: Abstract art, not quite what I expected," Crowley says as they enter together, stopping in the middle, in front of the bed, and giving the room a real look over. Sam is full from dinner, Crowley not inclined to eat this week. He doesn't need to anymore.

Sam had been counting down to when this would come up; if Crowley actually gets comfortable here he might start accumulating things.

"It's not my room," Sam says quietly, almost ashamed. "This is how Jessica decorated our apartment in Palo Alto. It's as far away from here as nine years and more than a thousand miles."

Crowley turns to him wearing concern and 'sorry' and empathy.

"Sam."

"Is that too weird?" Sam asks, still standing there where they stopped, uncomfortable down in his gut. He cringes. "I don't know, man. This isn't where I'd live. It's not how I'd live." He looks across the walls, himself. "I'm not living with her ghost, I just need to remember there's a whole different world out there. It's just never going to be mine." A thought arrests him and he looks back at Crowley. "Hey, if there's something you wanna put up…"

"Think about it, Moose," Crowley promises. "Decorating your flat...almost have to know who you are."

Sam laughs, but sadly.

"Tell me about it. I had no idea what to put up in the house with Amelia. We had nothing. Neither of us. Just all these memories we didn't wanna see."

Crowley takes a long pause. Sam grows more attentive the longer he's quiet and grows a little suspicious.

"Not to terrify you, but I saw your house a couple of weeks after you moved in," Crowley says carefully – like in any situation that isn't going to terrify him. Sam's eyes widen. He goes still. His pulse races. No Crowley: boyfriend, then. Crowley: King of Hell. Crowley keeps calm, explains: "Hard to believe Sam Lunatic Winchester living an ordinary life in the suburbs with a veterinarian. I didn't trust the judgment of my employees. They're all demons. Had to make sure you weren't building a hidden arsenal. No cologne. No sulfur. Hospital footwear. Latex gloves. Episode of CSI. I had that girl vetted like she was going into the Secret Service." Shrugs. "Then I shagged off. Far as I was concerned at the time: Forever."

Sam lets out a long exhalation.

"Thanks, dude, for...totally creeping me out."

"Rather it not come up in another manner," Crowley says easily. "Be much more awkward, then. Besides, I did care. An eensy, tarnished stalker amount in the sense that someday I just might need to use you and if you were living in a cardboard box in an alley off dumpster diving I would've had to intervene." He wets his lips, brightens his tone, turns his eyes up, too-innocent. "Around to the beginning before the confessions, I'm just saying, disturbing implications aside... Drab, mate."
Would've offered to have Design on a Dime in. Didn't think it would be appreciated."

Sam, still shaken, falls down to sit on the edge of the bed, looking up at Crowley. All he can think about is the way he's spinning this into one person keeping track of him at all. Not in a grateful, relieved way. It's all sorry; pathetic; a memory of how stranded he'd been and in how much pain. The only person who thought about him once came around to make sure he never had to see him again. Yeah. Fair. He didn't go even try to check on Kevin.

Crowley stands in front of him, hands in his jeans pockets, looking down with sensitivity and actual understanding. As forlorn as Sam is, Sam'll take it.

"Long-standing policy that I've never wanted either of you as enemies. No power on Earth that could have compelled me to meddle with your domesticity. Would never have exploited Amelia. Not from the kindness of my stolen or metaphorically withered heart. We danced that dance with Lisa Braeden. I lost."

"Thanks," Sam says grimly. "At least I'm..." Terrifying? A famous serial killer? One of the most dangerous living creatures in the world? Sam reaches out, tugs on Crowley's shirt, tugs him a couple of steps forward and then gives up, forehead falling forward onto his stomach, letting Crowley hold him, a hand atop his head and a hand on his back.

Sam's thoughts roam a circuitous route. His isn't meditating. That involves clearing his mind of focusing on one certain anchor of stillness. Right now he's waiting for the plant to guide his thoughts. To take him over. To lure him down the spiral.

His muscles start to twitch, then spasm, then cramp, trillions of cells carried poison with each pulse of Sam's heart. Abnormal electrical effects in the brain. Body temperature rising. Pupils dilated. Perspiration forming on his skin. Nausea coming and going.

This is his induction. This is a spirit changing his body to be receptive to its work, another trial.

"Poison. From the Latin pōtiōn," Crowley says, standing behind Sam in the pharmacy while Sam painstakingly follows instruction. "Poison, draught, philter: you're changing the chemical composition of the cells. Homework is catching up your cellular biology. Exogenous agonists are our little friends who shove their way to the front of the queue and make a great fuss about the importance of their business. Too much of a ruckus and everyone quits and goes home. Death. Better know exactly what business you send them on, Moose."

He is a man in a cold cell of ceramic, crushed stone, sand and mortar. He is cells. Trillions of cells. Now when he holds his hands up he understands them as if they've spread into a cloud, hand-shaped as independent as they are inter-reliant.

His whole body slowly disperses into fine mist the color of flesh, organs, muscle and blood. He understands now: His soul is bound to each particle of his human body but his body is a true golem, earth and air, heat and water, minerals and fats and carbon. No part of his body is special. No constituent part is an element not found in dead, still matter -- even rock. He sees its kinship with the stone, with the vegetables he consumes, with the fuel of the Impala, once long ago organisms not unlike himself.

He loses all sensation of possessing a body, at one with the walls, with the mesa, his companions and the world beyond with its innumerable possibilities. Heaven, too, and also Hell. Purgatory where corrupted bodies celebrate an orgy of violence. He is kin to all of these. For the first time he isn't alone. No freak, instead one thread in an infinite tapestry.
A thread with more responsibility than the others, holding the tapestry fast against unraveling, but no more or less an element of the larger picture than any other.

Ayni. The word that speaks of the unity of all worlds. When Sam read on Peruvian shamanism the word appeared more than once. So did its definition. Retrospectively, he sees he didn't understand it at all.

He is whole, complete, and beautiful within the universe that he is where Sam Winchester is no more than one form and one name he has taken.

Gradually Sam becomes aware of his immediate surroundings again. The bricks are deep, vibrant hues of orange and red and brown, the cinderblocks and concrete a rich gradient of greys. Sam lies marveling at colors he has never seen, wishing he wasn't confined to this room, wanting to indulge in National Geographics, vistas once only the world away now otherworldly.

Sam rises from the bed, walking carefully to sit before his mesa. His 'artes' lie in a gradient, forming his own topographical map of the cosmos. He remains euphoric for his first experience. He knows the plant will be silent while it diagnoses his trouble before it will, in time, unveil them in visions. The idea and potential strength of the plant are no longer in question. His experience has washed away the last tones of skepticism.

On one side lie the objects possessed of heavy, dark energies: Those that, when too burdensome, require banishing to bring his world back on order. Crowley's old tie, the wooden cross, and the worn leather volume that belonged to John. On the opposite side, those items that bring light into his life. The picture of Jess. Crowley's almost-purified blood. Herbs he's learning to use in spell work. Holy water, maybe the only sure sign there's still a force for good in the world.

In the center, his world in balance. Here lies his gun, a gun that has saved and taken lives. Here, too the amulet that burns bright in the presence of God. A God who is watching over him, but a God who won't intervene. It's never glowed.

Whether animism is alive and real or only because of the potentials they promise, he senses the energies living in each of them. He sees them for all that they are. It isn't that he's banished his Christian faith, but that he has to free himself of the mandates of Heaven; the mandates of Hell, too. It isn't that he doesn't love and respect his father, or that he hasn't, reflectively, come to see how hard life was on John, but his father's journal is a tome where every word and clipping is blindly dedicated to vengeance. Sam can't afford to live that narrow view. The toy soldier sits beside it. All these heavy energies weighing him down and holding him back must be exorcised, but he isn't absolved of his responsibilities. They ground him, give him direction, but he can't let them distract or overwhelm him.

He sees the best and worst of himself in Crowley. Both the black-eyed monster and a redeemer filled with light. Sam will never remember Jessica as sweet and pure and out of reach the way Dean said their father painted Mary once she died. They fought, snapped at each other to vent their bad days; they both had a way of keeping their problems to themselves when it would always have been better to share the burden and get frustrated with well-intentioned prying. Sam's heard little things like that are normal. Jessica showed him he didn't have to close himself off to other people, that someone would accept all of him without punishing his imperfections.

He contemplates these objects. Why he chose them, if they hold hidden layers of meaning. His mesa is impoverished compared to ones he's looked at in pictures. Those are the work of years and this is the work of days. At the beginning of his work, mesa arranged, he sat one of the cactus stems collected by Crowley in front of him, staring down at it for hours after he called on its spirit. One after another, plants he'd been told about popped into his mind or a plant Crowley brought...
back from Peru suddenly stood out among the others.

The demon looked his selection over after a sense of satisfaction overtook Sam, shrugged and said the combination wouldn't kill him, leaving Sam to cook his cimora alone with a grin and a clap on the back.

The first vision comes. Sam stands where he first arose from the Cage. He's not alone. The cold-faced Other that his body became stands across from him. Sam tries to think. He accepted all the memories of its life as Sam, but a divide remains. Why?

"I would have wondered that myself, but you've been hogging all the equipment," the Other says, eyes narrowed at Sam but emotionless. He doesn't hate him. Sam thought he would, because he's right, but the golem doesn't love and it doesn't hate, a creature of cold logic.

"I need you on my side, Sam," Sam says, because the Other is Sam. A Sam.

The Other looks incredulous, brow wrinkling up.

"You may have noticed I don't get to choose a side. I go where you go. I do what you tell me to. What else is there?"

Sam squares his jaw.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

The Other shakes his head; gives Sam the sympathetic eyes, but Sam doesn't feel any sympathy coming off him.

"That's your problem. Not mine. There's nothing wrong with me. If Lucifer put me on right now I'd be factory mint."

Sam shoves his hand through his hair. He paces across the grass with a frown on his lips, trying to think this through.

"So this is my fault?" Why, why, why. "I pushed my anger down, I didn't wanna be like Dean or Dad. I pushed down all those times I saw a woman and I wanted to fuck her." It's like night fishing, the bobber a shadow in the water. Sam can't tell if he has a hit. "All the hormones – all the boners, all the times I held back when I wanted to beat somebody's face in – you suffered through all of it. It made us strangers."

The Other watches him pace, brow knit, lips parted. On the verge of speaking but having nothing to say. His eyes slide to either side, suddenly he's engaged, his full, intense attention on Sam.

"No. Think, Sam. What has two legs, a heart, and a human brain and doesn't sleep?"

The answer appears in Sam's mind, shared between them. His eyes widen.

"Demons. Angels. Archangels."

The Other bursts into a smile, sheer enjoyment of his own mechanical cleverness.

"I didn't come back wrong," he says, adamant. "I didn't come back missing the sweet, soulful Sammy parts of our brain. I came back set to archangel."

Sam almost believes it. Stops pacing and turns on him in consternation.
"And that's why you slept with about a hundred—" He thinks about Gabriel and thinks about Balthazar and no longer has a point.

"The whole time you were in there playing house with Jekyll-Hyde, I was burning. My skin boiled off as fast as it healed. I boiled year after year. Except when you took over, I suffered but I didn't care. Lucifer ran the show while you missed it all. The screaming matches with Michael. The vessel-breaking fights raging across the cage until me or Adam's body couldn't pick itself back up. That's not all. Even when you were alone together, guess what was running through my head? Everything. Lucifer's every thought. It's all in here. Castiel popped me free while I was wired to handle that."

He taps his skull. Sam squints, but the Other's thoughts are opaque.

"...I only took back what you lived when you were free."

The Other's face falls. He shakes his head. Tilts it forward in confidence, looks something like concerned but is only offering advice.

"I know you, Sammy. I don't think you want it."

Sam can admit he doesn't understand everything Lucifer did. Not while he walked the Earth, and not what he did to him. But Lucifer's no stranger. He's a best friend, a brother, abusive and unstable and compassionate and doting.

"I know him...and I love him. I'm not afraid of this."

As he plunges into one of his own memories, he realizes with a sick sensation he lied to himself.

Lucifer lies heavy atop him, thrusting. Sam looks into his own face but Lucifer's hard eyes. Giddy with panic Sam's fingertips trail down his cold chest, fingers in the archangels' hair he pulls him down, kissing him in the cold, begging. Lucifer has forced one leg up beneath him, the other drawn up by Sam himself but not so far. The complaints or Sam's muscles have graduated to shooting pain. They're in a nowhere motel bed, windows rime-crusted, magic fingers vibrating beneath Sam's back.

Sam's prayer Just let it be over is reaching Lucifer because Lucifer is an angel. One who offers no chance of succor, but Sam kisses him because it's the single tool at his disposal to assuage at least a little of the archangels's anger. A single, faulty tool. His hips are still jammed open; their body smacking him hard each furious thrust. Their cold skin sheds no sweat.

He's sorry. He shouldn't be sorry. He's not sorry for yelling. He's not sorry for yelling that Lucifer's blind; crippled; that that's his own fucking choice; that he's the most human out of any angel Sam has ever met going around defying God and breaking God's creations; where the hell is the difference?

He's sorry. He's sorry he's letting this happen. Again. He's scared; heartbeat in his throat, his ears. The trembling bed blurs with the force of their bodies colliding. Lucifer whispers: "I win. Again."

Sam made this hotel room. Sam pulled his own clothes off. Reluctant. Determined. Lucifer took.

Sam doesn't want to be crushed under the weight of their body. He wants it more than being alone. Not today. Not this year. Not Lucifer picking Michael's company over his and then when will he see him again? Sam pulls their mouths together more violently. Swears lips to lips he'll be good. He'll play nice. They'll be happy. Sometimes in words, sometimes in physical vehemence. He shoves his hand down between them and tries to get hard; jerk off. The pain in his legs still lances through
"Over and over again," Sam's own voice says. The voice of the Other standing beside the bed. Sam slams back into his present but Lucifer's still fucking him; he breaks away from his mouth, holds the ghost to his shoulder, glares, shuddering around the pounding of Lucifer's dick, at his doppelganger. "But Sam, you ask" the golem says. "What's his motive?"

The world slides through dimensions Sam has glimpsed but never walked. He hears a voice. His voice. Just let it be over. Power courses through him; exultation. A body is clasped to his erection; he slams it with violence – thrust after thrust.

My frightened little boy, is spoken in his head, his own voice but Lucifer's slow and gentle tones. Now he's being kissed, a hand tightening in his hair. Their hand. Adulation swells inside him; he just fucks the boy harder, whole bed trembling like the tremors running through Sam's body underneath him. Sam doesn't remember trembling; mixed it up with the magic fingers; feels sick at Lucifer's affection.

"I win," he says. "Again." He thrills with his own word, thrills as their body kisses promises onto his lips. Wants to laugh at the hand fumbling underneath him. So desperate to prove yourself. So why do you fight me?

Sorrow. Resentment. His own promises ringing in Lucifer's ears, stinging like slits sliced across flesh; like knives. Lucifer's sorry. He's sorry Sam yelled. He's sorry he's making this happen. Again. He wants it more than he wants to let it go. A frightened Sam paying in flesh underneath him. The anger clings to him, blood-sticky. The anger of looking into Dean Winchester's swollen, bloodied face and knowing after a hundred thousand years of waiting to meet this single boy Samuel picked him.

Picked the Michael who chose his baby brother. Who loved him. Who listened to him.

**WHY DID FATHER GIVE SAMUEL THE CHANCE WHILE HE BURNED IN HELL ABANDONED?**

Sam gasps for breath as they stand alone, Sam and the Other. His weak knees give out, pain still stabbing through one leg, legs still aching from remembered sexual acts.

"So, I know everything. Up to the point. I know you're both pathetic. Gear up for the greatest hits reel," the golem says factually, without insult. "It may not be the cause of our problems, but, you know, it's not the heart of the problem but you were right, I do suffer because of you. We went for Crowley how we wanted. Remember him on his knees in the closet when he sucked us off? I do. Drool in his beard. Black eyelashes. Fingernails in the seam of our pocket, grabbing my ass. Then you had to go and make some huge deal about the steps you took to get through to his body. He's leasing. It liked it. So disrespectful. You've definitely left me drowning in hormones."

Sam doesn't have the chance to answer.

"—can imagine the consequences," Michael finishes vehemently, Lucifer's larger vessel pinned between Michael and the glowing hot ground endlessly scorching the skin off his back.

"How have you remained so short-sighted over these tens of thousands of years? You still believe in him. You're a joke. You're the punchline. Don't you see it, Michael? This was a test. Father testing us. Forever. But we'll never be good enough. While we fought for separate Paradises, the humans discovered they no longer needed us. Did you ever imagine that? That like the Leviathans we would become obsolete?"
Michael pounds Lucifer's chest with his fist, strong enough to crack bones. Lucifer pities him. Tears would sting his eyes if not for the heat.

"He wouldn't," Michael seethes. "There must be a Plan. One he didn't reveal to even us."

Lucifer shakes his head. He's never felt so sorry for his big brother. Michael had always been the good son. Triumphant. Untouchable.

"Pray, Brother," he whispers. "Pray that time will end."

Michael raises his eyes to the infinity above them, an infernal hurricane of flame.

"This is your cage," he says without malice. "If you died here...would the locks remain fast?"

"I don't know," Lucifer says. He can't find it inside him to be angry with his brother. Michael never dreamed he'd be cast down. Michael, who flawlessly obeyed every command. Lucifer once stood in the same place, stood before Michael in faith, before the brother he adores. "I won't fight you. I'm finished fighting. You'll only be risking an eternity alone with Adam and whatever remains of Sam's soul when you destroy this vessel."

Michael's hands pin Lucifer's shoulders to the searing ground. His own pale blue eyes are rimmed with tears, all of him immune to the heat.

"...I love you."

"Not as much as you love Father," Lucifer says, calm despite the love he returns aching inside him, an open, leaking wound. "Not as much as the Humans you wanted to bring to your Paradise."

Michael's hands tighten against Lucifer's vessel, digging in until flesh bruises. Lucifer's chest is so filled with heartbreak he barely feels it.

"That isn't true," Michael says. "But I would have killed you rather than returned you here. You slayed Gabriel. Tell me – was it worth it?"

"The human vermin deluded him. The poison Dean Winchester spews seeped into him. In his last hours he rebelled against Father's Plan. I saved our brother before he Fell. I killed him before you and Raphael cast him down. Never forget you enjoy the greater comfort here. This is, after all, the fire you struck when you drove me here. Me. Because I pleaded for you to stand with me. Because I believed in you."

Michael is silent and still and doesn't cry. Just looks down upon him. Just holds him to the floor wrenching pain upon the vessel.

"—no apologies?" Lucifer finally asks. "None? Even now?"

"I did what had to be done," Michael says, intonation bland. Lucifer can't tell if his brother believes that or if he doesn't anymore. All these years and that cruel thorn can still be driven deeper. "It never meant I loved you any less," Michael swears.

That rings of a horrible truth.

Michael disappears in a bright white flurry of celestial feathers, off to haunt some private nook of the Cage. Lucifer picks himself up slowly, ignoring the pain. There will never be relief from the pain. He despairs that Michael will offer him any succor, either. Surely not as long as he withholds Sam from the first and greatest angel's wrath.
Michael doesn't understand Sam the way Lucifer does. Michael doesn't understand Lucifer, either. No pain, no thrashing, no screaming, no amount of anger, even holy and righteous and overwhelming, will ever move the either of them. They break only when driven to the complete inability to resist. Lucifer's desire for revenge against Sam shadows him. It doesn't mean he loves him any less, either.

The Other is beside Sam when his world changes. Sam remains on his knees; the golem has a hand on his thigh and strokes his hair, studying him dispassionately.

"Do you think you'll make it through this? Will you still be Sam, or will all the colors bleed together?" it asks, voice lilting with curiosity. "How did you pull that love for you up from Lucifer? Do you think it was his, or do you think you infected him through me? That Adam infected Michael?"

—when Sam shoves himself up from the floor, walks deliberately to the sink an untold time later, he begins to vomit thick black bile stained with thinner yellow into the old sink, white paint chipped off of steel. He twists the spigot. The manifested humors are moved slowly by the water, swirling the drain. Mescalito is telling him, in that he suddenly knows, that this is Lucifer's darkness and anger which still haunted the depths of the golem. That he has seen, accepted and expelled it.

Sam is the work of over one hundred thousand years. Of Lucifer's plotting in the cage and a breeding program, the usurpation of the human genome, that began with Lilith. A long time to be patient, even for an angel. It took the bait that is the body – this soul that is Sam, Lucifer's complementation. Driven. Intellectual. Calm on the surface but driven by passions he cannot always control. Hoping for no reason but to hope. Devious when he must be devious. Forceful when force is required.

Sam is the child of hope. Lucifer's hope that somewhere amid human depravity his Father would allow him a single ally, not all the undead proof of his point who so lust after power they've joined him in the fire but an ally who understands him.

How unfair the fruit born of his lonely wait. Sam understands him, but while understanding doesn't share his ideals or aims. Lucifer speaks to him of demons, humans given up to their malicious desires – holds them up as the poison within humanity destined to sicken and waste the rest of Creation as he would if his Father would suffer his company.

Sam talks about choice, human innovation and what it has to mean that there was no Apocalypse because of Dean Winchester, not an act of God. He sounds nothing like Michael, as stunned as Michael still is humans would refuse Paradise to save those humans unworthy of it.

When Lucifer hates Sam it's with his whole being. He gave everything and everything is what Sam rent asunder. No punishment can inflict upon Sam what Sam's mutiny inflicted upon Lucifer.

When Lucifer loves Sam it's with his whole being. He was careless in what he wished for, but though he's wrecked his rage on Sam's body Sam forgives him. Sam forgives not out of fear of desperate loneliness, although that may drive him to act, but because he comprehends the root of Lucifer's anger. To be silenced. To be punished for speaking his mind. For longing for another world than the world he was raised into.

Sam, on his knees, hangs onto the sink to remain upright, body weak, moaning because his throat is burned raw and bile trickles from his nostrils. He fears himself. He felt Lucifer control this body.
He turns his eyes to his mesa. Raises a shaky hand.

The old amulet flies into it, smacking his palm. He closes his fist around it.

He's crying, but from the vomiting. Emotionless tears running like his snot to expunge the last bile. His yearning is more terrifying than that. To free the devil. There are beings as bad as and worse than the devil.

The golem only knows so much.

As the years passed Sam grew to realize despite Lucifer's protection no matter what dreamscape they shared he carried an undercurrent of tension and pain. His imaginings always seemed off. Wrong. It was then that when they shared pleasant days. Lucifer might become women, angelic beauties rubbing cold balms on his skin, distracting him with whispers and soft flesh. After so long, Sam didn't know how they still found conversations to share. That came with difficulty. All too often they finished one another's sentences.

"Am I going to die?" Sam asked when agonies became a constant. By now he knew Lucifer could only shield him from so much of the raging fire.

"No," Lucifer said. "Souls can't die. They can forget who they were, they can go mad, but not die."

"You'll remember who I'm supposed to be," Sam said hollowly.

"Always. Everything. No matter how many millennia pass us by."

Sam wondered how long he had, but didn't ask. Lucifer sounded too doleful to press him. He told himself he might get used to the fire. Maybe he'd blacken and harden but still think and exist, even though everywhere the heat of the Cage had burned away Lucifer's preserving cold his skin, if he could call it skin, had gone with it.

"How long has it been?" he asked the angel.

"A hundred and fifty, sixty years," Lucifer supposed.

That sounded like a pathetic number to Sam. Lucifer had kept his mind through tens of thousands of surface years; an unimaginable time on fire in Hell. Sam wasn't going to reach his bicentennial in anything resembling the state he entered in.

"Do you still think it was worth it?" Lucifer asked in his soft, slow way years later than that.

"Yeah," Sam said. His voice sounded papery-rough. "Whether it was you or Michael, you would have wiped everything humans ever made off the globe. It only took a handful of people to stop you. I'd do it all over again."

Lucifer hated the answer and disappeared.

Free the devil.

He won't. Even though he checked Lucifer's power before.

He won't free Michael. Adam can't even begin to control him. Even damning his brother, he can't free Michael.

A fear that they are all three now souls and all three burning will stay with him. Maybe for the rest of his life.
He washes his face, walks unsteadily to the bed and lies on his back, still clutching the amulet. He comes in and out of gentler hallucinations. He sees places he's never been. Humans he's never spoken to. A world teeming with life calling out to him, reminding him no matter how Lucifer denies it humanity is as much a part of the warp and the weft as all the rest of Creation.

San Pedro stands beside him now, showing him these things in silence.
Chapter 22

Sam dismantles his mesa, keeping its sundries wrapped in the cloth but his gun in the back of his jeans, Jessica's picture in his pocket and John's notebook under his arm, the coffee mug hooked by his pinky. He doesn't encounter anybody in the hallway, anyway.

Crowley is in their room, but doesn't pay much attention to what Sam sets on the desk. He still looks pale. Really terrible. There's dried blood in his beard, some of it from his ears. A handkerchief sits on the bedside table, bloody in different stages of dry.

Sam wants to open his mouth and say Cut it out, but then Sam also wants to raise Satan so he's going on his second impulses today. Crowley looks more dejected than he does ill supporting Sam's instincts – that Crowley's the one punishing himself.

He climbs onto the other side of the bed and slides next to the morose demon. Crowley dispiritedly lets him put an arm around him. Sam doesn't exactly find it effortless not to lick the blood coming out of him, but he doesn't; pushes that out of his head. He thinks his boyfriend could be less edible, but demons probably think that about everybody.

"You need to let yourself heal," he prompts, but quietly. Crowley rankles at the idea; defensively turns the conversation around on Sam.

"Did it work or didn't it? Damned lot of effort wasted on both our parts if it didn't."

"It worked," Sam says, too removed from his immediate physical reality to get riled up. "Batteries to power, turbines to speed." He even smiles.

"Well?" Crowley prompts, gone from complaining to curious. "Show me."

Sam makes a face. He's really not about showing off, except to Dean if they get into the right situation. He turns his attention to the can of tennis balls on the dresser, though. Takes a minute to feel it out. Pops the top off. It clatters to the floor. He's more careful, squints, raises the top ball above the plastic rim before it snaps forward into his waiting hand.

No nosebleeds. Not even a nose tingle.

"Like you've been at it all your life," Crowley gloats with satisfaction.

Sam tosses the tennis ball once on the air, feeling accomplished but mostly pleased with Crowley's pride. He passes the ball to the bloodied demon who puts it on the bedside table.

"I didn't do it to replace you. I don't know if I can heal, but I worked out enough of what Charlie and Kevin were saying that I'm not gonna try healing you. How do we stop the blood loss?"

Crowley gets nervous, presses his lips together, expression pained. He's recalcitrant at first but comes out with it after a short quiet spell.

"Ignacio Diaz. How terrified he was. I couldn't tune it out. I couldn't..." his voice is high and tinny. Strained. "I tried to bury him so he didn't know, but now I was sympathetic with him. Made it impossible. He kept praying. I held myself together in the market, got what I needed done but he kept praying, and praying and praying. I can still hear him clear as if I'm with him. Stuck in my head. I just keep bleeding."
Sam answers with a quiet "Oh." That's psychosomatic, sure, and it's self-flagellating. Sam was right, but it's not one Crowley can just pick his mood up through.

Sam wants to kiss him, offer respite, but blood's running from his nose again, staining his lips liquid red. Crowley growls and snatches up his handkerchief, pressing it to his face.

Sam tries to think of a way around that, more worried than enticed by blood.

"Think you can sleep? We could go put the TV on. Or I could...read to you." He may be grasping, but either scenario could work.

Crowley looks sour.

"This is like those awful Twilight books. You and me."

Sam gawks, superficially offended but still offended. He doesn't know much more about Twilight than he's accidentally been exposed to or the golem learned on the job, but he knows there's a hungry, pasty vampire that sparkles in the sun.

"Sure. Like Twilight. Only I'm smarter, better looking, taller, definitely, and I've only been covered head to toe in glitter once. I'll read to you." He rankles further. "And forget modesty: There's no way I don't have a sexier voice."

The noise out of Crowley's throat, frustration deferred, both affirms Sam's assessment and raises a comfortable and familiar warmth inside him.

"In glitter?" Crowley wonders. "Walk into a gay pride parade?"

"No. Exploding clowns."

There's not much more to explain about that.

----

Crowley listens closely while Sam reads. That isn't hard. He's damn right he has a sexy voice, more so when his emotions ring clear in it: Concentration, bullheadedness, and then the inflection the narrative requires.

Crowley doesn't put himself in positions like this: Eyes shut, folded under Sam's arm, head against the boy's chest rising and falling with his breath, handkerchief pressed to his face by his own blood encrusted hand, wishing he could enjoy the scent of his partner and not be clogged up with its metallic bite. Not out of machismo, which he can discard with entirely without fuss when it suits. It's not in his instincts to leave himself totally unwary. Hasn't done since he let Sam plunge the needle into his waiting neck without resistance and briefly, underneath Sam in bed, when he would have let Sam do quite a few dangerous things without protest.

He doubly doesn't put himself in positions like this considering Sam does especially poorly with freely bleeding demons – only he can imagine nothing in the world better than being tucked up semi-conscious to Sam, who's reading animatedly from novelized pulp fiction resourced from the abandoned personal collection of some Man or Woman of Letters along with more of its kind.

Nesting under his enormous arm he remembers Sam taking his hand under the table in the library; he felt like he was being engulfed, all that heat and Sam's hold firm and certain. Now he is being engulfed and it's just the same, the same swell of magnetism as at their beginning, only more.

Crowley can't interrupt Sam's reading to say This. That damn it this is going to work this time. He
doesn't have the strength right now; the interruption it would just facilitate more blood loss.

The story is ridiculous, lurid, nostalgic – for Crowley – and, naturally, racist, but it has a lot of action and the long but straightforward paragraphs are all that Crowley's up to keeping up with. He requested specifically that Sam choose one from the lot rounded up when clearing the private rooms, knowing they'd all be relatively mindless.

His eyes are closed but he can hear in Sam's voice the points where Sam's brow grows worried or he wrinkles his nose at some especially awkward-for-twenty-thirteen paragraph. He's not above, he's really miles below, having a giggle at Sam's expense, shaking with laughter against his side. Sam tells him to shut up, or asks him why he's not asleep yet, and shifts his arm to hold him a little nearer each time. By the time Crowley's consciousness surrenders, most of the blood has caked dry.

If he'd been up to talking he'd have liked to tell Sam how definitely he was getting laid for his attentive good sportsmanship, erotic were Crowley not driven half insane. Just as well he wasn't because he isn't sure of his follow-through.

----

Kevin sits at the library table eating lunch, sandwich and chips, staring across it at the literal 'angel radio'. He isn't thinking much, listening to himself chew. His frenetic translating days are over. The second bedroom he appropriated is covered ceiling to floor and in some places ceiling with papers handwritten, photocopied out of tomes, and printed off the internet. Charlie has a back door into every academic journal on the planet. If she doesn't, she'll make one. They set up a fax machine for finagling more obscure documents over the phone.

Kevin's mind shuffles through old facts knowing he has nothing to add and nothing to look for. When he catches himself at it he diverts his thoughts to MoonDoor instead. He was awesome in MoonDoor. Popular. His new friends, his comrades in arms, thought he was hilarious. He never used to have time for friends because he has obsessive compulsive tendencies; he camps just east of the autistic spectrum.

Now he's got an IRC chat to hang out in. Technically it's the channel of an anime fansubbing group but in that capacity it provides access to direct downloads from people's computers. There's not a lot of talk about fansubbing because everybody in the gang knows their jobs. It's mostly video games and media, concerts and...okay, so Kevin's starting to watch free anime so he can join in certain conversations but it's not like he hates it.

He's on the MoonDoor message boards too, with some of the same people, mostly in Off Topic. It's wonderful and it's miserable. They're out there in the real world, living real lives with real people. They're in college, or they have jobs. One of them is a reptile breeder. So, Kevin tries not to talk about himself. 'I live in a secret bunker with two terminally damaged older-brothers-cum-kidnappers, a TV junkie with a bug collection, one cool chick and the demon that murdered my girlfriend and my mother' isn't a conversation topic.

His sandwich is finished. The crunches the second to last potato chip. He wants a drink. He'll heist a vodka bottle and then he'll watch two free lectures from Yale and the latest episode of Attack on Titan.

He has to get out of here. He's a prophet, but he's not prophesizing anything. He wants to go to Princeton. Of course now, legally speaking, he's twenty-three, but on paper he's been working since graduation and he has great fake job references with certain hunters and Charlie prepared to testify on his behalf.
He seriously has to get out of here. His brain and his body are convinced he's actually, if slowly, dying. There's no sunlight. He can kill a man from two hundred yards, in hand to hand, or anywhere in between with any variety of weapons. He'll defend himself, but he's not becoming a hunter.

He's leaving. As soon as he figures out how to have that conversation with Dean.

He's going to ask Crowley where his mother and Channing's bodies are, first.

He can't even taste a burn on the vodka anymore.

----

Sam concentrates. Small, delicate gestures have always proven more difficult than sweeping displays of power. Exorcizing multiple demons simultaneously may be taxing, but it isn't exacting. Sam pantomimes the flick of the light switch, exhaling in cautious relief when he doesn't hear anything snap. If he shorted the circuit, he won't know until he or Crowley wakes up.

He's smelled blood long enough that his mind has filtered the scent out. The more he wanted to drink Crowley the more he wanted to protect him – a fair trade; a strenuous one. Right now, book laid aside on the bed, he's only feeling vigilance, listening to Crowley's even breathing, the demon's sleeping body twitching a handful of times as it settles deeper into slumber.

Sam tells himself they're in the safest place in the world, reminds himself he's the danger that put him on edge, even while he glares guardedly at the light-outlined door. He's in his element with Crowley coveted away under his arm. He's not a cuddler like Dean, but he has his own set of hardwired protective instincts. Even if he may be the most dangerous thing to a demon besides Metatron in terms of power and nature as well as desires.

He's still stinging from assuming Crowley was just moping. He'll fall asleep, too, eventually, but for now he's fixed in place; pulls the covers up a little more. After days of nonstop bleeding Crowley's vessel isn't doing its best job maintaining its core temperature. It may not be dangerous to the demon but that doesn't mean he isn't cold.
"What am I supposed to say, Charlie? Or, you know, type? These people think they know me. Hell, they know me better than I know me! They had some kind of director's commentary! And they write porn about me."

Charlie stays several feet clear of Dean's broad but desk-chair rooted gesturing.

"Breathing. Start with breathing." She sticks her lower lip out, brow notching. "I don't know – also, you think porn about everything, and sometimes you share it. Moot point. Maybe you can find somebody to cyber with. Just introduce yourself."

Dean scowls at Charlie, then at the waiting text box. Types: Hi. I'm Dean Winchester; makes a frustrated sound and holds down backspace until it disappears.

Charlie points toward the empty screen, raising her brow optimistically.

"That was a good start. I mean, you started. It'd be better if you left text in the box."

Dean thumps the backs of his open hands on the desk.

"Dude. These people expect me to lead them. Maybe I could do that, but not over the internet. How do I even know they're who they say they are? How do they know I'm Dean Winchester?"

"Um. I know they're who they say they are because I've hacked everything they own." She steps in range of Dean's animated arms to point to one of two small, black devices with digital readouts sitting near the keyboard. "It requires an authenticator to get on the forum, now. It's a little device that changes passwords every twenty seconds. You have to have that password on top of each person's forum password that they only have in their head. See? This one is yours."

Dean picks it up, squinting at it a minute before setting it aside.

"Yeah. I don't know what that is. This is not how I pictured forming the army of the revolution. I've seen myself leading the army of the revolution. I was a douchebag, but there was a real camp and real guns and...real people."

"Rude. How about you type about your feelings? Like, what you just said to me."

"Type about my feelings." Dean rolls his eyes. "I oughta sock you but part of me thinks you're a girl and then I'd just feel shitty."

Charlie's mouth falls open.

"Excuse me. Sexism."

"—what?"

He gets a hand between Charlie in his face.

"Oh, god. You. Neandertal man. Type." It segues into a wave. "I'm outie."

Dean makes a face as Charlie makes an exit. That leaves him alone with the computer, the open text box labeled 'start a new thread', and a blinking cursor.
He clicks into the title field: *Hi. I'm Dean Winchester.*

He grimaces. Picks up his coffee and takes a sip, sleeve of his bathrobe riding up on his arm. General of Heaven? Right. Generals are supposed to have uniforms. Audiences. Have earned commendations. He's a guy in his boxer briefs and his undershirt in a dead guy's or dead woman's bathrobe with a heart-printed mug that slowly loses "life" as the hot coffee in it dwindles.

How many times has he ever introduced himself to somebody without it being at least fifty percent bullshit?

But he doesn't have to introduce himself here, though. Not really.

Dean sets his jaw.

*You all know who I am and what I do. You know some of what I've done.* He frowns at the sentence a minute, but doesn't delete it. He scowls, sitting forward, hits enter twice. *I don't know who any of you are, or how I can help you. I don't how you can help me. You all know there's monsters out there. A whole lot more people figuring that out. Chuck's Supernatural books only have half the story.*

*We've learned monsters aren't all evil. That they've got souls. They go to Purgatory when they bite it. I know because I got sent there by the explosion when me and Castiel axed that douchebag Dick Roman. For the past two years one of my best friends has been a vampire. I know, Dean Winchester right? Think Lenore, Eve free. He saved me and he saved Castiel and a long time after we jail broke Purgatory for Earth he took a one way trip back to save Sam. That man is family.*

*That doesn't make monsters who aren't safe any safer. Don't go out there with the free hugs. Most of them will still rip your face clean off. Crowley, you know the one, is selling some bullshit about leaving letters to open negotiations up but I've thought about it and that's not totally bullshit.*

*Me and Sam got a regime change in Hell to deal with. See: Crowley's bunked up with us. You probably wanna know who's down there. Just know she's a conqueror, not a salesguy.*

*I don't need you on that. I need some people to figure out how to prevent wholesale amateur or government monster hunts. Sam's big into this whole monster rehab kick but Hell's our top priority. You get back to me some ideas and some action on that and I'll know what else I can trust you with.*

Dean stares at the text, bland in a white box. He hits "post". Nausea rises to his gullet imagining filtering through the Beckies and costumed fans of the world. 'Oh my god it's you!' 'I can't believe you actually posted here.' 'Are you really Dean Winchester?' 'What was it like blah blah blah.'

He chuckles when he registers Crowley's voice in his head. So he's used to the dude being around, now. To watching some TV together or, twice, having a shooting match. He managed to squeeze out a second-take victory.

*I went easy on you the first time. Because you're old.*

Hard to imagine, but Crowley's way more annoying than he's already annoying when he keeps his mouth shut and just smiles.

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Crowley passes Kevin in the library. The boy slowly looks up from the leather chair he's sitting in, reading, eyes silently following the demon until Crowley passes toward the kitchen. His back
itches with the sense of the boy's eyes on him.

He's just done frying up grilled cheese, and chives, and onion, sliced ham and bacon strips – basically the miscellanea of the refrigerator. He's holding a cuppa, letting the steam clean his abused sinuses. He's still snotting clotted blood when he blows his nose.

He feels Kevin standing at the door before he turns to face him, wary, instinctively hanging close to the counter and glancing him over for a firearm.

"This is turning into...What's the game got put on Sam's computer? Slender. Only creepy. I can't muster much fear for something with no primary senses."

Actually creepy. Very creepy. Graduating toward frightening. Kevin's eyes are liquor glassy but that's not the unsettling part. They've gone dead, all pretense of vivacity passed on. He speaks low. A man's voice. Not the child.

"I wanna know what you did with them. With Channing. My mom."

Crowley keeps his mouth shut on Who's Channing? The child's girlfriend, of course. Monstrous not to have made an enduring mental note. He sets his tea aside on the counter.

Dread slowly climbs his spine; skeletal fingers digging their spear-like phalanges into the crevasses of his bones.

"Channing I had disposed of. I didn't give much thought to it, Kevin. I don't know where she is but somewhere out of the way. I delegated."

"That's not what you did with my mom," Kevin assumes correctly.

"No. It isn't," Crowley agrees, diplomatic.

"Did you rape her?" Kevin's voice has gone dead, too. Hollow.

Crowley exhales.

"I didn't. I used a knife for everything."

"Tell me, Crowley."

Might as well be facing a ghoul.

"You can't really want to—Kevin...I just." Crowley swallows. Memories rise gory along with Linda's screams. "Kept. cutting. away. I gouged her eyes out. I carved in...everywhere you'd think. I was furious. I mutilated her. And sometime during, she died."

Kevin's voice roars through the claustrophobic room with its sharp acoustics.

"Where is she, you fucking bastard?"

Crowley keeps his voice quiet. Unobtrusive as he can. Terror's chilly in him. As much terror as his depleted blood can carry.

"Buried in the basement of my last mansion. I liked to keep the people I hated close."

"Is she in Hell?" Kevin asks, so calmly Crowley knows, intuitively, that he's going to be to hurt. Not how hurt and not with what, but it's crystal that Kevin's decided and that somewhere he has a
weapon. He deserves to be hurt. Despite that he doesn't like the thought of it upsetting Sam.

"No. It's very expensive, soul trafficking," Crowley placates honestly. "Did she go with her Reaper? Did she stay to haunt me? I don't know. I've lost the house."

Crowley doesn't move, breathing deep but steady, as Kevin, full of purpose, approaches him. The demon's vessel is a wreck. While he's quickly coming back up to power after his journey ambient power never fortifies a vessel, only energies shaped by will. He hasn't enough and anyway he doesn't intend to try.

Kevin hits hard, no longer an ordinary child but a martial artist trained to kill. Crowley can take a pummeling. He does. He's swooning on his feet, blood running into one eye, blood splashed across the floor from force of blunt trauma like in pugilism when Kevin switches tactics, kicks him backward into the wall. Here's the knife. Black military pocket knife. Serrated. It slams home through his ribs. It's not Kurdish, but hell if it's not blessed and it's salted and etched with something terrible.

Crowley thinks he held up manfully until the point. Now he's screaming in agony, on his knees on the floor, as he rips the thing out of his chest and throws it clattering, blood splattering, across the floor.

"Was it anything like that?" Kevin yells, picking the knife off the floor, throwing himself forward, shaggy hair in motion but Dean is putting him and then keeping him in a hold. Castiel rushes to Crowley's side to keep him from toppling while Sam stands at the kitchen door staring at a floor painted with bright splashes and dark beads of crimson. He looks at Crowley with apology, throwing his hands up to dramatize how little more of this he can actually take. Crowley nods pardon and Sam sullenly, miserably retreats. Charlie stands with her face scrunched up trying to figure out what happened from the evidence at hand.

He must have screamed like a stuck rabbit. His chest is still on fire.

"Gentle, Dean," Crowley chides breathlessly, looking up through the eye not dyed red. "I eviscerated his mother."

The physical pain conflates with self-disgust, regret, and memories he once savored, now awe-inspiring only that he could feed off Linda's screams for all those hours.

"I want her body back. Make him get her body back," Kevin pleads and demands at once, voice ragged cheeks gleaming wet.

"One thing at a time, cowboy," Dean says, all authority. "He's got like half a liter of blood in there. Literally."

"Dean's right," Castiel says. Crowley realizes blearily Cas's warm fingers are pressed to his throat. "He doesn't have a pulse. He probably went into cardiac arrest sometime during the fight."

"Bugger," Crowley mutters. He answers Dean's querying look with: "No. It's making a very sluggish effort, dying-goldfish like. I'll be fine. Need a transfusion, maybe a shot of adrenaline. Just look after Kevin, will you, Squirrel?"

After Cas has slung his arm around a shoulder and carried him upstairs with little help from Crowley's disobedient legs the demon supposes the blood will wipe off the nice chair.

"Get the tinned saline and transfusion equipment from the back of the pharmacy. Heart just needs something to pump. And a surgical kit to sew my chest up. The adrenaline."
"I...Yes," Castiel says, hurrying to do so. After a few minutes Crowley has fluids running into his body. He debates letting Castiel stitch him. Dean has no doubt provided the training, but despite those eager-to-aid eyes he cautiously decides despite trembling hands to do it himself. After a few minutes more he no longer has to will his failing heart to work. He stabs a small, reasonable amount of adrenaline into his thigh to encourage it to keep at it, not sure if it's a good idea or a poor one. It won't kill him. "Where is the body, Crowley?" Cas asks.

"In a shallow grave in a dirt floor basement, perfectly serial killer like. I don't think Mr. Tran will be in a state to see what's left anytime in the foreseeable future."

"And you?" Cas asks, suddenly sweetness and gentle touches. "You look completely horrible."

Crowley regards his friend sourly, estimating it's too much effort to give him a smack. Cas knows he prides himself on good grooming yet somewhere in that head two wires failed to fuse.

"Not even adjacent to rock bottom. I'll pop out and shop a blood bank when this bag's empty. Leave a receipt, suppose. Be fit as I naturally am before you know it."

Cas wets his flaking lips, taking on his typically pathetic expression of worry as if without immediate redress any given problem will end him.

"Sam is having difficulty surrounding his...should I refer to it as cannibalism or vampirism?"

"Vampi—We don't call it anything, sweetie, except in the past."

Crowley can see one of many possible futures: crushed against the wall by telekinesis forcing its way past his own defenses, the most expedient route to pinning a fly; Sam at his neck, eyes delirium-glazed, mouth sloppy with blood. That would be something. How much of a demon can Sam suck out that way?

"Of course," Cas agrees immediately, but imagining the same thing if the protective way his hand closes around the wrist free of the peripheral catheter is any indication.

"Fetch me some blankets, mate? This body's miserable. Whole thing's room temperature."

"Yes. I know where there's a...'space heater', also."

"You're a doll."

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"I want my mom's body back," Kevin states calmly, escorted to his bedroom, sitting on his bed, blood on his hands, while Dean looms over him. "For him to go and get her body back."

"Well that was a hell of a way to get what you want. You know Abaddon's got that house under surveillance. He can't just appear there and swing that, not in the shape he's in. Ten-four?"

Dean has no reason to hope reason is a viable tactic to swing this conversation.

"So we all go," Kevin says. "You, me, Crowley, Sam. We go, we get her body and we leave. Don't start Dean," he snaps when Dean's just about to. "If it was Sam down there you'd already be there. You would've beaten it out of Crowley months ago. She needs to be salted and burned. A death like what he did to her's what angry ghosts are made of."

Dean takes a few seconds with that and answers with care.
"You're not wrong."

Kevin laughs.

"But you're not going to. Not now. That's why I'm going."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up. You're going where?"

"To college. I'm going to college. And if demons or angels or hunters track me down there? I'm gonna kill them."

"You haven't thought this through," Dean says, so obviously a lie on his part it's not even gold plated.

Kevin starts raising his voice.

"No, Dean. You don't want to hear it. I'm living in an elementary school. You're all so fucking selfish. Guess what? It's my turn to be the playground bully. 'Wesley' has two job interviews next week. He's taking the bus to New Jersey. He has his bus ticket. And three prospective rentals. If I don't get into Princeton? I don't even care right now. If I don't get into Princeton I'll go from there."

"You should have talked to me, or Sam, or Charlie – a fucking adult about this," Dean barks back, hearing John.

Kevin's still laughing, sharp eyes seeing straight through it.

"From where I'm standing short of Charlie I'm the most competent 'real person' in this sad ass mausoleum."

Dean stiffly folds his arms; starts to feel small. Shifts his weight, reaches out to pull Kevin up to his level.

"It's not a—"

The kid slaps his hand away.

"Don't. Don't touch me, man. I just collapsed a guy's lung."

"And you're dunk."

"Yeah," Kevin says, grinning smugly. "Think what shape he'd be in if I was sober."

Dean glowers but he backs off, leaving the kid in his room to his rebellion. Yells: "Talk to Charlie!" through the closing door

Sammy did this. Sammy alright for himself, Dean thinks futilely. Tries to forget Jessica burning on the ceiling. He returns to the kitchen and washes the knife off in the sink first; disappears it into his clothes. Crowley's gone from the library, for whatever that's worth. The mess on the floor is uglier – mop bucket worthy. He has a mop bucket and mop solution and a mop, too, and that takes care of that.

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"Wake up, darling," a husky, familiar voice bids from just beside the bed. "Tanked up and scrubbed down."
Sam wills away his drowsiness enough to pull Crowley down and toward him as the demon climbs over his body, lying against and upon him and pressing his lips to Sam's. Sam didn't know a kiss could be this good, neither the clean taste nor slick textures. He'd never been pent up for kissing this way before. He chokes a frustrated sound deep in his throat while he grasps Crowley's face in both hands. Crowley grasps a handful of Sam's hair for himself, a hand rubbing soothing circles on the broad flat of Sam's chest.

Despite the sheets between them, Sam drops a hand to Crowley's hip and tackles him over onto his back, provoking a groan – not an inconvenienced one.

"Banking everything hurts like 'Kiss it better'," Sam murmurs, raking Crowley's beard with his teeth.

Crowley chuckles, sad and exhausted but still doting.

"Kiss it better. Lick it better. Suck it better..."

Sam complies in order, suckling Crowley's ear until his lips pop away.

"Oh, Moose..." Crowley mutters. "I really meant to show you my appreciation for all your troubles before I recounted...Linda Tran's...end at my hands to the child."

He guides Sam's face to center above him, gaze as penetrating as it is entreating. Sam's own expression softens in answer.

"Hey," he prods, smiling reassurance. "We both did our parts in getting my body in working order. It took something out of both of us. That's...synergy."

Sam doesn't know what put passion back in Crowley who leaves him kissed breathless, lips soaked and puffy. He whispers Wow and Okay while his fingers comb Crowley's bangs; intermittently lays pillowed kisses on Crowley's equally swollen mouth. He doesn't know what he's seeing in the demon's expression – gratitude and mortal guilt and desire and pain mangled together, the inner yearnings of a patchwork man.

Scratch that. Sam has seen eyes like Crowley's in the mirror, Sam's own gaze made of cheaper stuff, crimes that seemed unthinkable at the time superficial compared to Crowley's.

Sam slowly pushes Crowley's arm up, the one with the bruises from the blood transfusion. That arm means something, it means more than the healthy one could doubled up with Sam's larger hand sliding up its palm, fingers interlocking.

"I thought that was the plan. We face this stuff together. Like in Natural Born Killers if partway through they'd stopped and thought about what they'd done."

"Suppose I'm Mallory..." Crowley sighs, giving his hand a squeeze. "Think we ought pick a less disturbingly apt metaphor."

"If the shoe fits...then it's probably gonna be a pretty torn up shoe."

"What did you see, Moose? Have yourself a vision quest? Nothing if it's too personal, love," the demon whispers, slack but cloying underneath Sam's weight. Sam knows what he's giving Crowley's sore body. Defense but the ache Crowley's guilt wants to keep going, too.

"I did. Later. Have visions. It wasn't so much a quest." Sam kisses the demon's lips, reassuring he's glad to share, although he winces next he speaks close to Crowley's lips. "Lucifer and I shared a
body…That meant we used the same brain. I never even thought about that before. Now? I know what he knows. Or at least what he thought. I don't know an archangel worth of information, but he left me an encyclopedia set." A sigh. "You were right. He would've killed all of you. Demons were his proof positive humans were minted from a flawed design."

"He should have grasped it when he made us," Crowley says, voice edged with sudden, surprising resolve. "Not a flawed design. Open ended. Like what Charlie was trying to explain to me about building the angel radio on Linux before I entirely stopped caring. I'm a hideous piece of work – don't make that face, you know it – but how could he miss the evidence against his argument while he spent all those years in the Cage with you?"

Sam knows what he wants right now with as much clarity as he's ever been hit from behind him. There's certainty inside him like an eight cylinder engine firing. His breath quickens to feed it.

Sam presses up to the demon beneath him, an arm slid beneath Crowley's on the one side. He kisses the hand clasped at the other. He drinks Crowley's groan and the gratitude for that dull pain radiating from his partner's eyes. He needs the leverage.

"I wanna see you. Through to you…I'm not going to leave you because I do."

Crowley's widened eyes are exactly as horrified as Sam expected, but there's no effect on the yearning in Sam.

"You're saying that prematurely."

"Trust me, Crowley. Please?" he says, his promise inherent.

The demon's face breaks with incomprehension, like he could cry. He nods, but Sam looks on insistently.

"Not like this," Sam relents. "I'm not forcing you."

Crowley chases his retreat with self-deprecating determination.

"You should know what you're with, Moose."

Sam's eyes widen in their turn. He doesn't correct who because Crowley will answer with temper. He nods once, slowly.

He lets Lucifer's memories change his sight. Flinches. Sam suddenly smells sulfur. Crowley is airy red. That he's seen. He's never really seen a demon. He has double vision, both aspects equally real under attention.

Two eyes like bloody, unburst boils lie in place of Crowley's vessel's. There's only the vague suggestion of a head, a slowly swirling, poisonous, crimson miasma filling it out, but Crowley has a maw, ugly with stained human teeth coming from skinless flesh coalesced from the intangible body; tongue dark, raw-meat red. What else is there? A skeletal hand clutching Sam's, more fingers than palm, sharp, rough-edged claws rooted in the bone. Parts of a sternum, ribs, surfaces chipped off, battered.

Ghosts of other elements in equally rough shape throughout his body. Sam thinks they must be conjured from images his bones. His real bones – in some state of their decay. They've probably dissolved, broken down by the elements or digested by ancient animals. Immune to burning, now. Somehow Sam thought there'd be a mockery of genitals pressed near his own but there's nothing. Just that same vague airy suggestion, heaviest in his balls.
"Handsome bastard, I am," Crowley drawls, demon tongue articulating against the roof of a non-existent mouth.

Sam knew, of course. What the hell did he think? He knew, but didn't think.

This is one of his people. One of an immortal legion. This is Crowley, full of everything Sam loves and everything he admires. He matches the demon's gaze. Like the eyes he saw in Linda, the memory of Crowley's irises are like hard pustules pressed against the thin film. So what?

So fucking what? Sam remembers Bobby's spirit, pure and bright and white. Crowley has chosen this. A weapon to wield. Crowley hates it and Sam can't. He's only sad.

Crowley's kisses are rotten egg stained slime. Sam's tastebuds realize this is what he loves to suck up. It's so delicious he shudders, crushes down on Crowley and slurps a long, heady draw, just brushing it off the surface.

Not inhaling.

He lets it go. The taste dissipates. The monster is gone when he opens his eyes. He's dizzy with a rapture the slowly fades. Crowley whispers Sam in a shaky voice and reaches up to stroke his fingers through his hair.

"I love you," Sam says, voice more forceful than he anticipated for the briefest moment that he anticipated it. He's a little drunk.

Crowley's face goes slack with horror.

The alarms in his head are much too late.

"I'm never not going to love you," he swears hotly, before Crowley won't listen to it; now he's delirious but it's joy washing away the predator; fear blooming, too. "I should have saved it longer."

"You should have saved it longer," Crowley parrots, voice empty, still stunned stupid.

Sam lets up on his weight. Withdraws his arm a little. Loosens his grasp on Crowley's hand. Offers unsteadily:

"You can do what you need to just...come back in one piece."

A plea.

Sam's flipped onto his back so hard he knows Crowley used teke. The mattress groans. He exhales loudly in a room empty of the demon, but his panic-fluttering heart finds something soothing in the fact that Crowley let himself out the door. Only pushed it to swing shut. Probably too preoccupied, but didn't even slam it.

Didn't disappear.

----

Charlie stands with her arms wrapped around her chest holding her elbows in her hands, self-sure like Dean wasn't when he stood with Kevin yesterday and smiling.

"All grown up and assuming a fresh legal identity for the first time."
Kevin takes pause and studies her. Envies her.

"How can you walk around here like nothing affects you?"

Charlie shrugs her slim shoulders.

"Years of emotional isolation and the ability to discard tens of friendships in under ten minutes' thought. This unaffected facade? Not a facade. An entire defense array."

Kevin stares down at his packed backpack and the duffle he borrowed, beside it, with his weapons and the extra clothes he's thrift-shopped since.

"I won't know anybody. I'll be lying to everyone I meet, and I have to keep it all straight." He hears his voice start to crack. "I just want my mom, Charlie. I was supposed to be able to call her...I wanted my mom. I pulled her into this." He's crying, doesn't wipe at his face, just turns to the older girl, knowing she's the one person who's ever really understood. "That psychopath butchered her alive! I let that happen. For a stupid fucking 'god' that doesn't care about me!"

Charlie opens her arms, stepping forward, taking him by the shoulders. Her eyes are wet, but her smile lopsided.

"What do we say to the god of death?"

"Not today," Kevin says. Charlie pulls him into her arms.

"Now what's Wesley Kawaguchi going to do?"

"I'm not even Vietnamese anymore." How didn't he realize what that meant before? All the things he can't tell anyone about the history of his family?

"Bzzzzt," Charlie says, although gentle. "Try again."

Kevin gets himself together, pushing himself back to arm's length, wearing confidence he can't reflect inwardly. Yet.

"He's gonna kick ass at a couple of job interviews. Anybody would love to have him as a renter."

Charlie grins ear to ear, nodding, giving his shoulders a squeeze. She leans in, adding sweetly:

"He's going to shave, and then stop by one of those five dollar hair cut places when he gets off the bus. He'll always carry two knives, one in case he gets frisked, but he'll make sure they're both sturdy because sometimes they surprise you and find the better hidden one. He has a concealed carry license. He can carry a forty-five but that's more than enough power for almost every situation. He may want to stick with a twenty-two. And he can always call Charlie. She may not appear but sometimes she can fix problems faster rooted at a desktop."

"Thanks," he says, eyes starting to dry. "You're a great fake sister fake ex-manager."

"And you're going to be a rocking fake twenty-two year old whose prospective employers and the Princeton admissions board I will give gleaming, entirely consistent, entirely fallacious reviews to," she beams. "As a master assassin of the Followers of the Moon it's my responsibility to make sure our longbowmen, swordsmen and wizards can move unimpeded in the public sphere."

They embrace again. Kevin slings his backpack on, hefts his bag onto his shoulder. He's going to find Dean. And Castiel. Give Dean a letter for Sam. A sort of sorry-not-sorry-I-stabbed-your-
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Warning: Triggers, gore.

Sam Winchester imagines himself in a simpler time. From one when his brother called him boogerface to one where he was a kid with migraines of the future, frightening but their significance unknown. Basically any time before Madison and the first troubling signs that someone actually cursed his love life and it was God.

"You fucked up again," Dean observes, the familiar sound of a beer bottle meeting a wooden table adjacent of Sam. Sam isn't motivated to pick his head up and hasn't been since he woke up, forehead down, nose squashed, eyes shut.

"Days that end with 'y'," Sam mutters.

He hears Dean take a drink from a beer of his own; knows his brother looms over him.

"What'd you do?"

Sam makes face at the table he's become intimate with.

"Uh. Told him I love him. Like...in love with him. While he was stuck on repeat about torturing Linda until she died."

"Oh. So. He gets the bedroom."

Dean's beer sloshes in that direction.

"Yeah."

Sam reluctantly sits up and takes advantage of half Dean's offering in one long draw. Now he notices his brother's carrying a twelve pack of beer, minus two. Dean grins. Sam implicitly understands his face is covered in splotches, pressure-red.

"Come'on, dude. You've been passed out drooling on the table all morning. We're going for a drive."

Ten miles later Dean swings onto an abandoned property, driving past the house to the edge of the field somebody's renting to plant wheat. The Winchesters get out of the Impala, Sam with the beer, circling around to her front; climbing onto the hood with thoughtless coordination.

They crack their beers and drink in silence, the early-noon sun beating down on Baby's black hood; the beer cold.

"You're in love with a dude," Dean says toward the field. "That's so gay."

Sam shoots him an open mouthed look that doesn't part from his drink for long.

"Yeah. I guess. Sort of," he reluctantly agrees. Nostalgia lingering, he'd actually like to indulge
Dean on finally pinning him as gay, or a woman, or a transvestite, or one of those things Dean's always angling for that Sam wouldn't care about being – if he was – but the shoe still doesn't fit. He hasn't Cinderella'd his way across an invisible line.

Dean looks incredulous in his turn.

"You're sleeping with a pretty butch guy, Sam – sure, from England, but we gotta subtract that, 'cause they're all kinda gay. How does it get gayer than that? How is that not gay?"

"'Gay' implies something I'm not culturally affiliated with. Also, I'm straight."

"No." Dean says it so flat, a blanket ban, that it's clear there's no room for that in his understanding.

"No? I'm telling you, I'm a straight dude in love with a guy. You can't 'no' me." Sam knows for sure it doesn't work that way. He's not even six miles from wanting sex from some man at bar or from a magazine ad. "You wouldn't understand. You're bi. You masturbate about giving it up to Dr. Sexy. I've heard you."

"—shut up. Fine. But I definitely don't get it."

They leave it there. No way Dean would get not wanting to have sex with somebody, at least in an abstract way. Sam worries and wonders sometimes. He worries about things like if Dean's turned some tricks with the way Dean segregates sex with men from sex with women. He doesn't know how Dean always made the money John left them stretch. Asking is way, way out of bounds.

"How are you doing?" he asks, instead, not exactly off topic. He expects Dean to catch the gist from the tone of his voice and the way he keeps his eyes off him so he's free to change the subject.

"Of course Crowley would tell you all about that," Dean grouses, but he doesn't put it off. "I dunno. I'm just...not that interested. I can't care right now. I could still, you know, do whatever with Cas. Nothing's stopping me. It'd be pretty good. Hell, I know I could make it good." He licks the beer off his lips just to take another sip. He talks with more maturity behind him than he'd admit to in a court of law: "It seems stupid to get involved just to...be involved. I've got fake military general type shit to do. Cas deserves some wild teenage years." Shakes his head. "I don't wanna be half there."

"Neither do I," Sam admits, making a face. Different reasoning – Sam world class sucks at cautiously circling a relationship – but a similar frustration.

"He's super old. He'll deal with it." Dean shrugs, half-hearted. "I'll deal with it. I'm dealing with it." "You aren't, though."

Not wanting sex is just a symptom. The problem itself? That scares Sam. He's grateful his body's not at risk of spazzing out on him, can switch gears to archangel efficiency. Dean's, though? No guarantees.

"Not having time to give a shit is a strategy," Dean defends with a little too much emotion. "So I'm stressed. So there's dreams. I'm gonna go out and find some more trauma today, tomorrow, guaranteed. If I'm going off the rails on a crazy train, that's how it's happening. No breaks" He squints out into the gently swaying wheat. "Hey, these post-Yoda Jedi powers you're rocking. Can you teleport?"

Sam considers it. He hasn't tried. He pedantically wonders if the term is 'teleport', carrying something across a distance, or 'translocate', which is a ten dollar word for being removed from
one place and moved to another but isn't an exact synonym. No one could care less about that than Dean.

"I don't really wanna try unless Crowley's spotting me. I'm not gonna push it for no reason," he says. He has no question what Dean's planning. "We'd have to drive."

Dean nods along, already thinking steps ahead.

"I say we go to the front door, knock out the electronic security and you blow the door out the other side of the house. Abaddon's not gonna jump on it if somebody comes to her and says we did that. She's sharp. She'll want more information."

Sam hasn't seen Crowley's new mansion, but considering he did short his light switch he suspects he might have a fresh one up on the security system as well as the demons.

"Alright. Let's get it done."

Dean grins that self-proud grin that makes Sam worry what's about to come out of his mouth.

"Hey. Bet we can get some swag outta there. Nothing says 'I'm sorry I love you' like robbing a dude's house."

Sam slides off the hood of the Impala, chucking the empty beer bottle somewhere the new owners will clean it up – or maybe he'll get it later. Can't get pulled over with open bottles.

"Remind me why you're single?"

"What?" Dean puts on guileless, but it 'innocent'. "You can pick up that shitty whiskey of his and I can get me a TV the size of Portland."

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The room is dark, covers kicked to the foot of the bed.

Crowley doesn't want to be anywhere. A sensory deprivation chamber. That sounds like the right fit. He'd go lurk, aetheral, in the ventilation shafts but his body isn't in a condition to be left by itself.

All his foolish hopes are crushed. The ones where Sam moves on. The ones he let himself entertain, pretended to believe. That Samuel would see the filthy, sanguine, hungry thing he is and be repulsed. That he's a novelty, a bit of sexual experimentation, and they pass through this dalliance to 'just friends'. Things he doesn't want but the right things.

'God's in his Heaven—all's right with the world!'

He's not and nothing is.

Sam's especially not right.

Crowley doesn't understand him. There's nothing here. He's a wasteland; barren Mars-red sand. Funny. Ruggedly handsome, he'd like to think, but this is somebody else's meat he's wearing. Needy. Greedy. Selfish... Honest. He'll give Dean that one. Angry. Sadistic. He doesn't like all that about himself anymore but it's different from saying that in the moment he isn't or won't be.

Hell knows Sam is flawed. The difference is that that's superficial. Underneath it is a pure soul. A good but misguided, impulsive man.
Crack Crowley open and stinking vapors rush out. Flatulence.

All this and he's still reliving Linda's final hours. The few cruel hours after he determined she wouldn't break. Revisits her flesh coming apart under bloody hands kept neat in latex gloves. His fury at being denied by a mortal. A human closer to her death than her youth.

"Just kept your legs shut you whore you'd be safe in your middle class house with your nine to five. Wild little girl fucking married cock. Couldn't give your bastard over to me." Caressing her jaw with blade's edge, leaving an open wound. "Made him the little shit he is, didn't you, Linda? Doesn't know a good thing. I would've crowned him a prince. Now he's with those trailer trash Winchesters. Goes to show trash breeds trash." Throws rubbing alcohol over her face. Waves his knife at her as she screams. "Shh shh shh. I'm the second best thing that's ever touched you. You want it? My little poker? Wanna have a spot of fun, Linda?" He grins at her tears, equal parts emotion and her body's desperation to wash the alcohol out of her eyes; chuckles at her excruciating pain. "'course you do"

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Smoke stings Sam's watering eyes. A human body's burning, grisly suggestions of its final days preserved by flesh in dry decay in an immaculate basement, body bag further deterring most insect life. Sam vomited up what felt like everything he's eaten in his whole life, an oozy, spreading puddle on the concrete floor, the lingering contagion of Crowley's disappearing purging habits. When he gets to his feet, wipes his eyes with hands sooty from the inclosed space, he's struck – only for seconds – by Deans's total removed calm.

"Nothing I haven't done," his brother says with finality so heavy Sam knows Dean, and Crowley, have done thousands of times worse, their victims already dead, free to be slowly taken apart.

Sam's face falls. Dean's stony expression is the face of the calculated killer. He crosses the floor to him, dragging his feet about it because he's feeling him out, feeling out if there's room for him when that side of Dean takes charge. He offers his arms out. A bare, suggestive lift of his open palms at his sides. Dean offers no emotion, but he walks into it. It's Sam hugging the more fiercely, Dean living his wounds. Nothing's more important than Sam, Dean swore; not even at Dean's most cold-blooded. Sam regrets doubting him.

"Thank you," Sam says, feeling the words. For all the years he spent in the Cage – for all that, in reality, he's older than Dean now – Dean is and always has been his armor and his shield. Maybe his knight. He won't be the one to say it because the mileage on being the princess is twice the mileage on the Impala.

Sam doesn't know who he'd be if he lived the things Dean's protected him from: Growing up in a grim, tainted reality, the terror of his body changing because of the visions, being dragged to Hell by Azazel's test, believing his hallucinations of the Cage, suffering Purgatory, dying in the Trials.

Dean claps his back.

Sam realizes with a sinking, just-evacuated stomach how exactly his brother understands him.

"No problem, princess."

Damn it.

"King," Sam grunts. Maybe Dean will save it for special occasions.

Dean pulls back. His eyes are still cold, but his smile is warm. The rest will catch up.
"Let's knock this place over like the Hillside Gang. Remember: If it's gold or silver we can melt it down."

Sam dramatizes his sigh as they head upstairs, leaving Linda's body burning in the hole amid broken concrete. They sprayed insulating foam sealant on the windows and anything that looked like an escape path for the smoke. The atmosphere is thick with soot and smut like a Victorian factory.

The buzz of holding two demons frozen in place with a subtle twist of his hand hasn't worn off yet. "No back up, no cops. Clear out of here. You tell Abaddon we're not fucking around this time. We'll accept her unconditional surrender," Dean says. Throws a wrinkled wad of small bills at one's feet. "Tomorrow. Go get yourself some goddamn coffee."

They called their three buddies on a handset; took the money and ran.

Sam picks up the backpack and bags allotted to him, watching Dean take off upstairs – just bags. Sometimes Dean is hopeless. This isn't one of those times. An ounce of gold is serious money. Silver, maybe not, but they'll haul in way more than an ounce.

Sam's eye is sharp for valuables, but his thoughts are on other details. Crowley loves big windows. Sunlight pouring in. His old, burned down house was like that, too. Wooded lot landscaped not exactly like this one. Both are worth looking out on. Sam misses the sun streaming through the windows of the Impala. He never thought how Crowley sees the bunker. Crowley loves to complain but he avoids complaining about anything substantial. He hates the bunker. Obviously.

Sam stands in the center of the dining room. The china cabinet is about to get sacked, but it's not what occupies Sam's attention right now. He takes a long look around the room. Raises his fingers. Snaps. He gets maybe a quarter of the candles on the first take. It takes five. He laughs, embarrassed with himself. There are a lot of candles. The iron and crystal chandelier is decked out with real candles. Of course it is, when Crowley could probably light up and put out the whole house with just one snap of his fingers.

Sam dumps silver plates and silver goblets and silverware into a bag. Looks around, again. Snaps. The candles snuff. It's easy sucking the energy out of the whole room.

He panics.

The idea of snuffing Dean he can't wrap his mind around. He picks up his cell phone. Dead battery. Bellows his brother's name. Gets a distant What? Plays it cool, like he's just checking in.

So. Silver candelabras. Candles on the floor.

Stupid. That was so stupid.

He tells himself a human has a soul, a soul that provides natural resistance against psychic influence. That's why you have to break the body. Crush it. Routinely have to touch it to violate the mind, although not always.

He reasons that at most he would make a hell of a Orkin man. Bugs can't mount a lot of resistance. Sam would even debate their ensouled status. He probably cleared out the walls.

Where the hell do other animals go when they die, anyway?

—where the hell do other animals go when they die.
Sam stands with his heavy bag hanging open, eyes wide.

There has to be more. Gods take humans. Somebody's cat or their dog or their alpaca won't meet them in Heaven, but Sam knows what he saw in Riot's eyes. A soul. He knows it deep in his gut, knows it intuitively; he hasn't tested it, but Sam has been walking his beat since before he hit puberty. He knows what soulless looks like. Demons. Angels. Beings incapable of creation.

He remembers falling asleep in the hotel bed and on the couch at home, Riot up in his personal space, twitching and kicking (and if Sam was unlucky, snoring), dreaming doggy dreams. Dogs sleep. Dogs take the world they live in and weave it into a tapestry of memory and meaning, minds comparing their understanding of the world to their concrete knowledge in dry run scenarios, filtering through worlds of possibilities. Tell stories.

Sam swallows his Tarzan'esque urge to drop the bag, disappear out the door and try to intimately commune with a deer or a squirrel, or more likely an opossum because they're not all that fast.

Depressed boyfriend at home in a pit in the ground. Scotch. Right. Save the world later.

Crowley loves to drink – nonstop if he can help it – so his liquor cabinet is easy to find, off the kitchen caged in by a double door of decorative wooden bars. Crowley also loves a touch of the baroque or rococo; those definitely display that. Sam starts loading his backpack, bottles safely upright.

According to the house, Crowley loves oriental rugs and Asian porcelain, too. Some of his furniture is sort of eighteenth and nineteenth century American with a lot of leather and studding; none of the furniture goes all out like his full-seventeenth century urns or mirrors, even so a couple of pieces wouldn't be out of place in Versailles.

Sam evaluates his memory of his art history class. Jess would be proud. Then again, the only reason he remembers his art history class is because he met Jessica for the first time there after kind-of-dating a college sophomore for a couple of weeks. The vocabulary helped keep him on her level while she pursued her art degree and he let himself be drawn further and further into the complexities of the legal system.

Crowley loves dogs, too, Sam's memory chimes in helpfully as he racks it. One of the best things about dogs, for Sam, is they get him outside in the sun and his mind off everything but the physical.

Dean does not love dogs.

Dean's opinion basically doesn't matter because he's not allergic or anything, just unimpressed with the way they force their way into his space.

Dean's loosening up. Opening up. He's never gonna be a 'dog person' but Sam, sympathetic to his own cause, convinces himself having the right animal around would actually help Dean. Therapeutically.

They're back in the Impala, loot stashed in the trunk, except for the mummy wrapped flatscreen on the roof of the car, engine carrying them down the interstate. They took advantage of the completely awesome master bathroom to clean the soot of Linda's charred flesh and the sweat from the heat off their bodies. In other words they're publically presentable.

"I hate you. I'm not even using a figure of speech here. There's real loathing," Dean says, gesturing to his chest where he's hypothetically keeping the loathing as he scowls at Sam.
Sam lifts his brows.

"Okay."

That has the intended effect, pissing Dean off twice as much, his lip curling as he turns his eyes back on the road. Better he burn it all out now.

Sam gives him awhile to use up his fuel, and Baby's. After their next gas station stop Sam brings it up again.

"So does that mean you want to come help find a dog or that you want to wait and be surprised?"

"Fucking choke on a dick," Dean says. Sam frowns and considers that one. The kid brother in him says *Yeah, people don't usually die from that. It only maybe damages your ego.* The adult keeps it to himself.

"Shut up," Dean warns, Sam wearing the unspoken comeback, even silent. Sam holds up his hands in innocence.

Sam thinks he's making progress.


Crowley hears Sam coming up the hallway a little before the boy reaches the door. That's time to prepare himself to leave off living his past.

"Get the lamp?" Sam asks when he lets himself into their darkened room, after muscle-memory compels him to throw the useless wall switch.

"Where've you been, Moose?" Crowley accuses sourly while complying. The single, shaded bulb throws light over the room for the first time in several days.

He knows exactly where Sam was, even if the call to Charlie said the Winchesters were "out". He resents the fact that he's not angry with Sam, that he's grateful the boy has returned, that Sam looks fantastic when he's got 'job well done' loosening his posture, shooing his usual tension, Sam's own tendency toward brooding. Sam is giving him the hopeful, sorry eyes but that aura of accomplishment changes them up. His brow doesn't have all its crinkles; he's calm and confident, even if he's sorry.

Sam closes the door and toes off his shoes, drops his enormous body onto the bed and rolls over, lying next to him, close enough to feel the fading edge of the warmth off his body, not quite in his space. The boy smiles one of those smiles veterans, centenarians develop that takes the good with the terrible.

"We put Linda to rest, if she wasn't resting already."

"'Course you did," Crowley says with a sigh, just enough bitterness there to warn he's not ready to hear anything else about the trip, nor is he in the mood for any other vein of conversation.

He may be truly miserable, but there's no deeper regret or greater sorrow to feel. He knows. He's thoroughly searched himself and his two-penny mockery of a soul.

So, Sam loves him. He gets to have this, this man beside him looking on him with compassion, what he deserves irrelevant.

A wound to that cheap demi-soul like the deep slit severing a cow's jugular at slaughter rips
diagonally through his belly and hurts without the faintest promise of relief, a pain rendering his
face ugly with self-loathing. Sam realizes within moments, as soon and surely as Crowley himself,
that this is the only possible state of affairs.

This time Crowley surrenders nothing by letting Sam press his lips to Crowley's own. He suffers.
The pain detracts nothing from the joy of responding underneath him, taking succor from Sam's
kisses until Sam moves on him, supports himself with an arm on the opposite side of him, now.
Plucks at his shirt; doesn't restrain his trademark hungry, carnal aggression on account of Crowley
split between elation and torture. The pain detracts nothing from the joy of being subject, object of
a miracle.

Sam loves him. A demon. Crowley knows nothing but how dearly, how jealously he desires the
boy. That may not be love but it's passion. It's human; born out of a human an age of man ago.
Angels and Leviathan don't, can't have it. Not in the same way. Sam Winchester sees beauty in his
passions, and that's the single thing in Creation that matters.

For Crowley. Existentially, for all of Hell. Crowley may not be able to care about that, but
intellectually he knows it's a damned big deal.

He has his hands on Sam. He's not robbing an unwitting man; he's allowed. Sam's muscles flex as
he rocks with the pitch and roll of their indulgence. It comes to him suddenly that after he's taken
countless lives and provoked events indelible from human history with only kissing he has no
compelling reason to ever kiss anyone else but Moose. That inspires desires to go much, much
further than kissing – to places the room isn't even equipped for.

He settles for dragging Sam down on top of him. He's sick from it and glad, too. His fingernails
rake the fabric of Sam's plaid shirt; rip off a button that falls somewhere unattended, a fortunate
accident for taste. Sam growls complaint and starts unbuttoning the thing one-handed. Crowley
pulls at it, an impatient handful of cloth drawing the fabric taut across Sam's back. The shirt
escapes un-ruined, pitched away so Crowley can't use it for something like mopping up cum.

They forego any process of discovery. There's only naked grasping, Crowley tugging, biting,
undulating beneath Sam, plying Sam with only skin, fingertips, palms, mouth to drown out the
disgust he lives merely by accepting Sam's attentions, the pardon Sam drove the country to grant
him when Sam's eyes had to tell him no pardon could be deserved.

Sam has fierce animal intent in his gaze and no hesitation pushing lube-wet fingers into Crowley's
ass. Sam's looking him in the eyes. No mistaking Sam's expressions. Never; not now. Possession,
lust, keen interest to see Crowley hiss through his teeth in a brief inhalation. Love. It shows in the
care Sam watches him with, in the delay to every motion, small but perceptible. Crowley puts his
impatience second; allows it. When he commits he commits absolutely. Sam, though. Sam needs to
know he's doing the right things. Crowley sees it as an investment in Sam's storm tossed self-
confidence.

Doesn't change that lube and a condom later it's a fucking relief to actually get fucked. Sam's as
thick as the first time – of course he is – the magnificent stretch checks Crowley's sour gut
feelings, commands attention that floods his stomach with warmth.

Sam's all about it. Really goes for it, now. Puts one of those big hand on Crowley's chest, gets
positive feedback from Crowley's throat, pushes down on him after a slight pause; that's the trick;
Sam latches on to the separation of enjoying some manhandling and submissively silencing
complaints. Good, bright boy, Sam. For a Winchester.

Sam putting his weight on him until the mattress bows, it's as thrilling as the first time around;
permanent fixture the rest of their tussle this second go. Still a kick for Crowley to let himself take this position for his own enjoyment; god but the power in the body giving him a pounding, the slap of flesh smacking flesh louder in a stone room. He travels between letting his eyes fall closed – feeling Sam panting against his skin, rhythmically colliding with his body, everything inside Crowley in crescendo, the stunning pleasure and the deep self-loathing and the covetous exultation that in its best light is pleasure taken from mutual devotion – and letting himself dwell in the formidable sight of Sam's body in motion, more than six hundred muscles trained up for war; for murder; all of them put at Crowley's disposal.

Sam isn't fast about coming but he's not making love; he follows his body's impulses until Crowley's grinning smugly watching him come: sweating, making a throaty, feral noise, gasping for air. A living work of art, free for Crowley to touch, to coax on, to bring down and taste.

Sam pulls his cock out and presses himself to Crowley; shudders; slides lube-and-sweat against him; surrenders the most stunning overwhelmed, vulnerable whimpering sound; has Crowley coming like a plane crash, anticipated but devastating.

"Moron," Crowley mutters, frowning in the face of a Sam giddy with self-satisfaction and the idiocy of grinding a cock too sensitive to enjoy touch against anything at all.

Crowley can't bring himself around to joining Sam in smiling but the frown fades. He can't suss any one feeling from another, freely circulating hormones blurring the lines. He's enjoying unprecedented satisfaction. It's terrible. He's spared from being a quippy internet picture of an unpleasant looking cat by the facts that Sam is not even slightly terrible and the distinct lack of sorrow, of guilt. He knows what he is, a consummate monster. The fact that nothing will ever change or compensate for anything he's done has finally ingrained itself into the new him in a manner both better and worse.

He's melancholy, he's covered in his own cum, and he's delighted Sam is for kissing.

"Let's get a dog," Sam says sometime later, his cock naked of a condom and been jacked off, sticky string of cum leaking onto his balls.

Crowley stops. There are hypothetically things further from his mind but he hasn't been posed those.

It's the fact that he didn't blow Sam off – considering how Sam's cock is still erect, belly button is stretched too tight by all those muscles, nipples are so peaked they pale from their dusky brown color at the tips and skin is gleaming; how damned handsome he is with strands of his tamed but long hair stuck to his forehead, the scattered moles, the exercised lips and sculpted chin – grants the proposition a certain weight.

"I don't see why not," he finally says, watching Sam closely, fact that he would far from mind a dog about secondary to the particulars.

Decided on it, he finds himself even more thoroughly pleased with Sam, which under the circumstances where intimacy is tolerable and Sam deserving he intends to continue demonstrating to the point Sam, only human, gives out from exhaustion.
Chapter 25

The room stinks of sex, Sam thinks as he opens his eyes in the morning dark, muscles lax in what he thinks of as a post-hunt hangover, waiting for Sam to walk off accumulated lactic acid, but hunting's not remotely related. Ordinarily a smell fades the longer he breathes it, tuning him in to other scents. Sweat and semen haunt the air, the sheets, Sam's body.

He hears Crowley breathing slowly and evenly behind him, asleep despite flouting his no-need for it only hours ago. Sam's chest clenches; breath catches at the memory of the look that came over Crowley and stayed the night: pained, unguarded, desirous. Sam didn't have time to analyze that. That and that would've been the very last thing his boyfriend wanted.

Boyfriend. The word feels good. Comfortable.

Sam would admit but doesn't really need to go out of his way to explain snagging one of Crowley's shirts out of the clothes hamper since the man moved in. Pressing it to his face. Remembering what Charlie said about body scent and sexuality and thinking as the smell filled him with comfort, yeah, if this was Dean's shirt he'd be gagging. A little acrid; not off-putting. Zero problems when he's turned on.

He turns around on the mattress, facing the demon shadowed in the dark who rouses as Sam's weight unsettles the mattress.

"Who decided to leave off condoms?" Crowley's voice, morning rough, grumbles as he picks at the sheet. Sam lets his eyes fall lidded listening to him speak, even if he's about to go off. "Disgusting, this is. The bedclothes crunch. We're filthy, filthy animals. Does it smell in here to you? You smell for damn sure. Oughta collect that; bait me a female moose Toronto way."

Sam considers that permission to shift over far enough to slide an arm over Crowley's warm body beneath the covers, nuzzling up to his beard – not so much so he'll have trouble complaining. No pregnancy to worry about. Condoms are about sanitation. Crowley is fastidious about keeping his vessel in repair. Whoever he was having sex with on the lam in a dingy shack, a fireplace of discarded condoms vouches it was safe sex. Still. Sam isn't thrilled with the idea of anal sex without one. Plus, cum doesn't get everywhere like cum is everywhere right now.

"Problem with dogs is they smell," Crowley goes on. "Be up to here with stinking animals. And the combined methane production of you and a canine. Time to buy stock in Febreeze." Sam's surprised there isn't any in here already. Crowley got his scented hand soap at the sink built into the wall. Lavender. It's weird to have scented hands. Sam's over it. Crowley ranks at Sam's continuing nonchalance. "Can't be arsed to care, can you? I've ridden in that car. You people eat in there, you fuck in there, you bleed, you track mud, you host a small colony of roaches – I won't even start on what wafts forward from the trunk and that the thing is decrepit."

Sam can feel Crowley's voice resonating in his barrel chest. Feel it resonating in his cheek. He realized over time after their brush with Kali just how much of a vanity and comfort vitriol has always been for the demon, even when he has mastery of the situation; it means someone is listening.

"Hey," he says, Crowley breaking off with an irritated scoff, nonplussed by Crowley's insults; the rawness of us voice keeping his thoughts on last night. He bites his lip, grins a little. Nuzzles. "Next time I wanna...uh, I wanna give you head. I've kind of got this fantasy where you walk me through it."
"What, Moose, you've never—" Sam lies pleased in the dark as Crowley realizes and internalizes that. "You've never," he reiterates in comprehension with more than a little lust.

Sam hears everything else Crowley's face carried last night still bound up in his tone, but the demon lies settled, relaxed, inner security bolstered from bitching.

"Look forward to it," Sam promises, belly doing a warm twist. "I'm as happy to have a sex life as we are actually pretty gross." Now that the dam burst on abstinence, his silently harbored thoughts are spilling through. "You do know I..." He hesitates, not because he's uncertain but because the significance deserves a sober treatment. If he can't address it head on, he's not ready to say it: "I'm not new to anal. At all. I'm not letting Lucifer get to me like that. He doesn't get to do that."

He does. The fresh knowledge, the inherited anger with himself, the wounded aggression bleeding into memories of pained submission: All that's with him forever. Beyond the death of the flesh. But Sam knows, knows absolutely that beyond or besides the turmoil Crowley doesn't believe he deserves to touch him, is still awed to touch him – overwhelmed, the good with the terrible.

He wants to watch Crowley let himself inside him. Wants it insensibly, a physical craving bound up in emotion and not fully visualized. He wants it, and he trusts Crowley to be careful with his body. Not because Crowley truly has a benevolent side, really iffy, but in faith that the demon won't jeopardize establishing conjugal rights.

Anal's never going to be his go-to position, not only because of the devil. He's lain here with Crowley in bed beside him and weighed it out. He wants to let Crowley lay it down on him like that; it'd be a lot of potential to waste stifling his boyfriend's sprawling range of self-expression. It's not completely off the table.

Lucifer speaks from his mind. *That precious hole is for me, not it.*

Sam lets it lie. Won't argue with ghosts.

"Slow down a little, pet," Crowley murmurs, but Sam hears him craving. He almost forgets his revulsion at the prospect of going down on Crowley's cum-crusty dick. Almost.

No dice.

Change of subject.

"We sacked your house for gold and silver and we stole your TV. I raided your liquor cabinet," he says. Maybe he should soften that. "Happy unbirthday."

Crowley goes stiff; his expression twists in anger against Sam's forehead.

"Nitwits. You've gone and banged up pieces of art history."

"Like we do," Sam acknowledges. "We were kind of on the clock."

Crowley's one organizational mishap away from starring on *Hoarders* isn't the demon's first priority:

"Got all my good Scotch, though?"

Sam laughs.

"Yep. In the bulging backpack in the library."
Crowley relaxes bodily. His tone backslides to caustic:

"My heathen, barbaric, gnat-brained sweetheart."

"I know what we did. What we're doing. We can't sell anything they can trace back to us." For any value of 'they'.

"Blah blah blah," Crowley goes on sassing, talking over the end of his defense.

Clutch sinking into flesh, Sam drags himself halfway on top of Crowley, physical threat backed with the real danger of him. He doesn't have to ask why Crowley melts under it, subtly rolls his thighs open in invitation. Sam's never asked any of his lovers why they let him pour on the intensity. He allowed himself to remember Ruby, remember himself desperately depressed, vengeful, thirsty and craving absolution from her whispers and her body. Demons take more to impact. More of everything.

"You're this close to getting it raw," he warns, throaty weight to his threat.

He can't let himself compare any longer; knows Ruby's proud passion for him meant things to her he wants to process alone.

Good thing in his imagination he's already slicked his cock to bury it home, Crowley tight again but pliable. His priorities reordered themselves. They're one fuck away from a shower.

"I can't hear you over the sound of hick," Crowley mocks, venomously endearing.

Sam doesn't do much thinking after that.

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"Who hypothetically knows more about animals than fairies?" Charlie says. They've considered calling Kali, who sounds hot in more ways than one. Also? Terrifying. All are agreed there's no animals in what they know about Nirvana, either.

"And anyway, according to the boys they can slip in the back door everywhere," Crowley says, innuendo unchecked. That's normal except that he and Dean have joined in psychological warfare that Charlie doesn't want to completely understand.

"I'm real glad to know you can't," Dean gloats – patented asshole grin.

"The places it counts," Crowley idly corrects.

Sam is showing a new abundance of reservation. More like he lumped Crowley into his power to ignore Dean. He's not checking the body language, that way two people become gravity wells when they're flush in the hormone reeking phase. He is selectively deaf, so much so he's had to ask one of them to repeat something already.

Charlie guesses it has something to do with Dean playing medieval gatekeeper to Sam's sexuality like he has a daughter, which makes sense in terms of Dean raising his brother.

It's not the sex that matters. Dean basically supports Sam getting laid. But even Castiel can see the sudden and exponential increase in emotional investment. However prepared for that Dean thought he was, now it's day-of. In this case it's fantastic there's no shotguns involved yet. Somewhere the song "Stealing Cinderella" is playing.
She has no sympathy for Dean at all because his room isn't across the hall from Sam's.


Castiel perks up and starts watching them like they're an educational demonstration. Dean silently transitions into jealous anger, tells scribbled at the edges of his expression.

For the time being, Sam has lost any remaining shy; who knows, maybe other things. Crowley tunes into Dean like a new favorite podcast.

"I have memorized the tome of faerie magic eidetically despite my lack of an actual eidetic memory," Charlie says, pretending there's no dick wagging going on nonstop. She means it. She can feel the tooled leather under her fingertips, feel the straps come free at her touch, the hand binding, smell the crisp but yellowing pages, hear herself practicing the words by booklight. Way out of order, of course.

"I'll bet," Sam says, giving her a smile that says 'get some' in a way less pervy way than Dean would. She beams back.

Okay, maybe she's probably not going to marry Gilda in a literal fairytale hand binding, broom jumping ceremony under the dappled light of ancient magical trees. A spark still existed. One like Charlie's never felt. She feels a lot of sparks but they're mostly in her hips. She can admit maybe it was the setting. Beautiful woman, magical tent, Disney prince opportunity...

"So," she continues, "I can get us our Hollow Forest representative. In a grove of hardwood trees at least one hundred years old. With gold dust, an elder wand – not 'The' – and a gift or a meal because that's only polite. This isn't like your dark sidhe story. Deal making is its own game. We're having an ambassador over."

"You think they'd take Crowley's stuff?" Sam asks. "I remember they're pretty sensitive to energy."

Crowley turns a withering look Sam's way, sniffing with disdain.

"Suppose that's preferable to melting it." He gives them all their share of his accusing scowl. "Does anyone care to acknowledge these things still belong to me?"

"Considering that, Sam is on the right track. We should have him renounce ownership and then perform a cleansing ritual," Castiel offers.

Crowley flings his hands up, rage brewing. Dean's smug turns into an eye roll with Sam carelessly resting his arm on Crowley's back to scratch him between the shoulders. The demon tones it down to glowering darkly, as clearly wishing they were dead as a doused cat.

Obviously the "ill gotten" of the gains loses predominance the closer Crowley's physical proximity.

"So we go with a shiny. I should probably bathe in honey and milk and something. I confess the ritual purity of that is questionable because mostly I want to look super-hot."

Dean puts on a frown.

"Or edible. Those are things fairies like to eat, right?"

"Right. But that has to do with them being unprocessed. Pure. I'll have to go stealth milk a cow into a wooden bucket. If I go to that organic dairy farm I might score some magic mushrooms. Income!
Lucky for us we make our own honey."

Castiel's radiant smile raises her spirits. Everybody breathes a little easier with that aura of accomplishment and joy in nature. Almost. Crowley makes his will save, holding on to his moodiness, clearly annoyed his mood tried to rise when Cas just betrayed him. Technically Sam is ape grooming him but Charlie imagines Sam pulling out a soft bristle brush like he's an expensive animal. Dealing with Crowley in a nutshell. She debates the merits of silently sliding him an expensive chocolate each time he gets riled up.

Isn't that rewarding misbehavior?

She wonders if the fey can get them news from Heaven. She doesn't want to push the eternal debt thing. She gets that they don't owe her indefinite favors. She just has the one blank check to cash. It's also true she wants to spin it into an extended exchange. Pen-pals with magical 'ultraterrestrials' has about a billion upsides all pointing to survival when Heaven and Hell are testy.

"We have pure gold dust in the pharmacy," Sam says. "So we just need a wand."

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Charlie's looking at Dean like she feels sorry for him, which so doesn't make sense.

"I think you're inherently biased. Think about the pagans you deal with. Either they've fucked up, they've fucked up, or they're pagans who will deal with you. Dean, hunter, bully. Pagan, lumped indiscriminately into broad category. You know God is a god and your Christian sorcery isn't any different from anybody else's. Tl;dr: No further use of the word 'wackos'."

She lets herself out of the Impala, shutting the door on him, stretching her arms out above her head and rolling her shoulders, three hour drive all jokes and smiles until six minutes out from the 'metaphysical shoppe' she's sizing up while he walks around Baby to feed the meter.

"I get it," he says with a glance to her back. "Sam's contagious."

The machine eats his quarters as the numbers ratchet up to two hours on the digital display. Better safe.

Charlie spins to face him on the tree shaded sidewalk, one hand planted on her hips, finger wagging.

"Watch it, brother, or there'll be health food in that mouth."

Dean makes a face.

"You can't make me eat health food."

Charlie frowns, but not like he's successfully rebutted, taking idle but goal-oriented steps backward toward the storefront.

"I can be very disappointed in you until your weakness for nurturing caregiving turns against you."

"My what?"

"Now that's adorable," Charlie flaunts, flashing a teasing smile and letting herself inside. Disgruntled, Dean follows.

The place definitely smells like a 'metaphysical shoppe', a certain mix of incense, primarily. Dean
has always headed into these places with disdain. Assumed the people that run and frequent them are just lucky they haven't done something stupid yet. Assuming the opposite, that professionals run these and teach safe practices, never came into his head but today he wonders.

He nods to the lady at the counter, about his age, tattooed, hair dyed, wearing crystal earrings; frowns slightly and takes the place in, slowly walking the perimeter, while Charlie, mojo in fully swing, introduces herself as the woman who called about the wands.

Rocks. Lots of rocks. Then some more rocks. Expensive rocks in cases. A display tree hung with crystal ornaments all sparkling in the window light. Statuary. Mostly the stuff he expects like pretty, not-aggro fairies basking. Dragons. Actually there's some pretty cool what he thinks is Mexican animal figures painted in bright colors.

He's taken back in time to the surreal experience of taking a by-road, interstate closed, and eating at a Mexican restaurant seemingly in the middle of nowhere, equally far from the two nearest towns, carved benches just as brightly painted, ceiling hung with a decorative fake parrot, vivid art on the walls, Spanish flowing liberally between everybody but the waiter and the Winchesters. He's eaten TexMex but it's all been served by white college kids, so that and those funky skulls basically sums up his assumed knowledge of Hispanic art.

Here's a shelf of Tarot decks centered with a polished black mirror propped among them. He bends in to take a better look at the variety. He hears Charlie and the shop clerk talking wands in an adjacent room and follows after them, quickening his step. They're not the only customers in the shop. The couple of concerned glances he gets makes him wonder if people can really smell 'hunter' off him.

"Of course if neither wand speaks to you, I've found objects through online stores and E-bay that felt right from just the picture," the clerk is saying, perfectly serious and professional. Dean usually avoids talking to these—Yeah, well, 'these people'. The woman gives him a casual glance that cools before she returns her gaze to the two open wand boxes, sticks tagged with little cards featuring printed descriptions.

"Like a Hindu god's still in their murti if you take a picture," he says a little too loudly. He sucks it up; swallows. So he's on the defensive. He didn't come in here with attitude.

"The same idea," the clerk says, looking at him curiously. Like he's a wacko. He'll take it over 'invader'.

Charlie is pouting at the wands, deep in thought, like she's trying to look inside them. Basically she is, in a really non-professional capacity. Crowley pled he would go with her except absolutely not. That paranoia of witches again. Dean understands the basics, that there are witches and there are priests-shamans and there are psychics in their lingo. Crowley said a few choice things about his intelligence and ratio of masturbating, television viewing and reading salacious and violent novels to studying the important things in life but basically he agreed.

"I guess we could rush delivery," Dean suggests to Charlie. The painful thing is not knowing how much of a hurry to be in. They have this on their plate. They have to duke it out with Abaddon for a definition of right now that gives Sam time for a crash course in sustained power. Angels in America is writing itself at its own pace; the same with its sister program Monsters in America. Dean doesn't wanna sound self-important but he needs executive control over that in the vicinity of now.

"No," Charlie says, sounding once removed, like when he tries to talk to her while she's gaming. "I mean, I don't know. What is this supposed to feel like? I'm overthinking this. Pretend magic is so
much easier." She catches the clerk's change of expression. "—I LARP," she says, flashing an all-charm smile. Dean backs it up with his brightest.

Perplexed but vaguely aroused clerk. That's one way to get in the door.

"You know anything about fairies?" Dean tries, a little careful a little daring. She thinks about it.

"I know you usually don't need a wand to work with them. Leaving out cream is supposed to attract them, just sitting out and thinking about them, speaking to them. It's not my path but it's usually about slow relationship building."

Dean holds a hand up.

"Believe me. Charlie's related. We're trying for second base. I don't guess there's anybody around with, I seriously didn't mean to make all of this a sexual metaphor, but experience?"

"This one!" Charlie exclaims, reaching out and taking a wand in hand for the first time. "This is the one. This is my wand. No Thestral tail hair needed." She takes a deep breath, holding the wand close to her chest, thrilled with her achievement. "I'll take it."

The pagan looks alarmed, now.

"You two do know what you're getting into? Fairies can be seriously dangerous. You need to start with the basics."

"We know. I, especially, know," Dean promises. "Sometimes it's less of a path and more like when you hit a deer with your car – except in my case I was the deer and the car was a Leprechaun."

"We're very invested," Charlie swears.

Letting on too much? Dean has no idea. How much of a metaphysical civilian is this woman? What if she's a 'witch' witch? Dean doesn't know how to have this conversation. Apparently neither does the store runner, she stands stunned and suspicious.

"I'm Brian Bonham," he says with a smile, breaking up the tension, sticking out his hand.

"Selene," the clerk says, shaking his hand.

Dean has to restrain himself, just keeps smiling.

"Carrie Heinlein," Charlie says with a wave, still clutching her wand as closely and possessively as she has been. That's a good sign, magically. Probably. What the fuck does he know about magic?

"Do you want some coffee?" Selene asks. Dean realizes she might not make the sale. Suddenly coffee sounds awesome. The back of this room is split between the sales floor and a wooden floor with two wooden tables, coffee machine on a cloth-draped folding table against the wall along with a tall box full of little drawers. A sign on the back wall has a printout listing the prices for Tarot readings, tea readings, palmistry and aura cleansing.

Charlie boxes up her wand. She carries it with her like a dog in a purse.

Fuck. Dog. No. Not even thinking about it right now. Definitely not sending a hostile text message to Sam who's probably too busy having gay sex with Crowley to check his phone, anyway.
"We're not. Pagans," Charlie apologizes as Selene asks them how long they've been practicing. Saying he's a hereditary magician supposed to take up the slack for a bunch of dead magicians and whose traditions they think go back to the Zoroastrian, Median tribe of Magi is clear cut TMI in this situation. Also, he's way behind Sam. "We're pagan-adjacent," Charlie goes on. "I'm a computer specialist. Sometimes surprisingly related. Brian..."

"Let's say the truth is out there," Dean says, tone neutral.

"...you're a hunter," Selene replies in a low voice, disapproving.

Dean's had it up to here.

He leans over the table, dropping his own voice.

"Goddamnit. What says that about me?"

"The plaid," Charlie apologizes to be shot a look. Her expression shrugs.

"I work with your people. Sometimes," Selene says, taking her turn with tonelessness.

"I'm with the Reformed branch," Dean swears, hands wrapped around the warmth of his coffee mug. He scowls, sitting back, still talking low. "That probably doesn't imply whatever I think it implies. Hugs not drugs. You win, there's nice magic and decent supernaturals out there."

Selene takes a drink, looking at the wand box like she's seen just enough of too much. She lifts her eyes to Charlie.

"If I sell you that wand, who gets killed?"

Charlie's eyes widen.

"Nobody," she says, hand going instinctively to the lid of her prize. "This is like...preventative care." She wrinkles her nose. "Also he was totally serious. I would've gotten to at least second base if I wasn't rudely interrupted. His fairy experience was sucky. I successfully promoted human-fairy relations. Which, in some form or fashion, I intend to continue to promote."

Dean holds his hands up in surrender.

"What the world needs now is love sweet love like you wouldn't believe."

Charlie slides him a look.

"Which I'm quoting next time you get up in your brother's sex life."

"Hey. That's different. And none of her business." He totally regrets adopting Charlie. He looks to Selene, losing the offense. "We good?"

She shakes her head, earrings glittering.

"Good? No. Do you get the wand? Yes."

Dean glances at the wall; picks the highest price; regrets what's about to come out of his mouth: "Can I get a...aura cleansing?"
He wants power, he has to Daenerys Targaryen these situations. Granted with less rigid personal integrity. He also has no scruples about sleeping with people to secure new friends.

Arguably he doesn't want power, but he *needs* power. Power like Sam's won't do the job, long-haul, even if Dean gets in on that game.

What exactly the hell is an 'aura'?
Chapter 26

Sam's finger and thumb are moist around the pinch-warmed needle between them. Crowley sits at the head of the table reading something on his phone. Castiel is at his tablet pouring through his blogs, his articles, absorbed in the lives of his kin.

Sam clenches his teeth. The thread on the table rises like a serpent, weaving through the air toward the needle's eye at glacial, practically non-existent speed, a serpent slowed down a hundred times.

Sam's focus tightens on the approach, willing the hand clutching his thigh not to move. The thread turns away against the steel on the first attempt. He slowly reels it back. On the second he misses the needle entirely. On the third it turns off in another direction. He fights back his emotions: frustration, anger. If he relents to those he'll lose control completely.

Motion at the corner of his eye during his excruciating failure told him Crowley has started watching him.

"Every time I think 'I'd like to see you do this'..." Sam says, keeping the thread in the air. It took him hours to control it at all.

"You realize you'd be furious at me for days. No thank you. Pass," Crowley says.

"I also preferred to use my power through gestures of my hands, but we can't assume you'll have the liberty," Castiel says without looking up. "For example, if they were cut off."

Sam stares at the thread, now scarcely maintaining his grasp as his mind races.

"Thanks, Cas."

"You did cut Abaddon into pieces," Crowley warns. "She prefers her enemies to die in agony if the chance presents itself." Sam bites back he already knew that. The thread suspended above the table convulses and falls as his concentration fails.

He spent an hour after Dean and Charlie split replacing the light switch. Since then he's been right here, doing this. Crowley and Cas are shitty moral support, but Sam can't convince himself to tell them to leave. Any kind of solidarity mediates how isolated and inadequate repeated failure convinces him he is.

The needle slams down from his hand, embedding itself a half inch into the table.

Castiel looks up at Crowley, the one who initiated this whole miserable ordeal.

"He has good instincts. He was frustrated with steadying the needle. He steadied the needle."

"Good instincts when it comes to violence. We all have those," Crowley says. He's looking at Sam, not Cas, astute but offering nothing.

Sam looks away, giving the needle a pinch and a pull. It doesn't budge but feels sharp running against the pressure of his fingertips.

"Leave it there. One less variable," Crowley offers. A reprieve. Sam falls heavily against the back of his chair to glower and brood at the sliver of metal. He doesn't want training wheels screwed on; he wants to get it right. The political climate is poisonous, news anchors speaking with alarm,
headlines increasingly dire. Nuclear war is on everyone's mind; on every wagging tongue.

He's pushed his ETA to four days. He doesn't know what's going to happen on day four. If they
gamble on Abaddon's pride, will she make a showing? The skin-crawling alternative – going to
Hell alone with Crowley – ranks just below inviting Lucifer in. Neither of them knows how
Abaddon has shaped Hell since she smoked in. If Hell is where she is. If they don't conduct
interrogations there and pursue her on Earth. There are demons loyal to Crowley, even demons
loyal to Sam after all these years, messianic fervor their flavor, Crowley says, but not a single
demon Crowley would rely on considering the impossibility of laying a demon's motives bare.

They haven't discussed tactics further than that. Every time that rapidly approaching future creeps
back into Sam's mind uncertainty erodes him, a sinkhole in his chest.

Sam sees Crowley startle, follows his gaze instinctively. Cas has gone pale, his eyes wide, frozen
in place, barely breathing.

"What happened?" Sam asks, instinctive, too.

"Not open warfare," Castiel assures woodenly. "Iris Allen is producing the documentary 'Who is
Castiel?' It will contain footage of my brief time as God. The testimonies of my siblings. Of people
I encountered as I did Penance. Daphne isn't named, but I trust she would engage in order to defend
my character. My name has not gone unmentioned among the other angels in the past..." Cas looks
up, splitting his worried gaze between Sam and Crowley."I have no power to change my face. You
have all assured me of the difficulty of recognizing an individual out of context..." He looks down
into the glow of the tablet, no longer looking worried but forlorn. "Everything is going to change
for me, isn't it?"

Sam sits forward. Cas won't look at him, but he searches for reassurances anyway.

"Maybe not. Leviathan impersonators went on a killing spree as me and Dean. People were
satisfied we were dead. Again."

"This is different. The assumption is that I may still be alive. In hiding. They're correct. I am."

Crowley has crossed his ankle over his knee, is leaning against the arm of the chair pulling at his
chin, whole face a frown.

"Destroying what's been collected or assassinating the director would only draw more attention to
the question."

Sam would reprimand Crowley for suggesting they assassinate an innocent filmmaker if the
thought hadn't passed his own mind.

"Cas. We'll make this okay," he swears, instead.

"Should we? I am a human. I am subject to human law and justice," Castiel says earnestly, finally
looking up. "I've done research, now. In the case of Crowley, despite the false pretense of
American citizenship, he is an iteration of the undead and presents a unique legal situation. I am
alive, simply human. It might be best if I...turned myself over to a trial by my peers."

Crowley's frowning deepens.

"Don't talk like that, kitten."

"Your failure to rebut is telling," Castiel replies, unflinching.
"Fine. You're right." Sam doesn't see the point of arguing against Castiel's culpability; of trying to sell him on a lie. "—you can claim asylum. Here. If you dig back in the records, and I did, this property is not on US soil. It's more like the grounds of a foreign embassy, allotted in 1879 under President Rutherford B. Hayes. Super shady stuff, but it holds up legally. And since that's not enough — you're only safe on this property — I'm granting you citizenship in Hell and demanding diplomatic immunity as soon as Abaddon's ass is kicked and I'm the uncontested ruler of a foreign sovereign power."

Castiel expresses only pain at the words, hands tightening against the small computer.

"Sam..."

Sam's mood darkens. He understands the error of looking at or treating Cas as a child, everyone understands that, but if Cas hasn't been jaded by his best intentions turning sour every single time by now he has to be in willful denial.

"I don't want to be Dean here, except the answer to most of the things about to come out of your mouth is 'Shut up', Cas," Sam says. "We need you. Nobody knows Heaven like you do now that Raphael is dead. Nobody can crunch math like you can. Okay, other angels, almost, but do you know how far behind they'd be? You're in charge of maintaining this radio. Maybe we're not picking anything up right now but that doesn't mean we won't be."

Castiel's brow narrows, the man seething silently at Sam's reproach. Crowley lays a hand on the table to draw his attention off Sam. He looks suspicious of Crowley, no less affronted.

"This program hasn't aired yet. We don't know what light it'll paint you in, petal," Crowley reasons, candid in the face of Castiel's resentment. "We don't know if it'll blow the lid off the Supernatural books, and it just might." He picks up his phone; begins tapping the screen. "This is me logging into that forum with my fingers right now. I've a digital authenticator. We need help, not your unconditional surrender." He shoots Cas a scowl of his own. "Why do you always default to unconditional surrender? Your mates have leveled cities and smote all kinds of humans. I know: Statute of limitations. Just don't paint yourself into a corner."

Cas presses his lips together. He sets the tablet on the table, watching Crowley thumb around on the smaller touchscreen device, Crowley's expression impassive.

"Your overwhelming verbal assault is further confirmation of my guilt and culpability. You've already admitted to it in detail, Crowley." He sighs in lamentation, considering Sam in turn. "...please. I need your honesty, not just your protection. Both of you. Sam, you're my brother. In falsified documents, yes, but I know that it means more to both of us than that." He frowns. "And Crowley...I don't feel the need to conventionally define our relationship, although by other conventions it's progressing to brother-in-law. You're one of the most important people in my life. All my life. You both know no matter how he responds Dean's going to be enough for me to deal with."

Sam laughs, catching skeptical attention from both Crowley and Cas. He pushes his hand through his hair, grinning from one to the other.

"On the record I'm gonna go ahead and define it as 'romantic friendship'. You guys are kind of, uh, schmoopy. More schmoopy than I could even pretend to be." He pauses, lifts a brow at Cas. "...I am dangerously physically possessive."

It'd be hell on all of them if Cas got that one wrong. Sam knows Crowley isn't flirting by the one of several dictionary definitions that reads 'inviting sex', unless Crowley's flirting with him. Inviting
emotional intimacy, making somebody uncomfortable, or teasing cover the spread. Cas can still suck at nuance.

"That's how I like you, love," Crowley gloats while still at his business on the forums. Sam's next breath passes around the pleasurable glut of heat helpfully drying out that sinkhole under his breast.

He's crunched the math and started to think he was under a few misassumptions: Like that Crowley would let him have sex with anybody else, ever. (His body takes the chance to argue that orgies are awesome. Sam lets it know it'll have to be happy with the memory.) Odds are they're already in some kind of sexual homicide pact. They just don't share well.

Cas has relaxed, quietly watching Sam. Sam has failed to address his request, but Cas now awaits him patiently, frustration dismissed.

"And?" he prompts when Sam proves unforthcoming.

Sam cringes and obliges, heart heavy.

"You're as guilty as anyone who ever stepped into a court of law. The extent of your planning renders any insanity defense...spurious. If I had gotten a law degree I'd tell you to forget trial by jury and plea bargain. You're eligible for extradition to multiple countries and you're guilty in all of them."

Rather than taking the news as damning, Cas beams a calm smile.

"Thank you, Sam. I know Crowley is of the exact same opinion."

The demon must be typing a post, because he looks particularly focused and his thumbs are flying across the screen.

"Personally knowing guilt on your level, I'm available for reassuring, purely platonic cuddles," he says without looking up.

"We should...return to overseeing Sam's practice," Cas says, attention falling on the thread. His gaze remains fixated upon it. "Later I would like to watch a film with you both and...to be held, because I'm frightened."

"That's an easy one, Cas," Sam promises.

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Arm slung over Cas's back, Sam idly strokes Crowley's cheek with his knuckles. Crowley has his hand clapped to Cas's thigh in solidarity. Cas sank into the cocoon they offered and hasn't shifted his weight since, rapt to the on-screen narrative.

Thoughts churning, Crowley slowly grows ill and more ill over the fact of Castiel's fragility. Comparative, yes. Cas resents ever having it spotlighted, no doubt frightened or not.

Crowley was long accustomed to the unspoken, spoken and demonstrated threat of Castiel. Months later he still thinks twice at his ability to snuff Cas' life with a small exertion of his own power.

There are certain constants in the universe, like the terror that is angels, which after thousands of years are incomprehensible to imagine failed. He catches memories of Naomi arresting his attention rather than the film. His pride and cheek at holding the fascination of a messenger of
God. The countless justifications she struggled to keep private but wielded defensively under strain. She always came back to the one: Know thine enemy. The one young and reckless enough to embrace her, please her naked vessel, steal nights in the dark.

The enemy she knew, who she left but allowed to survive. All the deadly junctures afterward when her choice came close to resulting in her elimination, or his.

He'd dared to think he held the same sway over Cas. Significantly overestimated his own allure. God shaped Castiel as a soldier, not a watcher. If the derision he felt for Castiel's mechanical fascination with humanity hadn't kept kin with pity, with Castiel starring in scores of films about AIs leaning humanity, Blade Runner, Crowley would have escaped underestimating him. If Cas hadn't been such good company before everything went wrong…the angel still the betrayer but Crowley playing Naomi; getting off on keeping his little pet, his little secret – albeit for different values of 'getting off'.

He thinks of Heaven's drones falling. Entertains romantically whether or no Cas ever walked the other planets in Creation while the heavens were still his. If Naomi ever did, and if she survived Angelfall.

Crowley hadn't talked to the soaked Hadariel on the ride back from the church. Wouldn't have been allowed if he tried. He'd been dealing with fresh life changes, himself. That and the newly-vulnerable angel sat ice sculpture still in silent terror of him. Either way he wasn't advantaged any knowledge of how the ride down went. The blogging and interviewed angels don't like to talk about it.

Cas told him Naomi last had a drill her head, unconscious but grace intact. How many times had Samandriel had a drill in his head before Cas murdered him? The fall is the question. If her grace burned out before her body revived then she landed as a corpse.

Sam, hand at rest now, fingertips on the nape of his neck, finally casts him sober looks of concern – compassion. Crowley shakes his head, rubbing soothingly at Castiel's thigh so their ward forgets to notice anything gone amiss. Castiel squirms further down into the couch, riveted to the telly, as much a survival tactic as in enjoyment of the film.

He'd fancy Sam's fingers continue combing through the hair at the nape of his neck, that Sam doesn't lose track for a while although the boy's focus is on the movie. That's simple greed again. He suffers for it proportionately. Thank himself he's at last sorted his presently-proverbial karma.

His feelings for Sam are jealous, covetous; shades shy of love. Those dark emotions demand primacy yet have failed to claim victory over loyalty, a filament of steel. This growing loyalty is new in nature. His nearly-fatal loyalty to Castiel fed on desperation for recognition. Sam recognized him ages ago and acknowledges him constantly. Crowley novelly deems it important Sam is alive and intact for the sake of Sam being in the world, something he's never come close to feeling except for his dogs. The same desire to shelter, not just have, has bled over into his feelings for Cas. That they're both in separate immediate dangers sits poorly with him, to say the least.

The demon accepts who these two bastards are. They've all proven capable of repeatedly inflicting intentional and unintentional devastation to each other. Regardless of their potential danger to him, regardless of circumstances, he has no intention of giving them up. He reasons that's the exact location of the loyalty. He accepted only today that his commitment to Sam isn't so much more proprietary than Sam's to his. Sam gave him clear signs all along. It halted their sex life. However, the surrender of privacy – delivering a not-veiled threat to Cas – gave tangibility to the ephemeral. Teeth to sentiment.
Sam looks across Cas at him. Again. Crowley matches Sam's silent, annoyed command to relax with silent and surrendering disgruntlement. They do have a film on, though. He'd probably enjoy it. They put on *The Hurt Locker* because Cas wanted to watch 'something real' with a proper story, not a documentary. Crowley passes on setting in on psychoanalyzing that. Sam would give up on him. Dramatically.

The demon is just starting to get into it when Dean shows up in the doorway. Cas startles; Sam and Crowley stare. Dean's confusion over the seating arrangement lands first on perversion, then on suspicion. Crowley gives him a little wave, nods his head toward the screen. After tense consideration, Dean thankfully decides he absolutely does not want to know yet and leaves. Crowley supposes the odds of a threesome came out too high for his taste.

Castiel receives his share of petting from them both while his unsettled mind struggles to latch back on to the film. Afterward he'll make it back to his insects; the small, simplified universe he's created to retreat to. Crowley hopes Dean's capacity to be reassuring will exert itself once he and Sam explain the situation – once the initial misdirected anger at his own helplessness passes.

Crowley hasn't been to primary school, but he's consumed enough stories on it. The rigor of sorting children into grades and rows rings of Heaven. He pictures Cas as that shy, enthusiastic child who formed his strongest bonds with the teachers. He'll discuss it with Sam, later, who still keeps up with observations on Cas on paper as if there's hope of triangulating what a soul means if he can round up a handful of profound insights. Personally the demon thinks Sam has enough data, it won't do the job, and they ought to look into developmental theories to gauge the gap between Cas and fully functional adult human.

And so he's back to holding congress with himself. He hadn't hope of being transported by film when he ought to be straightening his head out, then *plotting*, to begin with.

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The number one greatest thing about having a boyfriend he could have sex with is having a boyfriend he could have sex with.

But Sam isn't. Having sex with Crowley. Not at the moment. Crowley's been self-chatting all afternoon and *still is* despite stripping to their underwear, coming together on the bed, touching, kissing, but winding down. No. Mourning. They want good things for Cas. Cas being outed is one more step toward the dissolution of the refuge they've been enjoying.

"I hoped if we worked on your spatial perception I could teach you to at least translocate. We'll try it tomorrow, you and I," Crowley says, granting Sam his first look into his head. "Suppose ultimately it comes down to whether or not she'll die in the burn. Like Alastair. Like Lilith."

Sam's hand pauses on Crowley's skin. He steadies himself. The last thing he wants is a serious 'row'.

"I'm not going to kill her."

Crowley goes lethal.

Sam's breath catches. The layers that hide Crowley's death-thirsty rage rarely slough off all at once.

"Repeat that but in words I'm willing to hear," the demon says. He's not threatening Sam. No, Sam affirms, looking on the hatred afire in Crowley. Crowley has just set himself on personally
executing Abaddon.

"I won't kill Abaddon," Sam repeats, confidence backing his words. "That's not who I am anymore."

The silver lining of Crowley committing murderously to plan B is that he's willing to be reasonable. He's as motivated as Sam to avoid an argument. New game, new politics.

"You only have the one trick. She'll destroy you in hand to hand combat," Crowley explains, not in reprimand but as common sense. "I'd leave you a blood slick on the floor. Remember when I tore my sleeve clearing out that nest of demons? Did you see Meg nick me except I was distracted? You think I wasn't restraining myself against those harpies, shreds of hope for diplomacy? You've no idea how fast you'll die fighting demons our age, no matter if you can fight off the teke."

It helps Crowley's case that he's right. He plays the Lothario, Casanova, as if any situation could be resolved if the offending party would just let him convince them bodily. Only Sam hasn't forgotten Meg's legs swept out from under her, the Kurdish knife in the ceiling faster than his eye could see, the smile on Crowley's lips, amused that he pulled one over so easily. The golem took deep offense at that; burned it into their brain. Crowley held himself back against the harpies, but against the three of them, then, too. The knife that held Meg at bay could as easily been flicked through her neck instead.

Sam's not motivated to ask for a demonstration of how 'demons their age' fight. Going into a fight with Abaddon as a cripple isn't what he's aiming at. What he needs is Crowley on the same target.

"There's another way. I can feel it, Crowley. I'm going to find it," he stresses, eye to eye. "I'm sick of killing vessels. Wiping demons out of existence. I won't do it."

"Sam. Idiot. Pure ideologies never work out in the real world," Crowley says with the same patient surety. "You can rule however out like, but not with Abaddon alive. She'll always be out for you. We might as well not have a go at it. Same result minus burning your corpse, which we'd only get back if she strew it across a city cartel-murder style."

Sam lifts his hand, combs Crowley's chest, fingers crooked, gentle attention that changes Crowley's savage expression only a nuance, but a nuance in the right direction.

"You think I'll idle by while you walk into an execution?" his slightly-sated lover rebukes, agreeing to a contest of convincing: "I have nothing that isn't you."

"I'm not going to actually die, Crowley. If it goes sour, I'll be fighting in Heaven. If she holds me in Hell? Then I win. If I ever find out you let somebody burn you out..." He sighs, exasperated, running his hand down the side of Crowley's head, now, cupping his jaw. "You have Cas. You'll have revenge. If I die, Dean's gonna need you. I'm not hoodwinked. You're a demon, and you'll go as far as Meg for revenge. That's your way. Hell, it's Dean's way. But that's not my way. At least, today. So let me try it my way."

Crowley scowls. That's three floors up from sanguinary.

"You'll what if somebody burns me out? Bit late. I'll be vapor on the wind."

"I'll suffer. For eternity," Sam counters, stubborn confidence backing his words. "That sounds stupid-dramatic. I'll actually suffer for actual eternity because I was the one who didn't finish the ritual and you hung on to your power to fight next to me."

Crowley lets Sam kiss him. Total victory is nothing like assured, but negotiations are safely open.
And no fight. Sam would like to get intimately used to that, at least if he's not dead three days from now.

"That is stupidly dramatic," Crowley mutters, put off. "Lucky for me, you're pretty."

Sam grins.

"I haven't even started on 'I love you'."

Crowley's brows jump up; suddenly he's the socializer.

"Better not. It's not wasted, mind, Moose, it's just a bit one-sided." He cocks his head toward the pillow, touches Sam's lips and thinks aloud. "I covet you. I obsess over with in a way that's restraining-order illegal. I can't describe my aggression at the thought of parting with you. Immense. I wish I could cut my way into your chest and hold your warm organs, save that wouldn't work out the way it goes in my head."

Sam bites the pads of his fingers.

"That's...romantic. I have a spare kidney."

Crowley's brows inch up even higher.

"...don't. I'm already overstimulated."

Swapping saliva is guaranteed not to help with that. Sam really doesn't care. He can translate demon. In this case, no translation necessary. Crowley completely, literally means it. That's not bad, just maladjusted unless your partner is another demon.

"So, I'll look forward to waking up in a bathtub full of ice," he flirts slyly. Sure, living dangerously. Crowley's not that overstimulated. That's a critical, not bloodthirsty gleam in his eye.

"You are much, much too—"

Sam cuts him off.

"Let me pretend that wasn't going to end on an insult."

Crowley scoffs.

"Who said it was?"

"Cue the sex," Sam says. "Except I'm exhausted in places I never knew existed, some of them actually in my soul, and after Cas..."

Sex set aside, they move in on each other again, mutual and easy. Crowley's still one for boxer briefs, elastic fabric hugging tight to his buttocks and things. "Prefer my junk nestled in," he mutters, wearing a pair of Sam's boxers while they do laundry. Sam knows he only gave up briefs due to mixed feelings about denim on his skin. If Sam reads through the meta layers Crowley actually just said 'I want to buy suits.' Crowley moves slow, hitching Sam's leg up over his hips, pressure of his hands firm and steady, mouth purposefully wet, leaving his saliva to cool on Sam. Negotiations. Sam's tensions disappear into trust. He plays passive. It's easier than he anticipated allowing Crowley to be an aggressor.

The demon's hand closes so carefully on his wrist. He pulls Sam's arm down between them, but the care soothes the shiver of fear, the memories of cruelty. Sam lingers at kissing his partner until the
alarm subsides.

Sam needs Crowley to know that he's listening; reassure him he's allowed to take point. Sam already concedes he won't be infuriated if in the end Crowley kills Abaddon. The demon is branching out, the patience he leads Sam with is proof. There's no hints of restlessness. When existence and extinguishment are on the line, right now Crowley has only the single driving instinct.

Calmed, Sam failing to keep his eyes open, his fingers dragged inelegantly from points of contact to nowhere in particular, they break and roll apart, Sam sprawling on his back, eyes falling closed like lead weights when he gives in to fatigue.

... 

Confusion. Squinting at the digital clock in the dark. Lamp turned off. Sam is shaken awake at what his blurry eyes think is three o'clock. He's too disoriented to hide the What the fuck, Crowley? on his face. He reaches over and pulls the lamp cord, blinking in the light, a delighted demon propped up on his elbow beside him.


There's no way to respond to that anything like immediately. It takes Sam a minute to patch together what Crowley could be talking about, because he really is exhausted. He's still exhausted.

"You don't mean doing the documentary," he cautiously identifies.

Crowley's suave, confident smile deflates the bitching swelling inside Sam.

It's three o'clock and Crowley's hot. That's all that Sam, when deprived of the majority of his faculties, needs to know.

"Second morning after today, I'm going to be on every television in America," Crowley exults, punctuating it, tapping his finger in the air. "Just have to pick my morning program. By eight o'clock Thursday? I'll have changed the course of human history. Who wouldn't want a surprise exclusive with the previous king of Hell? Including every trick you need to get a demon out of your garden club and government. Our vixen will have no choice but to mount a response. On our terms. What are we protecting anymore?"

Sam's brow furrows. He's lucid enough to weigh the pros and cons of that, now.

"That is kinda brilliant. I mean, you're right. As long as we can keep you safe. All those tricks work on you," he says like he's not reiterating Crowley's complaint about his plan. That he and Dean and Charlie are stuck in paranoid, paramilitary survivalist mode has kept television appearances off their minds.

"I have some ideas," Crowley reassures. "Talk on it tomorrow, hmm? You're a wonderful plotter, but you need to sleep. Mandatory." Sam's not even going to say anything about exactly who woke him up. "I'll be right here. Plotting. Me and myself. We'll catch you up after you warm up from the ice bath," Crowley says, bright eyes bright as they've ever been.

Sam clears his eyes with fisted hands. Expression lightens up; lazy smile spreads on his lips.

"I love you," he says, and he means the way that Crowley thinks, but of course that isn't everything.
He's motivated to clarify that. "...I love you. I actually love you. It's pretty serious."

A lot of him is debating if he could be having sex right now.

Crowley fixes him with a disapproving look.

"No, Andre. Go to bed."

Fucking seriously?

Seriously. Of course.

Sam rankles and turns out the light. However annoyed he was, his return to consciousness doesn't hold out very long in the dark.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Warning: Intentional injury, blood.

Sam Winchester is incapable of translocation, and chucking down a handful of store brand Tylenol. He legitimately wants to know how not doing something could be that difficult. Partly because it could solve why he can't translocate, partly out of his impossible desire for vengeance against physics. Watching Crowley take small steps on the dirt road across the house as a body and as a demon proved fruitless.

He pushes down any misplaced antagonism he feels toward his boyfriend. Other demons can't translocate with the same facility as angels. Yes: Azazel, Lilith, Alastair, but importantly not Abaddon. Castiel sat on a hillside rock and tried to give advice until Crowley sent him back inside before Sam sent him back inside without using his polite words.

Morning had been a trip. Dean's frustration at being unable to punch the problem stayed directed at the problem, stayed on the forums. There's a nomination process going on. Who'll approach Iris Allen? Should more than one person engage? What information are they prepared to offer her? What information are they under no circumstances going to offer her? Why is Crowley's forum name GodOfSexAlsoMakeovers?

"Ask anybody, loves," he says.

Charlie admits he did an awesome job painting her nails the time they had the little fake gemstones on them.

Dean squares his jaw; folds his arms defensively; slouches down in front of his laptop; passes a glare around. Everyone in the room except Castiel is thinking he's a draft pick for Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, it's a strange juncture of collective thought.

As negotiations progressed Dean rolled on to trying to feed the problem, Castiel too polite to decline any offer of food, coffee, snacks, tea.

And then Sam went outside and watched his partner translocate for four fruitless hours. He should have given up after one but the faintest tickle at the back of his mind like a line of light through a closed door compelled him forward.

Headache subsiding by virtue of modern medicine and after Crowley forces a light dinner, all vegetables, on him, Sam muses, following Crowley to their room, that he's way too happy to be doing something as simple as following Crowley. His mood's rising just because he can follow Crowley down the cool, concrete hall. From a rational standpoint that's incredibly stupid, but philosophers have failed to argue to Sam's satisfaction that the human mind is rational. That's a belief people under less stress, exposed to less death, passion and senseless violence can afford.

He's the one self-chatting when they enter their room, distracted trying to remember his general education courses, dredging up quotes and concepts from specific wrong philosophers. He's lagging feet behind.
"You stand there," Crowley says, turning to face Sam as Sam closes the door, wagging a finger at the boy, casting a casual, almost dismissive glance over his huge body.

Sam stops in place, pulling himself back – straightening – arousal pooling hot at the nuance to Crowley's voice promising there's so much more he has yet to say. He can't quite remember what he'd just been thinking, flushes as the demon smiles, genial, sensually appreciative. In Sam's dictionary sex starts with physicality. He already made it clear he was willing to add new entries.

Crowley's gaze wanders back down as he strips off and tosses aside his jacket, undoing the buttons of his solid-colored, second hand button up, chest gradually exposed by the falling cloth. Sam's cock has some commentary on that articulated by an influx of blood.


The demon flashes a smile, mischief now. Sam knows what the game is; not how it's played. He takes the chance to get undressed as an alternative to just watching Crowley undressing, catching glimpses of the demon's brisk expedience, his naked body.

Sam follows Crowley to the bed when his boyfriend beckons. Crowley takes a seat on the edge, regarding Sam with a lifted brow. The demon's cock hangs weighty between his legs, off the mattress. Sam nods a little. The cold concrete floor isn't a draw. It is a solid foundation. That cuts out futilely trying to fit himself at the foot of the bed. Crowley's epithets stick for a reason. He's actually that big.

The smile Crowley's wearing grows warmer.

"Then come over here, Moose. What's the one? It's not going to suck itself."

Sam's face heats up – a leap in degrees. He's grinning, too, 'awkward' and 'shy' in his body language. They sit comfortably. He can't embarrass himself in front of Crowley. Like, he actually can't. There's nothing he can do that he'd ever be shamed for. Besides bite him really hard. That would be less shaming and more eviction. He's done with eviction.

The floor is, expectedly, as cold under his knees as it was under his feet. He sucks in a breath and gets over it, sinking down to sit on his calves, bed-height. The musky scent that's Crowley's body fills the air. That has a lot to do with Sam being about level with, a little higher than Crowley's crotch. The familiar scent eases his nerves even while his brain is informing him he seriously doesn't know what to do with Crowley's semi.

Which is why his boyfriend is laughing at him.

"Thanks," he says.

"It's not maths. You've handled my cock before. Go on, pet. Take a grip. Stroke it 'til I'm good an' hard."

Sam has gone one on one with Crowley's cock, multiple times, which doesn't account for why he's dizzy just listening to Crowley talk low and rude.

He obeys him, takes his dick in his hand, foreskin still loose, sliding over the stiffening shaft as he entices the blood into Crowley's growing erection. Crowley exhales a pleased sigh, not so much of encouragement as genuine relaxation. That's better than theatrics. Sam sucks his lower lip into his mouth, keeping his focus where his hand is working, peripherally aware Crowley is more interested in his persistent blush than his handiwork.
The head of Crowley's erect, full cock leaks clear precum. Sam's breath shivers as he pushes the now-stretched foreskin down with his thumb, smearing the glossy fluid across the glans.

Sam's as hard as he gets. The whole first time vibe riled his body to alert; one punch of adrenaline and now he's in bullet time, waiting to come down, listening to his own breathing, too loud.

"Did a pretty job, Moose," Crowley soothes, voice gone husky. Teases: "Look at you, gorgeous. I'm flattered. So damned set on getting it upright I think you may just faint."

Sam grins along, laughs, presses his hand to his face a minute, getting a handle on the hormones, scent on his hand ushering in fresh hormones. It kind of follows the hand he was masturbating Crowley with would smell like Crowley, aroused. Now that the thinks about it.

"I'm good," he says, dropping his hand, grinning, feeling younger than he has in years and free. "I'm conscious. That's what we're going for right now, right?" The smile spread wide on his lips pulls at the corners. It hasn't reached them in awhile. Crowley looks...besotted. Luckily somebody already invented the word for it. Sam doesn't know how to process that, a snapshot memorized for later, but he's got his own head in the game now.

"Just at the moment," the demon agrees, growing playful again. "Give me a kiss now. Shocking enough it tastes mysteriously like skin."

Sam grasps Crowley's cock loosely and wets his lips, presses them to his skin where the head gives way to the foreskin, everything soft. He lets his lips kiss down the firm shaft covered over in soft flesh, tasting the familiar, lending ease to the task. Now it's Crowley breathing audibly.

Sam follows Crowley's erection down in kisses. Stops, drawing back when he reaches the dark, thick hair of Crowley's lower body, scent too heady, more than he's used to, but he breathes in deep as he sinks back on his calves. His mind wrestles with itself, sorting out his few, no-longer-reasonable hang-ups. He's doesn't know what they are, couldn't say if he was asked.

"Like it when people take initiative. Been saddled with too many underachievers for my lifetimes," Crowley flirts; reaches out to tuck away unruly strands of Sam's hair with familiarity of his own. Normally, Sam doesn't want to kiss him. He wants to suck his cock more than he wants to kiss him, idea consuming his planning. That's great, considering.

He doesn't have anything to say. He's between Crowley's thighs, his boyfriend's skin dusted with dark hairs, there and his belly, too. Then there's his erection, thick and smooth, dripping a little precum on the concrete, small gleaming drops, balls tight underneath it. Sam's great with that. Ask him last year and no; what the hell?

He turns an expectant look up at Crowley, who's taking him in like he'd been taking in Crowley's dick.

"Not much to it, sweetheart. Here, now," Crowley says, making 'sweetheart' sound filthy. A good thing. He presses his thumb to Sam's lower lip and Sam sucks, digit gliding in, suction tight against the tang of Crowley's skin.

Some corner of his mind reminds him he's spent his whole life rebelling: against John, or Dean, Azazel, Lilith or Lucifer. He wants this. Not in an extreme, BDSM kind of way. Getting to trust somebody, though? He wants that. For once in his life to know what he's supposed to do.

"Don't you just look completely fuckable," Crowley approves as his thumb departs with a wet smacking sound. Sam smirks, self-proud.
he hopes so.

Crowley's gazing down on him sharp and hungry. To the demon's credit he steers clear of something out of a porno. Says: "Here's a boy who knows what his business is. The rest is practice. Take it in your mouth, now. 'Sucking cock' isn't a metaphor."

Sam's knees are complaining. They can complain all night for all he cares. A rush hits him as he gets a grip on Crowley's erection again, takes the head of it in and a little more, lets his eyes close when he sucks it, when the slick walls of his mouth latch to it. He knows what he looks like, knows how great it is on the receiving end, reaches up with his unoccupied hand and rests it flat against Crowley's side. The demon answers with a hand stroking Sam's head, fingers light across his hair. Comfortable. Personal. Emboldening.

He can let Crowley slide into the slippery pockets of his cheeks; slurp his skin, messy, gravity taking care of drool; sink pretty far down on him, but then, okay, he just has a deep mouth. His heartbeat throbs in his own dick, whole body hot like it's running a fever. He's getting sounds out of Crowley that aren't just generous, groans that sound like appreciation and small grunts when Sam's willing to get sloppy for the sake of trying out a couple things short of one hundred percent successful, getting his tongue more involved.

"Lick it dry, Samuel," Crowley corrects, a sentence which in the moment makes a lot of sense. "That tongue of yours..." the demon appreciates, Sam licking, sucking off his own spit with diligence. He takes a breath to say, entertained: "You're a might ridiculous, Moose." Sam chuckles while his tongue bathes skin, mood high. He's allowed to slobber on Crowley's dick, and that's awesome.

Sucking Crowley's balls is not a today thing, but he's fielding the tangible and gustatory fact Crowley comes with a penis attached – with all the ridges and veins and the swollen, leaking glans that are part of it. There's a missing element, a key omission: Sam knows when he wants to eat a girl out it almost knocks him over, all his thoughts latch on to licking deeper, bringing her to wet and swelling so he can fuck.


"That's my good boy," Crowley purrs in approval, making Sam want to something. "Bring it off, now," Crowley says. "Just give me head good and long, love."

There's that absent element; just somewhere else. Desire floods his brain, drowns every other thought. Sam can't remember anything he's wanted to do more than get Crowley coming in his mouth.

Because Crowley's his.

Because he'll wipe out that pain, that recrimination, the ache of that wound and for that moment, for Crowley, there'll be nothing but Him.

He does what he's told; draws an orgasm up from the demon: A choking sound, wordless exclamation, heated exhalation; cum spilling up, bitter, unsavory, easily swallowed one ejaculation at a time until Crowley hoarsely says Sam and the predatorily possessive part of Sam radiates hot pleasure; reward.

He's the one rising stiffly off the floor who unmakes the bed while Crowley watches him, quiet, fascinated and satiated. Sam makes a face and pauses, grabs his shirt off the floor to jack off into
Two did it. He milks it for a few strokes until he's spent. His head starts to clear. A lot fewer thoughts about wrestling Crowley down and fucking like an animal, for starters, but they hang around.

"So my cock..." Crowley ventures, sounding playful but unusually expended, when they're lying in the dark.

"It's pretty good, given I don't have a lot of penises to compare it to. I'm into it," Sam says, stroking Crowley's body calmly but lying a distance away, about as far as he usually sleeps. They didn't go into kissing, into anything post-coital at all. It's everything. It's one or both of them being dead in two days. It's Crowley terrified he'll be left behind. Sam's frightened, too, in the wake of stealing time to enjoy. Making Death an intimate acquaintance, feeling a disturbing thread of kinship in his presence, lends itself to a comfort with incorporealizing. He's not scared of Death; only its consequences.

Morning is for kissing. Really? Sam's thirty going on two hundred and he has the experience under his belt to say morning is for fucking. Serious, fear-erasing, aggro fucking.

For now, they're quiet. Content with each other's company.

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"Everything else aside? I'm glad we get the chance to bond like this," Charlie says. "I mean, by this time next year we're going to be beyond family. This place will be Rajneeshpuram."

"Yeah, I'm glad I get to share this moment with all three of you," Dean gripes, pulling a scalpel from a jar of disinfectant and wiping it dry with gauze, laying it on the steel tray on the floor beside him. "I accept Crowley and I need to get closer. I wanted that to stop at skin to skin contact."

"Both of you shut up," Crowley commands, seated shirtless in the circle they make together on the wide, open shower floor. "I already had to shave for this, which amid all other pain will itch profoundly. In fact, I'm certain it's going to be my greatest annoyance. Pull your weight."

"I believe Charlie and Dean are using humor to deflect their nervousness over permanently and extensively scarring your vessel," Castiel says soothingly, unsure if Crowley even wants to hear him and what, in their present situation, should be said at all.

"Thank you, poppet. The nuance utterly escaped me," the demon drawls. Castiel leaves aside the pang of failure. "I'm trying to communicate that at this significant juncture in my immortal life my nerves don't need any of you's nerves wearing on them."

Charlie smiles, brow jumping up, projecting nerves and earnestness.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Not comforting. Um. There's tons of morphine! If you ever want morphine, I'm ready with the morphine. I'm even almost qualified to administer it."

"My god I should just do this myself," the demon says.

The Dean looking at Crowley from across the floor is the same man Castiel knew in Purgatory, not the Dean who's been overfeeding him since yesterday.

"Don't worry. I'm an artist with a scalpel when flesh is the medium," he promises without wavering.
"I've heard. Yet you'd think you'd never cut up a body before."

"I haven't. Cut up a body," Charlie points out, and then she wrinkles her nose. "—that's a lie. I dissected a pig in school."

"The trick is not to overthink it," Crowley says, words ice; his cold, resentful demeanor effectively silencing them all.

Dean lifts the branding iron from the concrete floor, holding it before Crowley. The demon raises his hand, held in the air a foot away but cupped as if grasping the iron's head. The iron begins to shift through shades of iron from dark to ash light. Crowley chants, rousing a repulsion deeply ingrained but no longer fundamental in Castiel. It is his duty to hold Crowley. He sits at his back unflinching, grasping the demon's bare triceps as Dean presses the brand to Crowley's left, lower rib cage.

Unusually, Crowley says nothing as the layers of his epidermis sear off. Castiel accustomed himself over the years to Crowley complaining about any discomfort or inconvenience. One arm flinches and nothing more, Crowley dispassionate for the six seconds Castiel counts his skin sizzling off.

Dean leaves a burned-brown binding link on his skin. For all Crowley's power, iron, foe of spirits, can be wrought to bind even him, whether in this manner or with less permanent restraints such as the manacles in the bunker's dungeon. Worry rises in Castiel regardless of his attempted detachment.

They will enter the film studio in New York tomorrow. Charlie has made it easy by scheduling them, save Crowley, as outsourced maintenance workers. She already prepared the speakers in the building to play an exorcism if demons interrupt them, if their other measures fail. Crowley submitted the motion that if Sam refused to let them destroy demons then exorcism damn well needed to be on the table.

Immunity to exorcism confers pseudo-mortality Castiel doesn't wish on Crowley. He releases the demon, laying a soothing touch on his neck that Crowley tilts his head away from, stretches his skin out beneath, before moving away.

"You sure you wanna be here?" Dean asks Charlie. She took the branding admirably but held her breath as long as possible before breathing the smell of burning flesh. She smiles and holds up a first pad of sterile gauze.

"All good. You'll know when I'm not when the fainting. But really, this isn't like...gore. Purification has not occurred. Scarification is a form of self-expression. I watched videos on YouTube until I desensitized me."

Even Castiel can tell Charlie is a poor liar. She relies on distraction, obfuscates through animation. She fascinates Castiel. He is unable to discern her feelings even seeing her so obviously masking them.

"Okay," Dean says, taking her at mask value. His attention turns to Crowley. "How's the topical anesthetic going? Set in?"

"Quite. We're now counting down to when it wears off, but that should be hours. Pain's irrelevant compared to the vasoconstriction, although I'm certain you can continue operating if the bleeding increases."
"Thanks. I'll have absolutely no extended trauma coming out of this," Dean mutters, resentful, Castiel knows, not of Crowley but of his own brutal capacities.

Castiel makes plans to sleep in Dean's room tonight. He can usually discern when a rough night is coming without it being this obvious. Dean always complains he might wake up and stab him. So they put the weapons out of reach and that's worse, plays chaos on Dean's nerves when he wants them most. Castiel's presence just barely suffices on the grounds that they survived Purgatory together over months of intense reliance. Dean still associates him with safety. He had been a weapon then.

He's exhausted of Crowley bleeding, although he's sympathetic to Kevin's motivations to stab him. He hopes, perhaps futilely, that after today Crowley's blood will make a better effort to stay within his vessel. An unlikely scenario in the immediate future.

"Damn but the floor's cold," Crowley grouses as he lowers himself on his back. Castiel smiles as he takes his position at the demon's head to hold his shoulders down, glad for the levity, however fleeting.

Charlie sets the gauze down, holding up a finger. She puts her earplugs in, tapping on her MP3 player. Castiel has no strong preferences toward music genres, yet, but Crowley and Dean refused to agree on anything to listen to. The bathroom is silent except for small human motions, the faint sound of Dean's scalpel lightly tracing out the first seal he'll cut on Crowley's smoothly parting skin, and Charlie's almost-inaudible music.

Castiel wishes they would speak. It seems that no one has anything to say. He has become a more proficient conversationalist. He speaks about film and television, about arthropods, about math and science, spends time on a forum on religion and forums about his other interests on his tablet. "Small talk" still escapes him. He has a kind of intuition no one else wants to discuss Tideland or The Hurt Locker or the early political and social commentary of George Romero's films at the moment. Although his intuition is so often a poor judge of truth, in this case he suspects reliability.

His hypothesis is confirmed as he watches Dean's eyes glaze over across the minutes, going from sharp concentration to a hypnotized stare, flesh coming off in strips under his patient incisions to be tapped off the scalpel into a bowl flecked with flesh on the sides hosting a basin of coagulating blood. Dean hand signals Charlie to wipe away the blood on Crowley's skin when it begins to obscure the sigils. Castiel sees the moment that the final picture becomes clear in Dean's forethought and all other considerations cease for what it is. Cruelty has not been asked of him, only precision. He wishes to separate himself from the haunting nature of his work.

When the cuts are more shallow, no nerve-driven flinches threatening Dean's work, Castiel occupies himself petting and tending over Crowley, a mind that seemingly disengaged from the scenario at the first touch of the blade. Castiel understands utter submission to the flesh is as inconceivable to a demon as an angel. He remembers still struggles to comprehend the incapacity to achieve the aether, no sense, no reason to make of the burden and inescapable anchor his fleshly body became without that vessel changing in the least. In many ways his first fall from grace, a gradual induction, turned out to be a blessing. He thinks of himself as wrong and small but isn't a complete alien to human bonding.

The four binding links being created by Dean – side, chest, inner thigh and back – have been plotted to be nearly impossible for an adversary to target consecutively, beginning with the fact that none are readily visible. It follows they are impossible for Crowley to deface with any speed.

"Tell me one more time you're sure," Sam says, holding Crowley's hand between his, the darkness holding sway over Sam part specter of years of loss, part freshly calcifying, emotional stoniness
that will allow him to endure the hours waiting alone.

"Positive. Certain. Resolute," Crowley vows with his time-tested stone resolve he can call on at any time.

Dean shows neither discomfort nor disapproval when Sam kisses Crowley in full sight, although Castiel doesn't entirely understand the expression that crosses Dean's face during the brief glance he spares.

Castiel tries not to stare, but he has an intense interest in what courtship should look like. He married Daphne, but he never grasped the motivation behind many of her behaviors. She touched and kissed him at confusing junctures: at the shopping mall, before going to the mailbox.

He understands now that kissing can communicate any variety of emotions, even information. In this case, Sam's promise to take on the task of protectively compensating for Crowley's new limitations and the honesty of Crowley's martial dedication to a dangerous strategic trade-off. He somehow can't apply that knowledge retrospectively with much success.

Oh. Apparently he's staring.

Blood stains the shower floor but it will be scrubbed away, rinsed down the drain. The flesh removed from Crowley is a different matter. Except for a vial to secure in the pharmacy, constituent of a number of spells, Crowley intends to incinerate it.

"Do any of you need a break? Water? Alcohol? I can go get us a pitcher, or bottle. Glasses," Castiel offers as they finish cleaning, covering and taping the wound on Crowley's thigh. If he and Dean's positions were reversed, Dean would say the same thing.

"Yeah, Cas. Water. I'm parched," Dean says, forcing a smile.

"Strangely I will be the one requesting vodka in the face of Dean's sobriety," Charlie pipes.

"Nothing," Crowley says woodenly, distracted, distant and weary.

"Understood," Castiel says, eager to be of more help than diligently care-taking someone who's paying absolutely no attention to it on any level.

He finds Sam in the library. Sam looks up, taking a pair of earbuds out of his ears, hopeful, tennis ball falling from the point he suspended it in the air into his hand, glass of whiskey on the table.

"How's it going?"

"Exactly as planned. We only have his back left to cut. It's...boring. One of the most boring experiences in my life. I didn't used to get bored this way," Castiel explains as he crosses the room to arrange a tray of bottle, pitcher and glasses.

"Need my iPod?" Sam asks.

Castiel musters a fatigued smile that Sam reflects.

"Please."

Sam tosses the ball in the air, catches it mid-air on the downswing, holding it steady in the air with only his mind, and then letting it fall back into his palm.

"Crowley's...?"
"Barely letting himself register the experience. I can't imagine the willpower it would take for a demon to so completely deny itself the possibility to escape its vessel. It's impossible the change you worked on him would have any effect on the horror of submitting to ensnarement."

Castiel has no social obligation to mince words with Sam. Not about this. Sam can't attend Crowley, however strongly he wants to and however much more comfort Crowley would take from Sam than Castiel. It would be needlessly excruciating. In the bathroom, by now, blood is a taste on the air.

"That's what I thought," Sam says, frowning, tossing the ball again. He takes a drink of whiskey while he holds it in place.

"Your support afterward matters the most," Castiel reasons, raising the whiskey bottle on the wet bar in offer to top Sam up. Sam nods assent. Castiel refills the glass two-thirds full. "You're the one he'll be willing to let see his shackles after they scar, and probably, discomforts aside, the only one he'll let change his wound dressings."

Sam smiles, setting the ball down on the table to detach and hand off the iPod over, taking another drink.

"I told him if we don't die tomorrow I'm getting my back done. Tattooed. Not exactly the same thing...I think he appreciated the solidarity," he sniffs with annoyance. "He told me to put his face on there. No. I mean seriously, first of all I'd never see him again. He'd just want to make out with himself." Castiel laughs. Sam smiles. "I'm still narrowing down the actual options. I mean, first comes the dog, anyway. And the tattoo isn't just for him. I think it's more like I want a physical record of my life so far." He contemplates that a moment. "—but you should get back to everybody else," he says, although he clearly prefers keeping Castiel's company.

"Yes. They're waiting," Castiel agrees. Sam goes back to tossing the ball. "Thank you for your iPod."

"No problem, Cas."

Cas, Castiel thinks as he navigates to the bathrooms and showers. He's gotten used to that name coming from the lips of his friends, so he's wondered for a while why it's easier from him to introduce himself by his legal alias than by 'Cas'.

Crowley's ongoing ordeal has revealed the answer. If Castiel takes that human step of reducing the name synonymous with his celestial being to a human 'nickname', then he'll be surrendering that this will be his condition for the rest of his life.

Frankly Crowley is making bigger strides at a greater cost.

"Cas," he says aloud to the silent walls. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Cas."

Cas makes a face, but the words weren't as hard as he thought.

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Kevin severs another bite from his pancakes with the side of his fork; sticks the fork through the double layer of syrup-soaked bread. He has a room in a rental house with two Princeton undergraduates, now. Dwight and Kayla, both sophomores.

The University only starts undergraduates off in the fall. He has until November or January first to get his application in. Wesley Kawaguchi, class of 2018. At least keeping the supermassive web of
deception organized distracts him from his persistent weak spot, essay writing. Before becoming a Prophet of the Lord he'd been short on his self-marketing skills, afraid of feebly laundry listing everything else already on his application. Today he dreads the essay with the knowledge that whatever complete bullshit he produces it's complete bullshit he'll have to live by. He hasn't been out in the world long enough for Wesley Kawaguchi to become a coherent, separate identity.

"Wes! Dwight!" Kayla calls from the couch in the adjacent living room with uncommon excitement. She's a habitual, though productive stoner. "Guys, get over here!"

Kevin looks toward the empty portal of the kitchen door, brow furrowed. He sets his fork down on the side of his plate; gets up obediently and heads to join Kayla.

He doesn't make it all the way to the couch, suddenly frozen in place. They have a sweet multimedia system: X-box 360, Playstation 3 slash Bluray slash DVD player slash streaming device for files legal and illegal on Dwight's computer, 5.1 surround sound with tall floor speakers to each side of the forty-two inch TV...

In Kevin's imagination he sweeps the television console clear, TV smashing on the floor. He picks up the Playsation and throws it to the ground, crushing it underfoot. When Kevin left Kansas for New Jersey he planned on never seeing Crowley again. If he had to see him, not for months, bare minimum. Instead there he is in high definition seated in a white bar stool chair across from a news anchor, Savannah Guthrie, her flat ironed hair lit with bright blond streaks. Homey bookshelves decorate the blue lit walls holding knickknacks, pots and dried flowers.

"Wes, you okay?" Dwight asks, coming up the hallway, following Kevin's gaze toward the screen.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure I am," Kevin says, voice sticking. He forces himself into motion, stiltedly taking a seat at one end of the couch, brow tense.

"This guy says he used to be the king of Hell," Kayla says, pushing the volume higher while Dwight sits in their green-upholstered scoop chair.

"What you're telling me is that the current global tensions are being orchestrated entirely by Hell?" Guthrie is asking.

"Don't be so modest. Give yourselves some of the credit. You're a member of a bellicose species," Crowley says, speaking as much with his mouth as his brows and hands, sporting an impish smile. Guthrie doesn't look so amused, tension plus a hint of fear on her face.

"Let's take that one for granted. How is it possible that demons have infiltrated our world governments that completely?"

Crowley gestures artfully, conducting the quality of her attention like a symphony.

"Once a demon possesses a body it has access to the person's memories. One demon may be a better actor than another but that's already been considered upon deployment – that determines who's playing a sensitive role and who's on the peripheral."

"I understand that—" Guthrie begins.

"Apologies. I don't relish being Matt Lauer, speaking over someone. In fact I specifically chose the Today Show to ask why in God's name, so to speak, he still has a job," he says, sounding honest. Crowley's no stranger to morning television. "Afraid I'm here to deliver time sensitive information. Let's get it out there." He straightens in his chair, adopting a more grave mien. "Demons burn at the
touch of blessed water and sacred objects. They don't have to be Abrahamic faith objects, although the demons we're speaking about are Abrahamic." One hand moves in time, demarcating each revelation: "Cold iron burns the grunts; shotgun rounds of salt slow them down. Demons can't cross lines of salt or red brick dust or cross thresholds guarded by shishi; they can't cross most of your usual spirit deterrents. No problems with running water. Of course, those can be blown away or destroyed remotely. What you really need is a Devil's Trap." He gestures to a leaf of paper held by Guthrie. "If you could put that on the screen? Thank you. This is much harder to escape from, can't be broken from inside. An Abrahamic solution for Abrahamic demons – could say it co-opts our source code. Draw it with anything. Hide your traps. Cover them up. Put them in strange places. Certain experts of other faiths may have spirit containment techniques of their own, consult your doctor, as it were." He pauses to think before focusing on Gurthie afresh. Kevin knows that's showmanship, giving his audience a second to digest. "Exorcisms can dispel demons from a vessel. They take time. The demon will fight you and it will kill you in the interim if it can. One tactic is to record the exorcism, defend the playback device. All sorts of exorcisms world over, but again checking with an expert in the area is necessary." His brows rise 'charmingly'. "My two foremost recommendations? Play exorcisms on radio. And for chrissake, don't lob bombs at each other you morons."

Guthrie lets out a breath she's been holding.

"Crowley, you claim to be a demon yourself. Your demonstration of your abilities was pretty convincing. You at least convinced me. Doesn't releasing this information put you in danger?"

"I'm already in danger, darling. Former king of Hell. Not present. That'd be Abaddon. Queen of Hell, if you like. Been a lot of changes in management downstairs this past decade. Abaddon suspects an old fashioned world war would promote reunification among factions divided by their loyalty to different administrators. For the rank and file it's a choice between your favorite flavor of tyrant." Kevin wants to punch the smirk off Crowley's face, anger boiling inside him. Crowley cocks his head, uncrosses the ankle over his knee and rests his arms on his thighs, opening up his posture. "Now, since you've so graciously allowed me to speak, I'm briefly available for your questions. I believe her majesty will be quite preoccupied with cutting her losses. Besides she's sharp enough to guess I prepared in advance to be here today at this hour. No worries, darlings, crack team keeping you all safe." Crowley looks out across the camera and sound team, offering a more reassuring smile.

"Hey," Kevin says to Kayla without looking her way, close to shaking with anger. "Load a bowl for me, hunh?"

Kayla looks surprised, but she does, pulling out the drawer of the coffee table in front of them, setting her pot, kept in a large orange medicine bottle and a small plastic bag inside that for freshness and to prevent loss, hovers over her pinch hitter and glass pipe for a second before choosing the pipe while the interview continues.

"I...The first question on my mind, maybe on everyone's mind: Was Hell complicit in Angelfall?"

"In no way. I had my own challenges to face. Angelfall was the result of internal affairs."

Guthrie has gained professional confidence now that she's the one leading the conversation.

"It sounds a lot like you have details. If that is the case, how do so few angels know its details?"

Kevin flicks the lighter to life, breathing in THC laden smoke. Kayla motions for him to pass the pipe, taking a turn while Kevin holds the drug in his lungs. He can't be happier how quickly it takes effect, blurring his thoughts and tempering his anxiety. It doesn't raise his mood. It does let
him start to ignore it. He's broken off relations with his good friend alcohol. He's not the biggest fan of cannabis, but he won't argue it's not relaxing.

"Angels could, as some of you know, communicate telepathically with each other across the universe, but they could also keep their privacy. The big players in Angelfall weren't broadcasting. There's a kind of MI5 in Heaven, it played a big part. More like M.I.B. They had a version of that memory erasing device Will Smith carries, but for angels. Most of them were immaculately obedient little bastards. None of them have been forthcoming in the blogosphere. Now, me? I happened to have one of them on my payroll, a long and sordid story if ever there were. I'll leave the angels to fight out who it was and who's hiding what, except to say that very expensive ally died."

Crowley's contrite face looks all too genuine. Kevin despondently asks for another hit, knowing burning all the bud in the world wouldn't erase his hatred of the demon. Not for a second.

Guthrie studies Crowley and then decides she won't pursue the subject further.

"There's something else I've been wondering about since you first introduced yourself to us this morning. You ruled Hell. What did that entail? How were you deposed?"

Crowley chuckles, sweeping his hand through his hair – only on the side, not disheveling his bangs. His good humor extends to his open, comfortable smile.

"I had a short but orderly stint. Really brought the place into the twenty-first century. Suggestion box right to e-mail. Now, it wasn't Abaddon who got the better of me. However low her opinion of me she would've been surprised if she'd tried to take me in a fight." Another laugh. A single disparaging scoff. He takes another pause on the verge of speaking, lips parted, gaze askew; full, 'sincere' attention back on Guthrie. "It was a man named Sam Winchester what did me in. He's by all accounts the legitimate heir to Hell, tapped by Lucifer himself. As far as Lucifer was concerned, he couldn't have failed Sam more completely. Winchester didn't grow up to be evil. Lucifer's unwanted cult of demonic fanatics contributed magnificently to that." Crowley's never looked more smug, and he spends more than half his time looking smug. "At the end of Apocalypse business when Lucifer was finally free to advocate for himself, Sam locked him back in his prison at the heart of Hell. Good for you lot if Hell's turned over to Samuel." He glances sidelong at the camera, intones importantly: "He has my vote."

Guthrie follows his gaze, then looks back, boldly asking:

"Who are you speaking to?"

Crowley looks proud of her. Kevin imagines taking a third hit, but he's pretty sure his tolerance isn't high enough and he'd go from subdued to morose. The effect of his first two hits is still mounting. He waves away Kayla's offer to pass back the pipe. She sets in on finishing it on her own. He has no idea at all how she stays so attentive when she's high.

"My people and Winchester's people. Oh, they won't do anything if Abaddon's in place. Me, Abaddon, Hell's other big figures are especially brave for demons, but that comes down to power, to risk and reward. I don't expect them to risk anything for us unless Winchester's victory is assured. I do expect them to act as a bloc. Otherwise they'll find me very testy upon return." He shrugs without lifting his hands. "Order over everything, in my philosophy. Sam hasn't had a run at ruling Hell, yet, but I've lately discovered it in my interest to align with our human heir for a plethora of reasons."

"I take that to mean you have a plan for deposing Abaddon. Is there anything you're willing to
"All said and done, we'd prefer to settle it like civilized preternatural beings. In fact, we'd love to have it settled today. I say Sam's human, but some humans have more talent than others in important areas." He's looking intently at Guthrie as he continues, his voice ominous: "She knows where to find us. Just where she found us last." He wears, if briefly, an expression of distaste. "High noon sounds unpleasant. Sweaty." Now to the camera, mock considerate. "Five o'clock by the time zone, Abby? If you're frightened to show, then you're frightened to show. We haven't ruled out hunting you. Mark that your unconditional surrender will still be accepted at any time. Suspicious, I'm sure. Just look at me. Not dead in the slightest. Winchester had a laundry list of personal reasons to dispatch me."

Once again Crowley's attentive to Guthrie, sober and seemingly curious what she has to say next.

"Let's say Abaddon accepts your invitation, and wherever you meet this power struggle is concluded today. What can we expect to see depending on the outcome?"

"If Abaddon comes out of it in control, business as usual. The angels, the ex-angels, have pretty well described how soul bartering and soul tarnish drag you into the pit at your death if you lived as a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim or another spinoff. If Lord Winchester becomes king, we'd like to open dialogue with other sovereign nations. Hell could have a future as one more world power. We've discussed what it would take to qualify for UN membership. Hell's full of criminals, no question, but Australia's in good nick isn't it?"

Crowley drops a saucy wink at his host. Kevin sneers at the television, even if Dwight and Kayla are dividing their attention between it and him. They look confused. They look concerned. Kevin has no idea what he's going to say to them when the interview's over. He's too enraged by Crowley's invasion of his apartment to do anything but listen and disdain.

"One thing's still unclear to me. Non-Christian…Abrahamic holy items, all correctly conducted exorcisms working on Abrahamic demons, and only worshippers of God go to Hell. The narrative we've heard from the angels is one of an almighty, holy God who rules the face of the Earth. Is there an alternative narrative you'd present?"

"This is why I fancy you, Guthrie. Right on the ball. S'not Matt Lauer interviews Matt Lauer, trying to force his opinions on you," Crowley flirts, smile remaining sure. "Yes. I am. Not long ago Samuel and I approached Kali for advice. For this and that reason she already knew Sam, so safe bet I wouldn't be smote. Ganesh, of course, he opens the way for the other Hindu gods to manifest but he didn't. Manifest. That's different from saying he wasn't present." He adopts a frown. "I've run across the Yoruba Orisha twice. Eshu and, um, Aganju. Now, I don't know anything specific on Olódùmarè or this Christian crossover business. I make a personal habit of getting away from gods fast as I can. I'm decidedly not the kind of thing they chat up." He takes a deep breath, another pause to think. "Zeus just died unpleasantly. Apologies to the faithful. I have no idea whatever if faith can revive him, if that's how it works, but apparently most of the Greco-Roman gods are still up and around. Had a big to-do on Earth. All manner of gods out there is what I'm saying."

Crowley looks so very apologetic. Kevin thinks about his mother. About all his imagination has thanklessly provided about her death. About how much he despises sad looks on Crowley. "Heaven's a right mess, madam. If I had the choice at this moment in history I'd seriously consider conversion to just about anything to keep out of there..." A shake of his head. "Angels want to believe their father is coming home to sort everything. Bollocks. We've no sign of that. I'd say we have a slew of reasons to believe exactly the contrary."
Kevin's angry with himself that he can't disagree on that one. He was a good Episcopalian all his life and after Crowley God's the next person down on his hate list. He still can't get over the bare facts. Forget the famous prophets of Abrahamic descent. He's not even Chuck. Kevin received a couple of revelations. Real small ones, like how to bless and handle Holy Water. He still asks himself every day why the hell would God awaken him, put his life in permanent danger, and not have a damn thing for him to do.

Nobody answers. God definitely doesn't answer.

"How can we take your word on that? It seems like a smart maneuver on the part of a demon to turn believers away from God. That is, if corrupted souls go to Hell. I don't know if you're really the 'former' king of Hell, if you're definitely a demon, if Crowley's your name...I know we brought that up at the beginning of the show, but I'm obligated to remind my viewers and inform members of the public who tuned in afterward we have no reason trust you. I've seen you appear and disappear, create fire out of nowhere, and apparently handle objects remotely. As grateful as I am you chose to join me this morning, my team turned nothing up on you in the time we had to prep."

Kevin swells with spiteful joy at Guthrie going on the offensive. She holds a performative tone of hesitation. Kevin bets she's terrified, but she has perfect hair, clothes as immaculate as the suit Crowley was apparently, finally allowed to buy and she's held her ground all the way through.

Crowley take it in good humor. Kevin bets he's insulted. He knows Crowley well enough to know that. Crowley gets insulted at everything. He's real fucking crotchety. Kevin's making another noticeable face, apparently, because his roommates are staring, confusion deeper than before but obviously more set on puzzling him out. Apparently they've been getting some thinking in.

Instead of reacting with negativity, he adopts a puzzled face very similar to the ones Kevin's just seen on Kayla and Dwight.

"Don't put a whit of faith in me. Don't ever dare trust a demon. Put enough evicted angels in this damned uncomfortable replacement for your old couches and see what you get out of them. Follow your heart and whatever other sentiment. I haven't a heart, speaking both metaphorically and literally. Winchester? He does. Let's hope you'll be seeing him soon."

"You obviously have a body." Guthrie is continuing on in her awesome, finessed inquisitional tone. Kevin gloats over it with a smile. "Is there a human inside it with you right now? How aware are possessed humans?"

"No human," Crowley promises. "Had the soul evicted ages ago. It can be a real nuisance keeping one subdued for any really length of time. I suppose I own a heart. Awareness varies according to the strength and concentration of the demon. The person usually gets glimpses through. They can be kept as cognizant of their surroundings as if they weren't possessed. They can even be given temporary control of their bodies. Nasty business." There Crowley goes looking so goddamned apologetic again. "Afraid we're out of time, now love. I need to be moving on. Specifically, I need to be prepping. Get some affairs in order. It has been a pleasure speaking with you this morning."

"Yeah right," Kevin says, glaring at the figure on the television who snaps his fingers and disappears. "He doesn't have anything to do. He's just pissed she started firing off accusations."

Kayla and Dwight are paying full attention to Kevin, now, although Kevin hears During the interview we've been preparing a panel of expert analysts, including former angels— before Kayla turns the TV off by remote.

Still laying back in the swoop chair, Dwight's taking a critical look at him. Kayla looks more
worried, a little scared. Kevin can't blame her. Her aunt and uncle died in the Apocalypse. She's touchy about everything Heaven related.

"Alright, man, you have something to get off your chest?" Dwight asks, still kind of squinting at him. "I have the feeling like most people would be like 'Oh, fuck, the king of Hell. Is everything going to shit again?' That's the feeling I had, but you? You looked like you took it pretty personally."

Kevin wrestles with his ability to lie. With exactly how much he can lie about. Not everything. Definitely not everything.

"I know. I know him. I don't know if he's king of Hell. I know he's a total jackass. It's not like demons weren't already out there this whole time, you know? He sets up pacts, or he used to. I don't know. Before you ask, there's no way I'm going to tell you how that works." He doesn't look at them, it could be because of emotion but it's really because even if he can act he isn't sure how well he spins off lies. "I was in a tough place in my life. I may have sort of summoned him," Kevin says, grimacing. He lets his voice get thick. That's not hard to do when he's angry and stoned. His eyes are a little itchy from the pot, probably red, so he doesn't have to do a lot of work to pull off sorrow. He thinks of his mom. "I was fifteen. I didn't want my little brother to die. He had leukemia. Mom and dad didn't have that much money. Sure, there was insurance, but It didn't cover everything they wanted. Insurance doesn't cover Game Boys, or buying smaller clothes."

He sniffs back real fluids, hands fisted.

"Did you do it? Did you make a deal?" Kayla asks with hesitant interest.

Kevin shakes his head.

"No. I backed out. Once there was really a demon in front of me I spazzed." He lifts his eyes to his roommates a few seconds; looks away. "He didn't stop there, though. My brother just kept getting worse. He showed up a few more times; tried to get me to take the deal. I didn't wanna go to Hell. I just...didn't." Now he divides his attention between Kayla and Dwight, determined to sell it. "He talked about all the suffering my brother was going through. He talked about my parents and how totally helpless they were. Danny died when I was eighteen. He was eleven. That...thing had a lot of time to rub it in. I felt so fucking guilty. I still...It's still really hard."

"Well shit," says Dwight, compassionate and unsure what to do with it. Kayla and Dwight have been roommates since their first freshman semester. They're close, even if Kayla's a little too attention-needy for Dwight not to keep boundaries. Neither of them have had time to get to know Kevin, even if Dwight invites him out to eat with his friends and Kevin has started watching crime dramas with him. Dwight's friends are mostly from the Near and Middle East, or their parents are, or they're in Near Eastern Studies with him. Sometimes they all go off talking in Arabic and Kevin has no idea what anybody is saying. Kayla satisfies her neediness by invading Kevin's room and lying on the bed to study. They talk while she's in there. She's going after a computer science degree and she's a video game fanatic. Video games are all their conversations, which is great and everything but not all that personal.

Right now, he's just grateful Charlie made up a dead younger brother to excuse his grief.

"I am so sorry," Kayla says, reaching out and putting her hand on Kevin's arm, searching his eyes. Kevin leaves his arm how it is. "Oh my god. I mean...Aunt Alice and Uncle Ron, I don't think they suffered for very long."

"Thanks, Kayla. It's still horrible about your aunt and uncle," Kevin says. "Guys, I think I need
some time alone," he says. That isn't a lie at all. He's still furious below the veneer of 'upset' and he
doesn't know Sam and Crowley's chance of success. He needs to call Charlie, or Dean. He can't
call Sam because he doesn't know how to say good luck when he so stupidly hopes Crowley dies.
Rationally, he wants Crowley to survive if it means Abaddon's taken off the board no matter how
much he doesn't want Crowley to survive.

"Sure, man. Hey, let me know if you need anything," Dwight says while Kayla gives his arm a
squeeze and withdraws her touch. "I don't know anything about demons or what you two went
through, but I wanna be able to help. I'm gonna be on my computer keeping up with the
political situation, but the news'll be the same news when I come back if I take a break."

"Thank you. Really, guys. It means a lot," Kevin says, mustering up a smile. Also not a lie.
Interacting with normal people who have normal responses to the abnormal and supernatural is
his favorite thing about Dwight and Kayla. It has been since day one when he visited the apartment
after giving them a call about their flyer. It's ridiculous to get attached to people just because
they're regular human beings. Even so, he plans to hold on to them and their mundane lives.

He figures he's a perfect roommate. Even after he discovers whatever annoying habits they have
between them he sees himself being happy they're the habits he'd expect from human beings.
Chapter 28

Post infiltration of and exit from NBC Studios the proverbial stage has been set, leaving Sam with nothing to do but turn scenarios over in his mind that he viewed from every angle three days ago. There's one person he wants to be with right now, the one he calls home, even if the bunker has started to grow on him in an increasingly troglofaunal way. His skin is losing pigmentation, the only thing resembling an adaptation to a cave environment, but he can imagine his eyes clouding over, the inevitable descent to Gollum-like, sound-oriented creeping in the dark.

Scratch that. There's two people.

Charlie, monitoring the cameras arrayed within and around the church last night, reports that Dean left with Cas for points deeper in the bunker. Crowley understands Sam needs time with family. That and Sam couldn't interrogate Crowley for any more knowledge of Abaddon if he was conducting an actual inquisition. He knows her favorite food: Malaysian fish head curry. Not Indian. Not Chinese.

Sam may have been sent off. He thinks his debatably better-or-worse half retreated to the apothecary to concoct poisons. Not because they intend to use poisons. Because Crowley enjoys designing them. Sam appreciates the artistic element. Yeah, it's delicately specific for an injection to dissolve only the connective tissue within a body. He could work on that for years and not make it happen. Sorry he's not enthusiastic about the hobby.

Sam hears Dean's unintelligible ranting from down the hallway. He walks softly and stops at the door, hearing about what he expected when he picks up a first full sentence:

"I'm just saying once upon a time Sam didn't have a bowel movement I didn't know about. Now Crowley's all up in his head. He's Crowley. He's evil. He'd sell Sam to Abaddon if he thought he'd make a nickel off it. And Sam's too high on do-gooder crusading to—"

Sam surrenders a pained sigh and turns the doorknob to Cas's room. Two pairs of eyes on him, he mimes a silent invitation for Dean to continue, even as his stomach twinges with hurt.

Dean puffs up like a blowfish out of water. Just as ineffectively.

"...you. You're too big to be sneaky. And listening in on people? That's…" Watching the realization that he has no defense to mount dawn on his expression almost makes up for the chronic verbal diarrhea. "Actually? I'm good here."

"I admit I've been paying progressively less attention, but I believe he sounded far more rational half an hour ago," Cas assures him, returning to the involved task feeding his menagerie, one where food and his pets end up in the same container without one of now three hungry, variously aggressive scorpions stinging him.

Laughter sweeps away Sam's decomposing sourness. He lets himself in, re-securing the illusion of
privacy while Dean gawks in offense at Cas's busy, remorseless back.

"You're like Peter Pan," Sam says, on equal footing as he goes to sit down next to Dean on Cas's bed, pulling one leg onto the mattress. "You'd rather kill us than let us grow up without you."

The haunted look called to Dean's face was inevitable – pain and regret, like Crowley's guilt, always prowling.

"I've met myself when I don't care. I'd rather be—"

"—a gossipy thirteen year old?" Sam interrupts. Shit eating grin.

"*Human,* Sam. I'd rather be human," Dean snaps. He sounds sadder than he does annoyed. "You're going to the same place with the same person to do something a little too similar to the same thing as when you almost died without me and I can't appear out of nowhere, today."

Sam has rehearsed his defense in his own mind. Dropped comments. Convinced no one but Cas.

"One more time: If I die? We're not letting that be a big deal."

Dean raises his guard. Scowls.

"The only person selling that is you. You know who won't be around to buy it?"

"Dean," Sam says, keeping it conversational. "How many times have we died?"

Dean's guard deflates incrementally until: "I'm not actually sure."

Sam chases the opening with a reassuring smile.

"Charlie can build me a robot body. It'll be like an eighties sitcom. You love eighties sitcoms."

"Do not."

"Small Wonder, Alf, Mork, Punky Brewster…" Sam's eyebrows ask if he really has to go on, leaving a pouting, grumpy Dean's guard broken.

"You're not *seriously* telling me to chill out when the illegitimate queen of Hell may disembowel you in the next few hours?"

"I kind of am," Sam says. "I gave the speech to Crowley. Uh, a different speech that involved babysitting you after your emotional collapse."

Dean gapes, betrayed.

"You kidding me? *I'm* the one that'll be babysitting *his* ass."

Sam beams like a pest of a little brother should. Age in years doesn't matter. He'll always be the younger sibling.

"Great. So I have nothing to worry about."

Dean miserably concedes all but total defeat. While he worked himself into a froth about increasingly implausible scenarios for failure, Sam and Crowley growing increasingly more incompetent with each retelling, Sam factored Dean's brooding into his battle plans.
"That's dirty pool," Dean grouses.

"Dean..." Sam says, partner, co-conspirator, soul mate. Not hand raised baby brother. "Worry. Then handle the results until I get back. Whether from Hell or from...Heaven." A cringe. "Confession? Still dealing with gunning to go to Hell. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Promise?"

Dean looks petulant as a kindergartner.

"No. I'm not gonna promise! I'll end up douching it up."

"At least I know what I can count on you for," Sam says, rolling his eyes.

Dean's face softens until he wears nothing but love, nothing but raw emotion, and he opens his arms up. Sam feels indescribable pride that Dean, in more pain than ever, no longer distrusts his family and by extension aggressively guards himself against them.

"Bring it in you sassy little bitch."

Sam presses his face into Dean's shoulder, their arms sliding around each other so naturally Sam could pretend they didn't spend years without embracing except at their most emotional and vulnerable.

"Jerk," he says into Dean's plaid shirt.

He wasn't all that emotional just seconds ago, but being held by Dean calls up all the feelings both sidelined today and inherent to their history. Memories freely coming to mind, he can smell the beer he was drinking when he a-little-drunkenly extolled his brother to Crowley during their pre-dating man-date. For a second he's unsure why he remembers standing with San Pedro, the spirit who silently appeared to him in the guise of an Andean curandero at the end of his trials and showed him his planet. They stand in Grand Central Terminal in New York City, a place Sam only knows from films. Although he can feel Dean's warmth against him, his arms around him, he simultaneously fully exists in the memory.

Near the center of the terminal, a younger Dean stands alone.

Sam combs his memories. He knows for sure he never saw this on their travels. San Pedro is with him now. He refuses to debate if the gift is a vote of confidence or if Saint Peter in another iteration's getting ready to open the pearly gates.

Dean holds a train ticket dumbly in one hand, staring at the ordinary people busy at shopping and dining or making their train. Expressionless. Numb. Sam intuits from never having worked or heard about a case in the immediate area past-Sam is on the other side of the country pursuing higher education.

Dean looks grungy and out of place in the opulent settings and compared to sharp dressed New Yorkers. He barely sees the people, let alone the painted ceiling's starry night sky with constellations that Dean taught him lying together on Baby's roof done in gold leaf. Constellations eleven year old Dean memorized just to sound important to Sam. Maybe earlier Dean paid attention to the building; to the pedestrians. Now the busyness has blurred to indistinction.

Sam wonders in spirit-time where Dean bought a ticket to – what must be an instant in real time. It
must have taken a chunk of his hustled cash but he doesn't think, no, he knows from the spirit that Dean had no intention of traveling anywhere at all. He came and observed, perfunctorily preformed the motions…Now the ticket falls from his hand onto the ground. He buries his hands in the pockets of his jacket and turns to the exit.

Sadness comes over Sam. At this moment he realizes his brother's predicament. In the now, Dean is coordinating an internet forum. He faces face to face collaborations. He faces memorizing the names of contacts of contacts. Having an army requires having a public. If Sam lives, Dean will struggle to fulfill his own role. If Sam dies, Dean will struggle all the harder. No allied king will sit in Hell. He will be as Michael, as brotherless as Michael, and responsible for leading humanity against the forces of Abaddon.

In another point in time where he's holding fast to his brother – solace taken in body heat, in sharing the same air – he and Dean simultaneously fend off the desire to not completely separate. They do draw apart but clap hands on each other in promise of solidarity. Neither of them really smiles, mouths pressed tight, the corners only just drawn back.

Cas trained Sam in his routine of insect care in case he is away, so Sam knows Cas hasn't finished taking care of every pet. Cas finished with a terrarium and paused in his rounds, spending a short interval murmuring conversationally to his Hercules beetle in respect of Sam and Dean's privacy. When he sees they've separated he turns his attention to them, to Dean.

"I think it would be better if Charlie and I monitored the cameras alone," he says, neither his poise nor tone bothering to pretend Dean will agree.

A rankled Dean works himself up, anyway.

"Dude. We spent all night setting those up. I climbed trees."

"We spent all morning at the television studio," Cas says. "And yesterday reliving something that already deeply disquieted you."

"I've seen Sam die and Sam's dead body more than once, Cas," Dean says, unmoved. Sam frowns but, yeah, that's true. "No, it doesn't get easier. No, I'm not sitting out." He ratchets the stubbornness up. He's nowhere near in full form. Full form goes to eleven. "I read the one where he watched me die constantly for a sick length of time. I'll be the first to admit I did not get it coming out of that one."

When his state of alarm passes Sam unleashes his violated offense."

"Dude. We agreed not to read those without…telling each other."

That's emotion. Rationality tells a different story. Rationality offers a robust list of completed titles. Charlie does have digital copies of all of them.

Sam can only stand Dean's steady gaze on him so long before caving under his own culpability.

"…De—…shut up."

"Mmm. It doesn't work when he says it, does it, Cas?" Dean laments, shaking his head. Cas has been watching Sam, but turns his attention to Dean, earnestness exaggerated.

"I have to admit it seems less compelling."
Sam would totally appreciate Cas successfully playing into a social interaction if he wasn't its victim. He fixes Cas and Dean with a look.

"I have some complaints about the quality of the brothers I've been given."

"Damn. Wouldn't you know it? Home office is full of doesn't care," Dean says with a smile so fake it'd do Charlie proud, pointing toward the ceiling and, beyond, the sky.

Cas comes sits at the edge of the bed in front of Sam, looks uncertain for a moment and then rests his hand on the calf of Sam's folded leg.

"I…" It comes to him he has no need to express the fact of family other than brightening into a smile, clear-eyed and relaxed.

Sam tries to imagine how he wants to spend what could be his last hours on Earth – at least for a vacation length time. A lifetime of motel living stares back at him.

"How about we help you finish up over there and we can play a movie before I, you know, contest a demon thousands of years older than me for control of another dimension?"

Traditional family time. Minus somebody running the magic fingers.

"Yes," Cas says, although he means I'd like that. He gives Dean a little frown. "I want you to recite what you're doing out loud. Mo Tzû is still recovering."

"I got it, I got it," Dean grumbles, looking Cas in the eyes and reciting: "They're little people." He doesn't look like a man who takes it to heart. "—considering how I am with people you should seriously consider a metaphor about gun care."

Cas huffs, making a very human face of passing annoyance, but he gets up off the bed, expecting them both to follow. His collection now rests on shelves spanning the length of one wall, residents organized by preferred temperature and humidity. Sam tentatively claims familiarity with insect handling. For whatever reason, Cas trusts him with his pets more than anyone else. In his caution over of their anatomy, he adapted to thinking of each of them as finicky, demanding individuals. Something about needing everything exactly right in areas where Sam wouldn't personally make a distinction reminds him suspiciously of Dean.

Charlie announces the 'all clear' on the interior of the church, with the exception it could be full of sneaky hellhounds. She hasn't seen the debris strewn across the floor disturbed. On the other hand, she relates, aside from two demons scouting the interior for traps, the exterior of the church hosts a demonic tailgating party. It's not without beer. She apologizes she can't promise which body Abaddon is wearing. I mean, you know, demons, they're all pretty stuck up, she looks over her shoulder at Crowley. You're my best bitch, yet no caveats.

More or less what they expected. Straightforward, ruling out surprises. She took the guessing out of where they'll appear alongside securing the area.

Sam checks the knife in his inner pocket and gives a sober Dean and Cas a last look, goodbyes said, boyfriend kissed. The familiar snap of Crowley's fingers and they're standing in front of the alcove of a building not easily forgotten. The threat of Abaddon is too immediate for Sam to relieve any emotions. He tactically re-assesses the layout of the room:

Discolored altar with its water stained wood bearing the same iron cross. Crucifix above it just as
creepy as the first time. Either an artistic statement or, more likely, the body of Christ rotted and fell away. Bench sitting where it sat before, the same leaves scattered on the floor with a few wind-blown additions. The weather’s drier but the building still reeks of mildew. The broken devil’s trap painted on the floor, the chair Dean bound Crowley to with its tattered covering and loose stuffing sitting upright but off center. The chain they took with them. There’s the floor beams split and splintered by Abaddon's teke. The crumbled pieces of the ceiling brought down by her entrance scattered on the wood. Broken fragments of stained glass jut from the frame of the shattered window. A charred corpse in a state of decay lies where it fell. The staircase in shadow to one side of the entrance leads up toward the bell tower, the door that once concealed it broken wood out of the way, close to the wall. The double doors stand open. Dean had more important things on his mind than shutting the church back up.

Nobody's been back until today.

Winter's chill crisps the air. Pale light slants through the windows. Sam intends to finish this before nightfall blankets the derelict chapel and surrounding marshy lake.

Crowley squints at the chair; flings it into the wall with his index finger, crash announcing their entrance. He crushes it to damp fragments in his fist, not with resentment but to clear the floor. He stands no more tense than Sam, although they're tense. The corpse he takes obvious pleasure in disappearing with a second snap. Sam thinks only fleetingly that Abaddon won't care if it's sent somewhere terrible. He doesn't mention it. It's a day for totally getting where Crowley's coming from and yet.

The figure of a woman in the doorway echos their last encounter with Abaddon except her erect stance, her squared shoulders – the once-confident Knight rigid with tension of her own. This vessel is shorter. The domineering sway to her walk has diminished toward stiffness but hasn't disappeared. She passes from the shadow of the doorway into the sanctuary.

Black hair piled high, pinned tight – not in reflection of 1958 but to prevent an opponent obtaining an easy grasp. Flawless make-up, bright blue around her eyes. Pouting lips, blue nails, dressed all in black. Abaddon's reptilian lust to inflict death – callous, indiscriminate hunger – shines in eyes swapped from blue to brown.

Sam realizes the change in himself only after Abaddon adopts a waiting pose, eyebrows arch.

Body language open, head kept straight, shoulders sloping, arms hanging loosely at his sides, feet shoulder width apart, expression calm…recognition flies through an unflinching Sam – Lucifer's name writ on a bolt of lightning. Comfort follows.

_They only said my greatest sin is Pride to belittle my confidence that my cause is just,_ Lucifer reminisces. _These little ones puff themselves up trying to forget that, until you, extant or erased Lilith alone could call herself regent. The King of Hell does not swagger._

Sam welcomes the absent archangel's voice and approval with a sudden, intense desire to do his imprisoned but best friend proud. Through the eyes of the ghost of Lucifer written into his mind, Abaddon and Crowley are children building sandcastles. Playing dress up and pretend. Sam can see them as the archangel without losing sight of his own vision.

Crowley marks the bodily change in Sam with a sidelong, curious look without anything approaching fear. He stayed as far away from Lucifer as remotely possible while on the same continent working against him. That's great, seeing as throwing the boyfriend that Lucifer does not approve of – but Lucifer can fuck right off – off his game would be the definition of terrible for so many reasons.
Crowley stays on task, stepping forward, holding his hands out broadly, a gesture of welcome and armistice, cocking his head to the side. His back is to Sam but Sam knows the face: an expression of inquiry, his eyes disarmingly wide, lips at rest. When he speaks his brow will furrow and lips purse, forehead shrug and where appropriate he'll offer fleeting smiles. More like Sam knows 'the faces'. Word for word, Crowley says more than Charlie, his body chatty, an encyclopedia of insinuations.

Sam's happy to host a vivid picture in his mind…in case he needs something to think about while doing dead again.

"Last run in we had Sam was in rough straits," Crowley admits. He gestures to Sam, gaze fixed to Abaddon. "Look at him now. Picture of health. Better than that. Picture of Hell. Get right with him. Surrender. Third and final."

"Can't he speak for himself?" Abaddon drawls, younger and softer voice spiked with the same vinegar. Her attention slides from Crowley to fix on Sam. "I admit there's something different about you, Winchester."

Sam steps forward, side by side with Crowley again.

_Politeness counts. Manners matter._ Lucifer's voice teases.

"Crowley is authorized to speak on my behalf," he says, voice steady and sure. His own voice, and not. From the change in Abaddon's demeanor, adding a tablespoon of almost-concealed caution, Sam suspects her call to knighthood came as a vision. "Crowley's a communicator," he explains, polite as bid. "I'm more straightforward. I don't have his skill at negotiation."

"I'm not here to haggle over terms," Abaddon says thinly despite her reservation.

At the corner of Sam's eye, Crowley marks her attitude change with a slight lift of his brow. The time for giving every possibility equal weight has passed. Sam indulges in really, really wanting to be embodied to explain it to him later, while able to rely on a somebody else's motor habits to keep his cool.

That Sam nods once.

"The terms are the same as when we sent your C team back to you: You pledge your allegiance to me, we all leave here healthy. Otherwise, we fight. You lose."

A congregation has gathered beyond the doors. The church's status as holy ground is so untenable even the weakest demon could invite itself inside. Sam allows a few of the demons to advance past the shadow of the doorway into the light before he halts them all, some mid-step, frozen like puppets on wires.

Abaddon twists to look behind her, startled, eyes black, snarling with rage when she fixes her attention back on Sam.

"What are you?"

Sam admits her arrogance goes above and beyond. The other demons in her pay grade may not exercise the attributes in question _often_, but every one of them is or was capable of modesty and caution. The Sam inside pulls a face asking if she's serious – maybe a serious idiot. He's seriously not going to answer that. He's sure he made the no-chatting thing clear. He understands that she believes she wields authority and legitimacy and expects him, just a human in her eyes, to respond to it.
His face doesn't change.

But he has Crowley, and Crowley makes exactly the face Sam wants to.

"No one fill you in?" his skepticism-laden partner asks. "Boy King, blah blah blah. Exorcizes demons plus killed Alastair and Lilith with his mind, blah blah. Pulled one over on Lucifer...I'd run out of blahs before we covered the half. I fancy you had it explained to you n' didn't take it nearly seriously enough even though when on the verge of dying from Heaven poisoning Sam still deep fried your vessel extra crispy."

She has attention to spare for Crowley, again. The roach in sales. Sam admits she's not an idiot. A lot of demons think that. He thinks of Captain America. Charlie screened them the entire Avengers franchise. It's the same deal. One second she has a rank in a strict hierarchy in Hell. The next she's pitched into a world where once-predictable demons wear facets they never would have shown in, say, three thousand years right on their public face. And like Steve Rogers found out everybody accepts America is a little evil, Abaddon has returned to the confounding fact that Hell is a little good. Say, fighting Leviathans.

"If he's this powerful, explain to me why I still exist," Abaddon demands, holding her hand out toward the frozen demons.

He's definitely not going to confess that as impressive as his trick looks it's a brute instrument. A single thought, Don't move, that doesn't take up too much attention he's holding in the back of his mind. To Abaddon and Crowley, demons who think of angel swords and Kurdish knives as inconveniences, it probably doesn't even register.

Sam and Lucifer-in-Sam concur now is the dramatically appropriate moment he's been waiting for, Abaddon's confidence undermined just enough.

Time to find out if he sees tomorrow.

Walking even and easy, he steps forward into the broken Devil's Trap. Moves deliberately, opening his coat to show the Kurdish knife; holding it open as he draws the blade from his breast pocket. He lays his coat back against his breast and lowers his arms, stance as unthreatened and as unthreatening as before, but armed both with his weapon of choice and his decision.

The war-loving, ancient wraith embodied within some innocent young woman focuses. Her intentions contract. In the same instant Abaddon accepts him as her opponent, the world falls away. Crowley, the still-arrested demons, and the damp chilly church. Sam in his aggression-craving craves this plummet, the erotic intimacy of single combat against a feral opponent.

"I'm not going to kill you, Abaddon," he promises, their gazes locked. "I'm going to defeat you. Just you and me, one round, no tricks."

The flinch of her hand. She realizes the raw power behind his telekinesis suppresses her own. Teke is the only buffer he has when she strikes, fast as a wildcat, a blow so strong the impact ripples through his buffer even as he relies on it to redirect her momentum, side-stepping her assault.

Knife in between himself and Abaddon, he jumps as she drops low landing, pivoting hard on one foot to sweep his feet. She knocks his arm aside as he drives the knife toward her rising form. She grabs his shirt, pulls him toward her a split second and then shoves him away with all her ferocious strength. He should crash into the rafters, fall from the ceiling to the floor, break bones – he cancels his own momentum, falls to a crouch, skidding backward on the boards, learning he or Lucifer has that psychokinetic reflex by doing. No respite. He rolls out of the way before the lithe
demon crushes him. Her fist's impact shatters the wooden floor, explosion of splinters forcing him to shy away, affording her leeway to rise.

She has him trapped on the defensive. Sam may be buffering the fast but heavy blows he's fending off with his arms with teke, thoughts rebuffing each punch, but the familiar pain of strain on live bone, of bone threatening to splinter, mounts every time her fist or arm collides with his – his own power doing the damage, delivering waves of force.

Made to choose between abandoning his guard or forearm with hairline fractures, he breaks his guard. Nothing to stop her, Abaddon's booted foot pounds into his chest. Sam's sternum cracks, sound as loud as the pain; this time he's kicked back into the wall, boards breaking behind him. Winded, he stays on his feet with the wall's support. She lets him collect himself, tilting her head to the side, predatory in motion, as she searches to see him as any threat at all, disdain poisoning her expression.

It's killing him to breathe. Only metaphorically. It doesn't matter where she drove the splinters of his bones. His body breathes deep and even. *Never alone*, he hears, his own inner voice but unaffected. The golem brags of its immunity to pain not so much in words as sentiment.

"Think fast," Sam warns, grin sliding onto his lips as Abaddon snaps around in the air, head faster than her body, twisting in a 360° spin before landing like a cat on the ground, springing away, shaken and angered and now Sam's *enjoying* the fight.

She lays in again; couldn't be on him faster if she translocated. She's right thinking he can't throw her like a rag doll when she's up in his space, raining blows. Sam thinks in lacerations, Abaddon's vessel his canvas; he slices crackling gash across and down her arm at the price of a punch to his sternum, tearing it tricep to forearm.

His sternum's all kinds of broken, now, no longer reliable for keeping his ribs from crushing in on his organs.

Abaddon takes advantage of too-close-to-swing-again; stomps his foot beneath her boot. There go a score of tiny bones. His nerves shriek, pain stabbing up his leg, a storm of cold knives. The golem retorts *It's only mineralized collagen.* The sound of static electricity; a slice across – no, **through** – her cheek. She backhands his, blow to his head flinging him to the side. He lands hard on broken wood, splinters digging into bare skin. His vision swoons in and out of focus as the demon stalks forward to stand over him.

Blood drips from her body onto the floor. From her forearm, her hand, and her fingers, her arm crimson. Blood fills the lower half of her cheek to overflowing; spills from her split mouth, her neck a river, its stain spreading over her black clothes.

Something wicked and anticipant; something seditious and vile and wild slithers through Sam, a hot-cold curl of inhuman desire. His mouth is full of his own blood, the hot fluid trickling from its corner an entirely different species of liquid. He thirsts.

"Arrogant human boy," she sneers, slurring around the flaps of skin once a cheek. "You can't sdefeat me. Kill me? Maybe." He watches her glance cautiously toward the demons still frozen in their vessels and spare a fleeting look at Crowley but Sam's gaze doesn't follow, married to the bleeding Abaddon. He knows Crowley stands unyielding at the corner of the altar as they agreed – no contract to hold him there. Trust. Abaddon bares her teeth at Sam, spitting: "It's getting late to kill me. Looks to me like all that power's useless without a clear head."

Sam feels spittle of his favorite intoxicant land on his face. He holds his resolve; licks the blood
off his own gums. He lost two teeth, or most of two, when she backhanded him. He swallows them. The teeth go down blood-slippery with rough edges. Abaddon towers over him, statuesque, clothed in regal confidence. Every inch a queen. She hauls him to his feet by a fistful of shirt and jacket, unaffected by the new, substantial difference in their height.

He sees the demon, not the woman she wears, Abaddon's glossy black eyes packed hard as diamonds. A tar black body that sucks in the surrounding aether, casting her in shadow. The fist holding him with such incredible strength sticky, concentrated pitch.

At the edge of cold repose, shirt twisted together, ribs caving under the pressure, Sam suffers the misfortune of remembering just hours ago, remembering further back, Sam a child riveted to motel televisions watching and re-watching *Fern Gully The Last Rain Forest*. One sexuality-defining fairy facing off against a pollution guzzling spirit. Hexxus. Thick, tarry evil. *Rocky Horror's* Tim Curry oozing the song "Toxic Love".

Spitting, sputtering and burbling blood is all kinds of bad for his health. He's not stopping, vital fluids pocked with big, sloppy bubbles escaping down his chin. He physically can't answer Abaddon's shrill, enraged *Why are you laughing?*

She's no longer holding him up. Crushed foot offering no support he collapses to his knees, thinking *Don't move*. Letting the thought that he'll die win or lose pass him by. Teeth bared, Abaddon wrenches his clothing tight, again, his ribs pulled in with it, the pain of this round of massive internal damage not so high ranking in the history of pain in his life, crowded out by memories from the Cage. The golem continues to disallow it to impair them. It has no desire to die. Survival takes exerting control to minimize the unavoidable damage.

He's dragged up until she holds him with his face below her own. Attention drawn to all the wasted blood escaping her face, licking gravity provided drops from his own bloody lips, the idea this could in any way be a bad situation disappears. *It gets better, better, better, better*, a circular train of thought enthuses, Sam too addled to fantasize, all but consumed by a surge in demented exultation save for one clarion anchor of intention: *Checkmate.***

Abaddon leaks a tendril of poisonous black smoke into his mouth, digging at his thoughts. He feeds them to her, his anchor a floodgate, a chaos of monsters half-remembered, anger at demons' manipulations, fears from his past; has a mouth, nasal cavities, and brain saturated with the Knight's unholy fury.

Ninth inning. Bases loaded.

Sam inhales. In the instant too late, at the moment of realization, Abaddon resists, clinging to her vessel, lashing herself to it with ichorous moors. He tilts his head back; he isn't breathing her in, not literally, anymore, his crushed, punctured lungs filled to capacity. He invites, his body vast. Intended to house an archangel. She has no power to decline. She pours into him, rushing to fill him like mud-choked floodwaters, last tethers to her vessel tearing away or snapping like breaking rubber bands until only a human woman too weak to hold him and suffering from serious injuries stands in front of but drops Sam.

That woman starts screaming.

Crowley comes to her in the blink of a thought.

*Crowley*, still with him.

Sam, on his knees, shuts his demon-black eyes. Abaddon churns helplessly inside him as delicious,
wrathful sin racing breakneck throughout their vessel. A feast waits one thought away. A Knight of Hell. Power enough to consume any contender until Samuel rules of all Creation, Castiel a laughingstock of a false god in comparison. Hell consumed, Metatron next. Worlds bending to his whim. Jess, resurrected. His mother and father and Adam, too. Lucifer, free. Dean, granted the fullness of his psychic potential with a touch. Crowley his second meal.

Lying half over Crowley, tucked against him by the demon's arm, Sam doesn't see himself detaching from his naked boyfriend tonight, for once, even unconscious. His hand rests on the paunch of Crowley's stomach, steering clear of the layers of gauze taped to his chest. Crowley showered the blood off everywhere else and liberally applied styptic powder, personal blend, guaranteed not only to staunch bleeding but to raise hypertrophic scars. Sam isn't picking up the scent of the blood at all. Mostly he doesn't want to aggravate the pain.

"I thought I might turn into the annoying guy who suddenly wants you to wax. In real life the whole bare skin part looks kind of wrong," Sam admits, scrunching his face toward the expanse surrounding the wound, unseen in the dark.

"You'd never," Crowley teases, moving in to suck on Sam's lower lip. "You like to play with my everything."

Sam laughs, finding belly to squeeze. It's good. Hair to comb through. Love handles isn't a PC term. He's gonna put so much mileage on handling Crowley. So maybe he's relieved it's just a light dusting of back hair over his shoulder blades, because things people say about Italian bodies. It's not random, stray kinky hairs out of tweezer reach like his own, so.

There's a patch of curls right above Crowley's ass, tramp stamp area, and Sam mostly ignores the whole idea of back hair but he has a thing about Crowley's shirt riding up, or seeing him standing naked across the room. He's 95% it's the way it makes Crowley's buttcheeks look rounded out.

Er. That's the one.

He turns back from getting turned on. Crowley's back is one huge bandage, the inside of his thigh taped up and sore. Plus, Sam's job is to rest. Rest, and try to mentally prepare himself for tomorrow.

"I do," he says. "I like to get grabby with all the things. Intact. Attached to your body. Not ripping your head off with my bare hands and drinking from your carotids. Definitely not breaking my way into your thorax and feasting on your heart. Those are out. I'd never do that."

Crowley looks on him patiently, reaching out with his free hand to comb Sam's hair into places; to caress his shoulder.

"You'll do smashingly, love. I've no worries," he says. Sam wants to believe him. Latches to the words, fact outstanding that Crowley really knows how to lie.

"Not even a couple?" he prods. "'cause a couple of worries would be on the level."

He in no way wants to hear agreement. The lights are off. They have the bunker to themselves. The others are out rigging tech. He's never been surrounded by a silence more total. He's lying in the arms of someone who accepts him. The public Sam Winchester and the rest. The anger. The violence. The bent for addiction. The will to power. The monster. They're the arms the person he loves. Never in a life that's stretched on in unnatural ways did he imagine those things could be true at the same time. By his book, that means that this time when he inevitably loses everything no other loss will compare.
"None whatever, Moose," Crowley goes on to vow. Sam admits to himself the demon's going a little far for lying. "I save worrying for the things I can affect. I'd prefer to think, seeing you've been so consistent, that for reasons I'm incapable of understanding and no matter how underserving I can possibly be you love me. The real human article. So: There I am. Or here."

Sam kisses Crowley until he's too sleepy to kiss anymore, dozing off clinging to a human body now Crowley's in a way it wasn't yesterday.

Someone's always there to stop this year's aspiring despot. Sam makes a full time job out of it. Did. Does. What he remembers now is the creature he loves exposed to him, alike to the one trying and failing to rend him apart from within, personal breeds of sin differentiating them.

Sam has known the devil. Reaping so many dark fruits, he sees the beauty of Abaddon: The purest extant concentration of the desire to kill without hunger, to destroy for pleasure, to slaughter as if someday when the last bloody corpse drops to the blood fed earth the universe will open wide into infinity.

Once a soul, now a perfect mirror of a single facet of Lucifer's delusion.

"I'm sorry," Sam swears, aloud and within, black eyes still shut. Truth. Abaddon knows of and revels in her flawlessness. She'll see it from the other side, her beauty lost not on Sam but on her. That plays a small role in how sorry he is. Wrenchingly, nauseatingly, soul shudderingly sorry. Sorry like his head will break in half to not usher the world beneath his dictatorial sway. Neither of them will say they enjoyed this.

He opens up his soul to her. Relief abounds as he discovers he's alone with his natural powers, the potential reality he opened himself to during the trials truly rescinded in answer to his rejection.

He believed that. A risk remained.

Sam's head falls forward; he breathes sloppy-wet through the psychic terror of Abaddon, a scream without beginning or end, her whole ancient being a single scream as the black sears away to radiant white. When she's finished, cleansed, absolved, saved, she exists as silence. Stupefied. He safely tucks her away as Lucifer used to tuck him away, relying on the absent archangel's memories.

"Actual God, I hope I can heal myself," Sam rasps, blood rushing over his lips, running as a rivulet down his chin, a huge excess built up over the duration of his meditations thanks to the gory pockets his dislodged teeth left behind. He winces. Almost raises a hand to ineffectively attempt to wipe the gout's aftermath away. The bad news of sternum splinters and those splinters in every single one of his organs halts him from getting that far. He lets it continue to run out uninhibited.

"How's our duchess, then?" Crowley asks, holding an armful of scared human woman. He strokes her back and murmurs Just a little longer, have you in hospital before you know.

"Healed. Inside me. Unconscious," Sam says, raising his voice for their demonic audience, however seriously that pains him. He can't remember how long they've been free of his influence. It doesn't matter they got loose. Sam left them facing the well-known: Crowley. Vision blurred, Sam can still see there's more demons inside than before. His hearing goes in and out but there's chatter, ribbing and private laughter. It's good. It's a good feeling knowing he had demons around him that already leaned his way – demons now able to gloat. "Tell them," he requests quietly.

Sam can't see the dangerous, ebullient smile Crowley gives the room except in his mind's eye. Wonders briefly if Abaddon's wounded vessel can make sense of any of this at all. She no longer
smells like a meal.

"Boys and girls or if you check 'other', meet your new king. He's kept Abaddon extant in good nick. Those of you over there having a sulk he's king but all bloodied up and not 'conquering hero' remember 'Knight of Hell'. Plus that I could slaughter the lot of you without a sweat. Context, darlings. He'll be in health in no time. When you get downstairs, tell them to tidy the place up. We'll be popping down shortly. God sake over there. Don't tear up. Look at that one, he's actually crying. I'm embarrassed of you. You're not being sent to bed without supper." Pregnant pause. "Come to think, I do want you all to fucking behave down there." Crowley has that certain way of cycling from genial to stone heartless. Now it's straight back to cheery: "Ta."

Sam expands his focus. Once more, the more brutal the act the simpler. The golem prods him that body is making a serious go at dying. That's important, just not yet. His soul remains empowered. Wrenching demon after demon from the possessed sends them billowing into the air in a roar of smoke only to be dragged down, their last thrashes of resistance dying to a sizzle before they disappear to Hell, exorcized.

There are a few score confused, kidnapped people here, now. Sam hopes unkindly that they're all too scared to approach. For this single incident in his life he's claiming, guilt free, **his problems come first.**

Sooner than later, Sam is going to collapse. That would mean bone driven everywhere.

"...Crowley, I need to be in traction," he whispers. "And then die."

Sharing his sentiments the demon gives the severely traumatized woman a pat on the back and moves away from her, finding a way to get his arm around Sam's back without much rib jostling. He's as strong as Abaddon, Sam's grateful for it, and Sam doesn't fall forward onto his face. The awareness of Crowley's nearness, the sense despite his unreliable senses that Crowley's head is turned close, raises a flutter of joy within the wreck of his chest. That's partly the natural morphine – endorphins – gleefully latching to every receptor in its path; competitors gone, the stuff's making rapid headway.

"Can you? Heal?" Crowley prompts.

Crowley sounds bland. That means he's everything but.

Sam fixates on his words. He passed up on the greatest high of his life, but he's pretty damn high. "Think so," he stresses, tongue clumsy, focused or not. "Imma heal my chest an'...that's probably gonna put me out."

"You and Abaddon perform Sleeping Beauty and I play sideshow host. Perfectly alright with me, Moose," Crowley seduces, husky voice selling 'knows-best', playing to all the right hormones.

'Healing' implies relief. From the little that Cas healed Sam and when watching the angel restore Kevin's finger instantaneous relief looked like a key component. Not so when putting his chest back together. A bright white glow shines through his shirt like he's in *E.T.* Crowley recoils reflexively without letting him fall. So far so good, right? Only it's hotter than any fire. Hot as hellfire. Innumerable splinters pull themselves together into healthy bones, flesh mending both before they arrive and after they pierce through,

A death of a thousand cuts gift wrapping a relentless inferno radiating from his core.

Somewhere in that shoreless sea of pain, Sam escapes the agony of consciousness.
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