

Out of This Darkness

by Maygra

Rating: Mature Adult. Horror. AU/Futureverse.

Pairing: None defined but you'd do well to assume slash.

Things you might want to know: The following is a work of fiction. It is meant for mature adults and deals with mature and possibly disturbing themes including **non-consensual sex**. Forced to a category, it would be dark fiction and containing both violence and sexual violence. It is a horror story. It's also a love story.

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“They lied to you. The Devil is not the Prince of Matter; the Devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without smile, truth that is never seized by doubt. The Devil is grim because he knows where he is going, and, in moving, he always returns whence he came.” (Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose)

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I. Prologue

No one really remembers what the world was like before it ended. On dark nights or when the moon is full and blood red, the stories tumble out slow and half-whispered into waiting ears. That it ended in a flash of light, that everyone who looked was blinded, or they were turned into pillars of salt or stone; that it ended in blood and fire with the screams of millions echoing across the plains and mountains and oceans; that everything went perfectly still for a thousand years and when it all started moving again this is the world that was left. Or that it happened between one breath and the next: there was that world and there was this one.

Maybe it was a little of all those things, or maybe none of it was true. Sometimes the children wake up to dreams of things they've never seen, glimpses of something that is less terrifying than it is strange. Sometimes the older ones are struck by a sense of déjà vu for something that should be familiar to them but isn't: the kitchen table, the pump at the well, the way the lightning arcs across the sky or the hard pelt of rain beating patterns in the dirt.

They know there was a before time. They can see it on the horizon, the crumbling skylines of cities no one can live in any longer, or the snaking path of roads that lead somewhere still but the signs really make no sense any longer. Chicago is a crater in the ground. Los Angeles is the name of the inland sea that now cuts the land in two and the only way from south to north is to either sail it or climb the treacherous mountains above it.

They say the broad inland sea that now separates Pacifica from Atlantia was once just a river. They call it the Old Man still. The libraries that are left have become temples, and it's taken them years to relearn the language all the books were written in and even so, people argue about translation and interpretation.

Once, the storytellers say, once all these places, these temples, were bright with light long after dark and not from candles or lanterns. Once people moved as easily in the dark as they do in the day.

Those are the scariest stories, because only fools go out after dark, beyond the watch fires, and if you have to, you'd best ask a

Reaver to go with you, to keep you safe, to keep your path straight, because you can get lost in the world after dark. It changes after dark.

Some say that after dark, the world is more like it used to be. That the world before keeps trying to force itself into the world that is now.

The Reavers will tell you not to let your watch fires burn too low. They'll tell you to keep your children close. They'll remind you to keep your salt lines unbroken around your house and to let the rowan and ash touch limbs, leave your willows by the water and plow around your oaks.

"Let the living live," they'll say. "Let the past have what's left."

Some people say the Reavers actually come from the dark. Between themselves, they'll call each other thieves. They'll call each other dogs or hounds, sometimes brother or sister and speak in words and about things that no one understands. They keep to themselves but they aren't unfriendly. Sometimes they travel alone, sometimes in pairs. Most towns have one, and those that don't will usually find a traveling Reaver showing up when they need one. It's a poor town, indeed, that doesn't keep a place for them to stay.

But most folks know the Reavers aren't really part of the dark, no matter how strange. They know because nearly every town, eventually, will have a child, who sometime around six or seven years of age, will walk up to the first Reaver they see and hold out their hand.

"I remember," the child will say. "I remember before."

And the Reaver will ask what they remember and then tell the child's parents that when the child is twelve or thirteen (he or she will know when) that child will leave the village and walk the world. And in a few years, that child will come back, and you will know that we didn't steal it or bewitch it or deceive it. And you most likely will not see that child again in your lifetime.

And so it will be, because the Reavers have no need to lie about what they do or what they see. The only thing they will ever lie about is what they remember.

No one remembers what the world was like before it ended. No one but the Reavers. And the Reavers will tell you, if you ask them, that they remember before because they were there when it happened.

"What happened? How did the world end?" The only answer the Reavers will give is no answer at all. "We stole it from you."

Some people say the Reavers never die but it's hard to say. No one but them remembers what it was like or when it happened. The Reavers say it happened yesterday.

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II.

Of all the things Dean misses, he misses his car the most. He misses the speed of it, the power, the low growl of the engine. He misses his tape deck and his music, he misses the sticky-tackiness of the wheel under his hands on hot summer days and he even misses the ass-freezing feel of the vinyl in winter. And he misses the trunk. Oh, God, how he misses the trunk, because hauling a couple of hundred pounds of weaponry and charms and bullet castings on horseback is a major pain in the ass and he can never *find* anything if he lets Sam pack. But if he does the packing, he always ends up with odds bit of things here and there that don't fit.

He's also not terribly fond of horses just on general principle. Sometimes they'll use a wagon, depending on what's happening and where and how long it will take to get there, and he likes that better, but wagons aren't fast, so there's a definite trade-off between comfort and speed.

Although that's kind of relative, because the new-old definition of horsepower is just a total joke.

But he's practical above all else. Horses are the best thing going. In some cases they are the only thing going. They've seen the abandoned hulks of cars and trucks closer into the cities, but like just about everything else, they've succumbed to the enforced decay that's settled over most of the world. The slate's being wiped clean, the old world is already mostly memory and legend and the new world is still trying to find its way. Even if he could find a car that hadn't succumbed to rust and corrosion, and find fuel for it, it's unlikely it would work and he's not sure he'd be willing to tempt fate a second time to try.

Pretty much the only electricity the world knows now is the kind that comes with storms and rain. There's pockets of it, here and there. Now and then they'll find a battery that's not completely drained, or a generator that can still spark.

Sam says they can leave them, eventually they'll decay too. But Dean's more apt to take a sledgehammer to them when they find them, just in case.

It's not that he doesn't believe Sam, it's just that even though he says to leave them, Dean knows they worry him. He knows Sam is afraid there are quarters somewhere, isolated places, maybe an old nuclear power plant or a water turbine somewhere that someone will figure out and it will start all over again.

Dean's half convinced it will anyway, but he keeps that bit of pessimism to himself. Sam shares it, but they never talk about it. There's a lot of things they don't talk about.

Like their father.

Sam doesn't talk about him because he believes it hurts Dean to know that their father, who survived the end of the world, doesn't remember them, or anything else. And it does hurt some. But it hurts less than having him dead, and somewhat more that he isn't part of this, that he can't help them -- that what he knew is as lost as the rest of the world.

Dean doesn't talk about him because it does no good. It can't bring him back, or make John remember. And he says nothing because he knows Sam blames himself. But they can see him, a couple of times a year; do it deliberately just to check on him. He's a damn good blacksmith and they need that as much as they need anything else from him. Shoe the horses, repair the buckles and fittings on their saddles, put an edge on their blades, let them use his forge to cast their bullets. He's even learned how to cast them himself, always has a couple of bagfuls for them when they stop.

And Dean still wonders, sometimes, if John doesn't remember or doesn't want to. He hasn't married, and his own village thinks that's odd. Children are the blood of any village. But John's got a couple of apprentices, sons and daughters of other villagers, so Dean supposes it works out.

But still he wonders.

"You ready?" Sam asks him. Behind him the door to the Rest stays open, to let the next Reaver know there's no one there. Sam would have made sure it was stocked, that the Rest journal was updated.

"We need to pick up water on the way out," Dean says and Sam nods. He looks tired but then he always does. Dean can't remember the last night Sam slept all the way through, or the last day either. He catches his sleep like he used to, in catnaps and long dozes. And Dean supposes it's a good thing Sam can doze in the saddle as easily as he

used to sleep in the front seat of the Impala. Otherwise he'd be dead from exhaustion by now.

God, Dean misses his car.

His horse snorts and the leather creaks when he mounts, but he does it easily, familiarly, and Sam is the same. It had come to them both inexplicably, like a lot of things and still they'd spent hours learning how to do more than ride on horseback. Learned to ride without the use of the reins, to be able to load and shoot and not end up on their asses in the dirt. Cowboys. They'd become cowboys, trick riders, cavalrymen.

They fill their canteens at the central well in town. The aluminum rounds still look like they could have bought them at any sporting goods store if such places existed any longer.

One of the older women approaches them, helps them draw the water. "You're leaving then?" she asks, all politeness. They never ask - or rarely. People treat them strangely and Dean knows it made sense. At least that hasn't changed. They'd been freaks before and they still are.

"Yes. There will be another Reaver here before sunset," Sam says and smiles at her. She smiles back but she doesn't quite look at Sam, or at Dean.

"Good journey then, Reavers, and thank you."

"What we owe," Dean says, before Sam can. Dean can make it sound more like just a polite, traditional exchange. If Sam says it, the poor woman might burst into tears. The way Sam says it tends to do that to people.

She smiles again and they mount, heading along the cracked asphalt that leads out of the village. A few people nod or wave, a few others look worried. Sam doesn't offer any further reassurances.

Sam finally relaxes a few miles out of town. Dean can almost hear his muscles sigh in relief and his bones crack. People are hard for Sam now. He remembers a little too clearly, Dean thinks. He looks at people and can see the futures they should have had, rather than the ones they do. But that really hasn't changed between them when so much else has. Dean is still the one that looks forward and Sam is forever looking back. They're both looking for the same thing, but neither of them are sure where or even what it is.

This used to be Illinois. It doesn't really have a name any longer and probably won't for a few years or another couple of generations.

Most towns are at least a day from each other, some more. Agriculture rules as does hunting. Part of what they do is check to see how quickly villages are growing, watching for the point where they start overextending their resources, start pushing further out -- more crops, more livestock.

That's when things become dangerous, when the dark pushes back. *You keep to your places and we'll keep to ours.* Dean can hear them at night, muttering and bitching. It's annoying but he knows its part of the price, part of the bargain made. It's a shitty bargain no matter which way he looks at it, but it's the one they have and the one he and Sam and the other Reavers are destined to keep.

Sometimes he wishes he could remember how long he's been doing this, or when it started.

It started yesterday, except he knows that's not really true. Time has collapsed in on itself, in on *them*. He's tried keeping track, but the marks he made of the days and nights keep fading. If he asks Sam, Sam will tell him, and he knows he'll be shocked and probably pissed off.

And then he'll forget. What he remembers and forgets has no pattern that he can figure out and it makes him a little insane to try -- which pretty much indicates to him that he's been trying to figure it out for a while now.

Sam's explained it to him a hundred times, he's sure, and sometimes he wonders if that's why Sam can't sleep, why people hurt him, why when he fights, he cries afterward. Why when a Reaver dies it's all Dean can do to keep him from killing himself.

Dean remembers everything in his life up to a point. He remembers his mother's death, pinned to the ceiling over Sam's crib by a demon. He remembers learning to fight and hunt under his father's tutelage, how to take on ghosts, demons, monsters and nightmares. He remembers Sam going off to college and the mix of pain and admiration and loss and pride he felt at his little brother's choices. He remembers Sam's girlfriend, (*Jessica, her name was Jessica,*) dying the same way their mother had. He remembers crisscrossing the country with Sam, looking for their father, and for the thing that had targeted their family.

He remembers going to Chicago in pursuit of something.

Then he remembers working in a village outside of what used to be Canton, Ohio, breaking a new horse in like he'd done it his entire

life. That he'd been riding and working with the farmer who raised the horses the Reavers used with an ease and familiarity that he used to have working on the engine of the old '67 Impala that he still misses.

He can't remember what happened between Chicago and then, or not much of it. He knows what the deal was and that it was made and why he and Sam and the other Reavers ride between villages keeping that bargain from being broken on either side.

But he can't remember how it happened or why.

Sam's told him over and over, but he can't hold onto what he hears, what he learns. He wishes he could, out of more than curiosity or some need to understand his own destiny. And he remembers asking over and over again.

Sam tells him every time like it's the first.

Because Sam remembers. Sam remembers *everything*.

Dean tries not to ask, he really does. But sometimes he just has to know, even if only for a few minutes.

"So, how long have we been doing this?" he asks, and Sam looks at him and smiles. Shakes his head and chuckles. The question is worth the laughter if nothing else.

"You won't remember."

"Humor me."

Sam blows out a breath and rakes a hand through his hair. "A hundred and eighty-seven years."

"No shit?"

Sam grins. "No shit."

Dean rubs at his jaw. That should sound weirder than it does but for the moment it sounds right. Weird, but right. "I look good for such an old geezer."

"You always were the handsome one."

"You say the sweetest things."

Sam looks like he always has, like Dean remembers. Tall enough to be annoying, dark hair perpetually in need of a trim, his face and eyes both too young and too old at the same time. He's got long-fingered, graceful hands and he always looks a little too skinny. When he flashes that smile, it's blinding. It doesn't happen often enough.

In some vague part of Dean's memory, he knows he's seen Sam look older, dark hair graying, face lined, those graceful hands scarred and rough, and the rest of his body as well. But he can't remember when.

"That long, huh?"

"Yup. We've been doing it for a long time."

"Huh. Feels like we started yesterday."

"I know." Sam's still smiling but it's sadder, and he looks tired.

Dean vows to make sure he gets more than a couple of hours sleep tonight.

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III.

It's become a popular bit of mythology that Reavers don't lie. Sam knows that in itself is a lie. Reavers lie as often and as easily as anyone else. Maybe more. Pretty much every breath they take is a lie.

He thinks Dean would find that thought reassuring if he could remember it.

It's been longer than 187 years. Cumulatively, he and Dean have been fulfilling their calling as Reavers for that long, but there are years before they start and years when one or the other of them has had to go it alone before it all starts over again. He can't be a hundred percent sure, because sometimes he loses his personal journal for a few years here or there and the careful records he keeps have gaps in them.

As near as he can tell, it's actually been closer to three hundred years since the world ended and began. Sometimes he can tell, if they go to one of the cities, that a decade's more worth of rot and decay has settled in. At first he thought that was strange -- he thought the cities would crumble a lot faster than they actually do, the ones that survived the initial cataclysm. It took him nearly twenty years to realize that they all existed still in the other time, the other when, and the rate of decay mirrors that of the world that no longer exists.

It's handy in its way. They can salvage things still, cloth and metals, like their canteens and their denims. It helps the Reavers become less of a burden to the villages too, when they can bring things out of the cities to help the villages, until the people there learn to make what's not easily replaced without the old world foundries and manufacturing.

Sometimes he wonders how the rest of the world is faring. If it's faring at all. There's no way to really know and in the three hundred years since this all started, there have been no ships pressing the shores of North or South America from Europe or Asia that he's heard of. It's possible it will happen eventually, and he feels a chill at that knowledge. There's no way for him to stop it, no way for him to *know* and he can only pray the Reavers might be helping slow that inevitable human inclination toward progress and expansion. Because when it happens, he's pretty sure there will be no turning back, no way to stop

or undo it and he isn't sure what that means, only that it makes his stomach twist and his mouth go dry.

Although another part of him prays that when everything that remains of the old world fades, no one will remember, and that maybe he can forget as well. That the world really will start over again, instead of this half-assed compromise that exists. Except that really speaks more to the fact that he's tired and that hope is harder to come by with each passing year, each passing lifetime.

It's not that easy, of course. Order and chaos are two sides of the same coin, and as long as the coin spins, you can't tell one from the other, but if it stops...when it stops.

Well, it did once and this was the result.

Dean asks him occasionally about ghosts. It's one of the harder things to explain, and it doesn't help that Dean never remembers the answer. He remembers ghosts, even though there aren't any ghosts any longer. There's demons and monsters; there are malevolent spirits and harpies, but they were never human. For all Sam knows, in some part of the world, there might be elves and fairies and unicorns too, but he's pretty sure there's no ghosts anywhere -- mostly because they are all in his head now.

Or most of them. Dean has ghosts, too, although he's only just now starting to realize it. It worries Sam because Dean is remembering more. Part of him wants that, needs it if only because there are times when he thinks he's going to go mad being the only one who understands what's happened to the world. He's not sure how long he can watch Dean die and wait for it to start over again. He's pretty sure that every time he dies, it's what triggers Dean's memory to come back more sharply and with fewer gaps. Dean is the epitome of devotion, and Sam suspects, but can't be sure, that if and when he dies before Dean does, Dean gets the full memory dump like a back-up computer drive. He doesn't know how well Dean handles that because he's dead when it happens. But when he comes back in a few months or a year or even a few years, Dean remembers more. Holds onto more.

There's always a Reaver waiting for them. This last time, Dean was only eight when it happened, when his memory came back. His realization always triggers Sam's memory and Sam's pretty sure he cried for, like, a week straight. They weren't even brothers this time, Sam doesn't think, except they always are. Different mothers, different

fathers (maybe). Same village. Themselves, again. Always and forever.

They should have more time without this, they needed more time without it.

Reincarnation sounds like the best of all worlds in theory, but in truth, it sucks like an ancient vacuum cleaner.

It's the law of diminishing returns in its purest form. Sam could already see it happening; could see it in what the children remembered, what the adults failed to forget. There are more Reavers now than a hundred years ago.

New lives, born wholly unto this world with no memory at all of the old one, were pushing the old lives into awakening.

What Sam didn't know was how many it would take to completely push the balance over.

But he thought he knew what would happen when it did. What it meant.

Dean reined in and reached over to touch his arm, warm fingers curling around his wrist. "Sam, you're white as a ghost," he said, voice low and concerned.

I am a ghost. "I'm fine," Sam said and reached for the water hung over his saddle horn and took a long, slow drink. Some color must have come back into his face, because Dean didn't push it.

"We'll stop in a bit, get some food into you," he says instead.

"Sounds like a plan."

Sam nudged his horse into a walk and Dean fell in beside him.

"You dreaming again?" Dean asks him.

"Something like that," Sam offers back.

"You know, if you'd dream while you're asleep, like a normal person..."

That makes Sam smile.

Dean thought Sam dreamed while he was awake and Sam let him. Another lie, but one he could live with.

Better than the ones he died with over and over again.

Better than Dean ever knowing he was the cause of both the dreaming and the dying.

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IV.

The next town over is Gage's Mill and there really is a mill there. It's about equidistance between four villages and there's a stream to run the mill wheel. Dean vaguely recalls it was a tourist stop once upon another lifetime ago.

The surrounding communities need the mill, but that's a problem, because it brings the villages closer together.

The year before last, the people of Gage's Mill had plowed a larger field than the year before. It was more than they needed. They moved their watch fires out further. They'd built two new houses on the far side of the river.

They thought they could push back the darkness.

It didn't work that way and standing in the middle of the wreckage and the death, Dean had wanted to wreak a little havoc of his own just to get the point across. He hadn't made the rules but he damn well knew what happened when you broke them. It wasn't the job of the Reavers to protect idiots.

If you try to take from the darkness it will take back. Usually with interest.

They stop at the halfway point and Sam does indeed, eat something. They've got cornbread and butter, and apples and a half a bag of dried meat. If they were going to be on the road longer, Dean would hunt, but they'll be in Gage's Mill before sundown.

"So, Gage's Mill and then...north?" Dean asks even though he knows. It's that time of year again.

Sam gives him a half smile and lies back on the grass on the side of the road. "Yeah. 'fraid so."

Dean nods and gnaws on the apple core. They're a little tart this year. Normally Sam doesn't care where they go, doesn't even ask. He will tell Dean when it's time to move on, but usually Dean already knows. There are Reavers who stay, sometimes for years at a time, but most of them move, even in the winter. Like staying too long in one place makes them nervous. Dean feels the same thing. More than a day or two, here or there, and he feels it like an itch under his skin, like a whisper in his ear he can't quite make out.

Like something's hunting them.

The feeling annoys him because they *are* the hunters and he likes that for the most part. If the people of Gage's Mill had pushed the rules, at least it didn't happen very often, but the things in the darkness, they pushed all the time, constantly. They *waited* for an opportunity and if one didn't come soon enough they'd make one.

"Do you think it's going to be any different?" he tosses the apple core toward his horse, who munches on the remnants happily.

"No. Probably not."

Then why are we going, Sam? Dean thinks but doesn't ask. He's pretty sure he knows.

He remembers going to Chicago. Back when it was a city and not a crater half filled with water and twisted steel. It's blank after that. He remembers what the city looked like. He even remembers what the crappy room they rented looked like. Sometimes he almost remembers Sam being there, and his father. He thinks the city burned, or exploded or imploded or maybe someone dropped a bomb on it. That's what it looks like now. Like someone dropped a couple of kilotons of explosive force on it.

"Did we die there?" he asks before he thinks about it.

Sam doesn't say anything, and Dean looks, then sits up because Sam is staring at him, pale as a sheet again, lips bloodless.

"Do you remember us dying there?" Sam asks.

Should I? "No. It was just a thought, Sam. Did we?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't remember that? You remember every other thing in the world and you don't remember *that*?" Dean sounds angrier than he is. Sam isn't telling him everything. Even knowing he won't remember it, Sam still won't tell him everything and it drives Dean insane.

"I'm not *sure*," Sam says again and gets to his feet. "It's not the same as not remembering."

Sam is mounted and a couple of hundred yards down the road before Dean finally swears and gets up to follow him. He doesn't have a lot to say to Sam for the rest of the afternoon, but he checks him periodically, to make sure Sam doesn't suddenly fall out of the saddle. It's happened more than once.

They reach Gage's Mill just as the sun is starting to set. It's still bright out, but the town has its watch fires lit already. They remember that horrible year. They'll take no chances now, or at least not until

some other fool or a whole group of them tries to take more than they need.

The people are respectful, polite, but Dean can see the recognition in their faces, can almost hear the whispers behind their backs. It's taken them two years of riding the circuit of towns and villages to make their way back here. They don't range as far and wide as some of the Reavers -- they've never made it across the mountains to the west coast of Pacifica, nor boarded the ferries that traverse the Old Man.

They are never more than a year away from what used to be Chicago.

But that pilgrimage is still a few weeks away, and Gage's Mill is here now. The Rest is well stocked, the bed linens on the generously stuffed mattress fresh and clean. There's food in the warming oven and even a couple of bottles of corn liquor on the provisioning shelf. There's fresh hay and grain in the stable attached to the Rest and the small corral has been spread with straw as well. Dean turns the horses into it for now, while Sam sits down to go over the notes from the previous Reaver.

"There's two women pregnant, one near term," Sam tells him when he comes in. "They've been having trouble along the south line, near the river."

"Are you surprised?" Dean snorts and pulls down two mugs and one of the bottles. He pours for both of them.

"No. Not really. They started to build a salt break but it's not finished."

The corn liquor (*moonshine*) was sharp and biting, enough so that Dean sucked air through his teeth, but it hits with a smooth, mellow warmth. "So, salt break or babies?"

Sam takes smaller sips and it makes his face flush. "Flip you for it," he says with a wry grin. Dean pulls out an old coin -- something else that has little use beyond this. Sam makes pregnant women nervous; Dean makes their husbands nervous. Not entirely without reason. A lot of women and some men find Reavers to be intriguing and irresistible. Dean likes to think it's more than that, but he's not averse to using either his face or his position to his advantage on occasion. Children are the blood of the world. It's a rare person any longer that begrudges them, no matter who fathers them, except as far

as Dean knows he hasn't left any bastard children behind, and he knows for a fact that Sam hasn't.

Sam calls tails and loses. He'll take the women.

Dean leaves him to make his way to their homes and heads toward the south part of town. His horse isn't happy about making yet another trek, but Dean's not shoulder-humping his weapons or supplies that far on foot.

It's more idle examination to check the salt lines around the houses he passes. Most people dig trenches in and lay the salt that way to keep the lines from breaking, but there's more chance that a break will be missed if enough dirt gets kicked over them. There's a town further north that built an open railed fence around the whole place, with a grooved continual break around the entire village. It works as well as anything. People are clever.

They've planted new ash and rowan along the river as well, though they are young plantings and there are still gaps between them. It's more marker than actual barrier growing like this, but more than one house in the village has bundled rowan branches spread across doors and windows and more than one crib or cradles is either made from them or framed by them.

Rowan is a barrier. So is salt, and running water to some extent. All the old rules apply with a few exceptions.

Holy Water has no meaning any longer, and sometimes Dean misses that. It's not that there's no faith or belief or even some kind of God any longer, only that it's all more present in the world than it used to be, just like the evil in the darkness no longer needs to hide itself or pretend to be something it isn't. The world has become very black and white and in some ways that makes things easier, but in some ways harder. There's a comfort in the gray areas, even in being unsure.

The Watchfire tenders wave to him in greeting, but the salt breaks are a little ways past them and Dean doesn't stop.

They aren't that impressive, but they don't need to be. They're just open-ended boxes, like miniature troughs, set end to end, from the river to the far end of the fields and up through the orchards to the east. People worry about ruining the fields with salt, but they are more worried about the things that live beyond the line. The breaks they've built already have salt in them, and Dean supposes it's a good thing that of all the things that are scarce in the world, salt isn't one of them. There are still mines running further north and south, and salt has once

more become one of those things that people use instead of money. And mining salt is probably one of the safer professions. Demons really hate that shit and once Dean knew why but he can't remember and it doesn't matter.

He steps beyond the salt break just as the sun finally settles.

Almost immediately he can hear them. The barriers are thin -- even this far out from town, there's a palpable presence to the living that pushes the darkness back, that makes it more silent than not. But it's thin, like stepping through a soap bubble.

A dozen steps past the break and he can see them, shadows mostly, doing whatever it is they do, a kind of parallel life he's never really cared much about. Sam would know.

He stands in a kind of mutually agreed upon DMZ and so he leaves his knives sheathed and his gun uncocked. He can hear the rustle of leathery wings and looks up. The moon always looks duller on this side of the divide, tinged with red. He wonders if the demons are hungry, denied their rightful prey by this bargain they've all made.

Hungry maybe but not starving. The bargain hasn't eliminated fear, or anger, lust or greed, it's just put limits on all of it. It's why the demons and the monsters always dwell so closely to the towns and villages. In the wide open spaces, you hardly ever see them -- there's nothing to feed them, nothing to draw them in.

One of them finally rises out of the shadows and takes on form. It's an ugly son of a bitch, skin mottled and grayish brown, yellowed eyes and all teeth and claws. Most of them look like this with some variation if you stare long enough. Dean can stare at them and not flinch, but he hates it when they come at him suddenly.

This one doesn't. Behind it are others pressed close to their side of the barrier, waiting, and Dean knows without talking to Sam that one of those children will be born tonight. He'll need to get back soon.

"We keep to our borders, Reaver," it says, voice heavy and wet, like it's speaking through a mouthful of water.

"I figured. Just checking."

It smiles at him and Dean makes his finger relax on the trigger. He'd seriously like to blow a hole in the ugly mother-fucker. "This town bleeds fear."

"Yeah, well you made your point last time. They won't forget any time soon."

It laughs softly and squats in the fresh, damp grasses. "They'll forget. Humans always forget. Even Reavers forget. You've forgotten, Reaver. You especially. You can't even remember what you've done."

Dean sucks on his teeth and nods, "Probably not important, then," he says and glances across the line. There are maybe a hundred of them out there, waiting, wanting. He's glad he'd won the toss even though Sam can take care of himself. It's pretty much inevitable the demons will give him a hard time, try to goad him into something. He's watched them try with Sam too, but there's something different in the way they talk to him, like they might have something Sam actually wants. It bothers him, because it's more than just the joy of a kill. It's like Sam *owes* them something and while Dean can't even try to understand half of what Sam knows, he's sure of one thing: There's nothing Sam owes any of these hellspawn, not in this life or any other.

But they always ask. They poke at Dean and prod him, make veiled threats and half promises. It's like some bizarre game of Concentration, like if the demons flip enough clues, they'll win something. Maybe they will. The other Reavers say the same. Best to know your enemy because your enemy knows you too damn well. The demons, unlike the humans, haven't forgotten a damn thing and Dean pokes at that thought like a sore tooth.

Sam hasn't forgotten anything either.

"You should send your brother to us."

"Not gonna happen, but you know, if you ask nicely, maybe he'll come tell you a nice bedtime story."

"You know he's one of us."

"Naw. You'd like to think so, but he's not. He's better looking for one thing." Sam isn't one of them. Dean's hard-pressed to know why he knows that, but he just does.

"You could be free of us, if you'd let go of him. He drags you down, Dean Winchester. All of you."

He's heard that before too. He remembers what it was like before, when the creatures before him had to hide more, when they couldn't be so bold or obvious. When they tried to subvert or deceive. There's something kind of sad about an honest demon. It's like they lost all their real power to terrify. They're still dangerous, but they've lost the edge in surprise. Everybody knows what they are and that they are out there.

Dean takes a few steps closer, looking up when the demon rises to its full height. Eight feet tall, maybe more. Big sucker. It doesn't like the fact that he's not afraid of it. "The only thing dragging me down is that fact that you and your ugly ass buddies are a little too close to what isn't yours. Do a fly-by tonight and I'll shoot your ass out of the sky," he says with a grin and cocks his gun.

Sam would probably kill him if he knew, but Dean can't help it. The demons are pushing the edge of the barrier, scaly toes resting right on the line, like if enough of them get close enough and push, the barrier will fall.

The demon blinks first -- not so easy a thing with no eyelids but Dean's grin widens. "The children born tonight will have no memory. And when enough like them come to the world, you'll remember and wish you'd given him to us."

"You'll get my brother over my dead body," Dean says pleasantly.

The demon stares a moment longer then grins, showing sharp yellow teeth. "Yes, we will. Over and over again, Reaver. Someday, you'll know why."

"Step off, leather boy."

"Dean."

The demon hisses, eyes narrowed, and backs up a step. It's not because of Dean and he knows it. "Be right with you, Sammy," he says. "Remember what I said," he tells the demon and then turns his back on it.

Sam is just past the salt break and his bow is strung though he's pulled no arrows. Behind him Dean can hear them, wings flapping, grasses rustling. He doesn't look back but Sam watches them, over Dean's shoulder.

"They invited you to a dance," Dean says when he gets close enough and see the flash of Sam's teeth in the darkness.

"I'm kind of rusty on the steps these days," Sam says. "Learn anything new?"

Dean shrugs. "They think you're a long lost cousin. And the kids born tonight will have no memory. Those things are connected, right?" he asks as they walk back past salt break. Dean can feel the world close in around him again and Sam pauses long enough to unstring his bow.

"Yeah, they're connected." Sam shakes his hair out of his eyes.

"If I ask you how, will I remember the answer?"

Sam shrugs but he looks uncomfortable. "You can try," he says, patience in his tone. He loops the bow's strap over his shoulder.

It's almost right there, at the edge of his memory. It's why Dean talks to the demons at all -- he remembers what they tell him, but they can be more cryptic than Sam and that's saying something.

Sam is waiting. He looks relaxed, but Dean knows he's not. He's tensed underneath like he's waiting for a blow.

There are times Dean wants to know so badly he can taste it. It's like a constant need to swallow in the back of his throat -- to just *know* what this is, and why, if only for a minute. Other times he's almost afraid to ask, is afraid, and he's not afraid of much.

The world that was frequently seems more real than the world that is, which Dean suspects means it's still out there somewhere, just not here. That this is purgatory or limbo, concepts and themes that really have no place in this world where demons walk at night and angels sometimes appear in daylight.

He knows Sam isn't a demon, and he's knows his brother's no angel, either, despite his outwardly celibate ways. But what Sam is, exactly, is open for debate, but Dean's the only one that actually wants to know. The other Reavers don't exactly treat them with deference, but the fact that Sam knows so much more than the rest of them has always been so obvious it's almost impossible to ignore.

Except people do. Reavers do. He's watched people watch Sam. They never look at him directly. Even the other Reavers don't very often, but they'll look Dean in the eye.

Sam looks Dean in the eye too; he rarely looks away from anyone. It's like he's lost any ability at nuance at all. He seen Sam fight and watched him bleed, watched him take on demons bigger than big ugly back there in teeth-bared fury even though he hates every minute of it. Sam's not afraid of much either, but Dean knows of one thing that scares Sam so much that Dean has to wrap his arms around him just to keep him from shaking apart.

It's always baffled him why, when Sam is that afraid, he turns to Dean to get himself through it.

That level of fear hasn't quite hit that point yet in Sam but it's close, for all that Sam's calm on the outside. For just a moment Dean's hand closes over the hilt of his knife like he's going to do something

with it and Sam sees the movement but he doesn't back off and he doesn't look alarmed really, but Dean can almost taste his fear.

Sam's fear all centers around *him* and has for as far back as Dean can remember. As far back as Canton, but not beyond that, not as far back as Chicago or any time before.

He wants to ask, but instead he eases his fingers off the hilt of his knife and reaches for Sam instead. His fingers curl around the back of Sam's neck and he has to lift his head to press a kiss to his brother's forehead. "Maybe I'll ask later. I'm kind of conversated out." He cuffs the back of Sam's head, glad to see the tension bleed off some. "So. Baby. girl or boy?" he asks and slings an arm around Sam's waist as they headed back to the horses.

Sam's arm settles on his shoulder and Dean hears him say it's going to be a girl. More girls are always a good thing.

And Sam's not so afraid anymore. Dean's glad he didn't ask.

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V.

Sam urges Dean to go to the birth. He's already made the mother more nervous than she needs to be, and there is a midwife, but most people like having a Reaver close by when there's a birth. There's always a risk when a new life enters the world and they have reason to be cautious. Maybe now more than ever.

There's no memory for this child to take on. The demon Dean talked to didn't lie about that -- there was no reason for it to. Sam can't see the future but he can feel it sometimes.

The first time it happened, he tried to figure out if there was something he could do. The only remotely plausible alternative was to kill someone, except he had no guarantee it would work. Well, that and the only one in killing distance at the time was Dean. That was such a no fly it barely even crossed his mind, and not just because Dean was his brother, but because it wouldn't matter. They always came back as themselves. Just like their father did.

Everyone else would come back as someone other than themselves, even if really, they were merely changing one body for another, one set of genes and chromosomes for another; blue eyes for brown. Sam always knows who they *were*, who they had been, but it was kind of incredible and even reassuring to watch them all come back as someone completely new every time.

Except for when they didn't. Except for when they came back and remembered the life immediately before this one and sometimes the fragments of others before that. When they realized the lives they lived were stolen from those who'd never been given the choice.

He's been checking the records as they pass through towns, reading the journals that record the births and deaths. This world is moving on, taking on its own life rather than reusing what's been borrowed from the past. It's taken a long time for there to be more people in the world than there were when the world ended. It's still not many -- a hundred more or so than there were in the beginning, scattered across the continent. Hardly a strain on resources. Except it is, they are. And if they were only drawing from this world maybe it wouldn't matter, but Sam's pretty sure that they're pulling it from the world that was before as well. It's why the demons crowd the barriers. Why the monsters wait for the groundbreaking of new villages.

They've been forced to leave the old world and they aren't happy about that. They don't want to lose this one, too. Or maybe if they can break through here, they'll be able to break through in the other.

It's never enough. Your kind never stop wanting, never stop taking. I could build condos in hell and for the right price, I bet I could find buyers.

Dean thought that was hilarious. *So says the sore loser.*

I take my share, my price. And that's a bargain you can't break, Winchester.

Sam could remember the look on Dean's face, down to the way his tongue pushed against his lower lip, the narrowing of his eyes, the grin that hadn't reached those same eyes. *So, if I can't break it, let's make a deal. Renegotiate the contract.*

I do like a good negotiation. What's he worth to you?

Sam's blood had dripped on Dean's face and he hadn't even blinked.

Everything I have. Everything I am. The whole world, Dean said, steady as a rock and he'd meant every word, he just hadn't realized the whole world was his to offer.

He still didn't know. But he got a little closer every time. Understood more. Remembered more.

Sam had tried to tell him no. Had tried to make him realize it didn't matter, that changing the rules wouldn't change the outcome. He'd understood more about exactly what price he represented then, than he did now. The demon could have taken Dean anyway, as it had Mary, as it had Jessica. Anyone Sam touched. He supposed there was something to be grateful for in the fact that their father had moved them around so much. That when Sam had finally left for school, he'd been awkward and a little shy and hadn't made many friends.

Dean hadn't made a lot of friends either, but he'd touched people, with his hunting, with his need to save them. More than Sam had. And those things had a tendency to grow exponentially. Save that husband there from a Woman in White and you touch the lives of his wife, his children, his family, even if you never meet them. Keep a little boy from drowning in a lake at the hands of a selkie and you touch his mother, and you touch the woman that little boy grows up to marry and his children after that, even if they haven't met yet.

The world according to Dean Winchester. It would figure that Sam wouldn't realize how much of an impact his brother was making on the world until it was too late to save him from it.

Sometimes Sam thinks maybe Dean was meant to die back in those muddy fields in Nebraska if not before that. That if he had, there would have been no bargaining with the devil. Sam would have died, and the world would never have ended. He's sure his father would have tried to save him, but he's not sure John would have made the offer Dean had, or even thought of it. Not because he loved Sam any less but because he wasn't Dean. Dean liked playing the odds and the angles and he had the devil's own luck, so to speak. Dean never gave up or gave in and never left the table before the last card was played. He still doesn't.

Dean's almost more comfortable in this world than he was in the last, Sam thinks. Maybe because in a way, it's a world Dean created, bought and paid for. Is still paying for. It's hard to wrap his mind around it sometimes.

The price is too high. It always has been and Sam knows Dean wouldn't agree -- he doesn't agree -- but that doesn't mean he's right.

The pounding on the door startles him and he opens it to see one of the villagers there. Tom, his name is Tom.

"Reaver." He give a quick nod of his head. "It's Nadia. She's reached her time. Her water's broken -- she's moons early."

She is. And Sam just saw her a few hours ago. She'd been nervous as the other woman, Karen, was, but there'd been no reports of problems.

Dean had taken the prepped bag but there's supplies enough and Sam grabs what he needs and follows Tom to another brick-walled home. There's hawthorn growing in an arch across the path and Sam brushes by it and then looks up. There's no moon to speak of but the clouds are edged in a reddish light. "Is there another midwife?"

Tom shakes his head no and Sam can hear the woman now, crying out. The people inside give way before him. She sees him and her eyes go wide with more than pain. There's a woman there, probably her mother, and she doesn't entirely yield her place but she makes room.

"It's too soon," the mother says and Sam knows it's true, even though Nadia is heavy and round and obviously in labor.

"Go find the other Reaver and tell him I need the midwifery bag," Sam says and doesn't wait to see who follows his direction or even if they do. They will.

Sam already suspects what it is, even though he thought she was fine earlier. She told him the child was very active and likely to be big, maybe bigger than her slim hips can accommodate, but she seemed okay. Seven and half months.

She's still afraid of him but she doesn't pull away when he lays his hands on her belly and carefully feels, leaving one hand pressed to her left side and then feeling cautiously across the mound of her belly to the right.

Sam isn't surprised when Dean brings the bag himself. "How's Karen?" Sam asks.

"Close. What's going on?"

Sam digs through the bag and finds what he's looking for; a simple stethoscope. It only takes him a few seconds to confirm what he suspected. "It's twins," he says. "They both sound fine," he offers but Nadia is already crying, a wail that makes Sam's head ache.

Old suspicions rose quickly in the new world. Children born in winter would be sickly. Children born on the full moon were considered lucky. Older collective memories and folklore seemed to have been brought into the new world along with the ability to speak and eventually read -- like some things couldn't be shed by humanity no matter the circumstances.

Infant mortality is low for the most part, but then again, up until recently, fertility had been a fairly steady thing, the population remaining roughly the same.

Twins were rare, triplets unheard of, but Sam wasn't sure if it was because there weren't any, or people hid the fact and maybe did their best to resolve a problem that didn't really exist except in their worst fears.

"It'll be fine," Dean says firmly and pointed at himself and Sam. "Two Reavers. They'll both have souls." It was an easy lie. Reavers didn't give souls, but rumor had it they guarded them.

"Karen gives birth as well," Nadia's mother whispers.

Dean gives her his most blinding smile. "Yeah, but she's probably going to drop that kid in about two minutes. It will be fine."

He gives Sam a look and a nod and heads back out. The lack of souls isn't really a problem. It is more myth than anything, but it's persisted, and it clings to the Reavers most especially.

"Could you check and make sure the salt lines are unbroken and the fires well fed," Sam says quietly to the people waiting. It gives them something to do. A few of them leave, but Nadia's mother remains and a couple of other women. "You're going to need another set of warming cloths," he says and that gets most of the women moving as well.

Early or not, Nadia's labor seems to be progressing normally and as near as Sam can tell, neither infant is particularly distressed, even under the assault by their mother's fear. But he isn't a doctor and doesn't pretend to be one, not even on the TV's that no longer worked.

He's still glad when Dean shows up some twenty minutes later. "Healthy girl," he announces and that reassures most of the people.

"We're not going anywhere," Sam assures the nervous mother, but he steps to the door when Dean beckons him; he looks far more serious.

"Walking over here, we got a fly by," he says in a low whisper, and Sam glances upward. The sky's clear but that means nothing. Sam looks back into the house. "I'll go. There's time enough."

"They see us with weapons at a birth..." Dean shakes his head and rubs his eyes. "We may as well have staked a goat in the center of the square."

"If it would help, I would," Sam says. He means it. And he could be the goat, but it only crosses his mind briefly. The time was too close, Chicago is too close and he isn't ready to die before then. After, maybe. "I'll pass the word."

"That leathery bastard knew," Dean hisses softly.

"Probably," Sam says and leans on the door. "Even if we fend them off, they'll say the town is cursed, being attacked again so soon."

"Maybe it is."

Sam can't stop the impatient sound from leaving his throat. "No more than anyplace else. I'm going."

Dean grips his arm before he gets two steps, searching his face. "For the weapons, right? Not to them."

The chill that runs up Sam's spine had nothing to do with the cool night air. "Yes. For the Weapons. Of course."

Dean let him go but he looks worried.

Another demon swoops high overhead as Sam trots to the Rest, passing the word. "Stay inside your homes. Don't leave. Put salt around your beds."

By the time he returns with their kits and their weapons, he can hear crying from the other houses he passes but no one's on the street and the watchfires are burning untended.

The birth of Nadia's twins goes as smoothly as any such birth could; both infants mew and squall and squirm and birth-blue eyes blink up at the new mother, at the father when he comes in. They move them all, mother and children, father, grandparents into the main room and set extra salt on the lintels on the windows.

"The children aren't cursed," Sam says, in that tone that made the men feel brave and the women a little less afraid.

"But the demons...we can hear them," the mother says, looking upward.

They could, the beat of heavy wings, the occasional thump as one touched down on a roof.

"It's twice the life, twice the power..." Dean tells her while loading his guns. "They're jealous."

The roof shakes and the oiled paper windows rattle. Sam strung his bow, taking the shotgun Dean hands him. "Stay inside. Dawn's not far."

"I warned that son of a bitch," Dean says as they slip out of the house. "It's not the kids, right? The twins. They have souls," he murmurs soft in Sam's ear.

Dean can't tell, neither can Sam, but that's not the problem here. "They have souls," Sam says. "They have no memories. They belong here," he says, and Dean looks like he understands.

A demon swoops low and spots them, teeth bared, rapacious grin on its distorted face. The lower feet are more talons than toes. Dean doesn't hesitate and he doesn't miss.

Rock salt and rowan, iron filings and ash. The demon shrieks and falters, the hole in one leather wing already spreading.

Sam fires as well, a heart shot as clean as a whistle. Silver tipped arrows and holly juice, seven kinds of admonitions carved into the slender shaft.

The demon drops with a shriek and a burbling spit of venom and black blood.

Dean's already moving, digging deep in the pouch at his side for a handful of raw salt, casting it across the carcass, and it shrivels and sears and the stench makes Sam want to gag. Later they'll burn it, but there are more now.

"Sam!" It's two, this time, one in front that Sam shoots but he doesn't have eyes in the back of his head. Dean fires enough on center to deflect, but taloned claws still rake Sam's shoulder, send him tumbling into the dirt.

Dean hauls him to his feet. The bow is broken, but Sam grabs the arrows anyway, sliding the quiver over his shoulder before reloading the shotgun with blood-slick hands.

Big leather ugly hovers in the air just out of range. "You know what we want," it says to Dean, and Dean sets his shoulder to Sam's. Sam looks up and back. They're circling now. "We can tear the roofs off."

But they can't touch down, not easily, the touching rings of salt between the houses a daisy chain of protection.

"I'd have given you one, but three's too much like the trinity. Maiden, Mother and Crone, that's too much power for your kind to have," The demon says. "Give us your brother and we'll leave."

"How about you take this instead?" Dean snarls and fires. It's too far but the demon backs away from the spray anyway.

"What's he worth to you, anyway?" the demon taunts and Sam closes his eyes, feels Dean's shoulder press hard into his. "The lives of all these people? Their fear?"

"Why don't you come closer and I'll whisper it in your ear," Dean murmurs and pumps another round into the chamber.

The demon is not helping and Sam knows why. He steps away, feels Dean falter without Sam to brace him. "Why don't you ever ask me?" he says and spreads his arms wide. Blood hits the dirt and the gun is loose in his hand.

"You know why, thief. There's always a price..."

Sam cocks the gun and fires. He doesn't even care if he hits anything but the demon dances back.

"Sam! Are you really --" Dean fires but Sam keeps walking, "-- this stupid or do you --" Again. "--just want me to kick your ass?"

Sam smiles and fires again. The demon can't help but take advantages when Sam's out of rounds. He waits, drops the gun and reaches for the arrows.

"Sam!"

He drops when the demon dives and Dean doesn't miss. He rarely does, but the demon screeches and Sam doesn't brace for anything, just drives the arrow in when the heavy body hits him. It's dying before it hits ground and he rolls free.

There's a bell ringing somewhere. *Matins*, Sam thinks. Dean fires again and reloads and Sam hauls himself to his knees, reaching for the salt pouch. It doesn't matter that it's tinged with blood, and he lays the line, small, barely big enough for both of them.

They lose a few patches of roof, and the well frame is ripped and dropped on another house, but the only blood spilled is Sam's when the sun first gleams on the horizon. The demons don't so much flee as fade.

Six demon carcasses wait to be salted and burned and Dean ignores all of them whirling on Sam, fury in his eyes, and he shoves Sam back until he's sprawled in the dirt.

Dean's angry and afraid. Sam's mostly just tired, even the pain seems secondary. "What the fuck were you doing? Were you thinking at all? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Yes. If it would matter, but it doesn't. The demons never ask Sam, they only ever ask Dean. *What's he worth? Give him to us.*

The next time Dean touches him, it's gentler, checking his shoulder, pulling his shirt off to press to the wide tear in skin and muscle. "I swear, Sam. Next time you pull this shit, I'm going to give you to them."

If only, Sam thinks but Dean doesn't mean it. The words aren't enough.

The villagers are already emerging and Dean is giving orders even while he puts pressure on Sam's wound. When they finally come to help him move Sam to the Rest, all Sam can smell is the burning of demon flesh and the sick sweet stench of the decay they leave behind.

Demons smell just like humans when they burn. Sam knows the scent well. It clings to Dean all the time.

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VI

"You want to tell me what that was?" Dean asks. He's got Sam stripped to the waist, on his side on the bed in the Rest. It's not his favorite duty as a Reaver, playing field medic, especially when it's Sam who's been laid out to the bone, but unfortunately, it's one of the skills he uses most often.

"I just wanted to distract it," Sam says, his voice muffled against the sheets.

"You're so full of shit it's a wonder your hair's not brown -- oh, wait, it is," Dean snaps at him and has to lift his hands for second before he either causes Sam more pain or jabs the needle too deep into the already torn muscle.

The door is open to let more of the morning light in, but the villagers are wary about disturbing them unless absolutely necessary. They'd brought hot water and even some bandages and one of the women had offered to see if she could salvage Sam's shirt and vest. Dean can hear them rethatching roofs, the sound of hammers on wood, of axes and lathes as they repair the well frame. They're worried about another attack but Dean doesn't think it's likely. He should check on the new mothers and their children, too, but it will wait until he is fractionally less pissed off.

Carefully, he wipes at the still-welling blood and goes back to laying careful stitches in the long tears of open flesh on Sam's back. There are three and the claws have gone deep. The muscle is already swelling but the best Dean can offer is hot water and soap and healthy splash of moonshine over the wounds. Antibiotics would be nice but it has been what...a long time since they've had those. Too bad none of the Reavers remember being doctors or chemists or biologist or whoever the hell it is that comes up with things like antibiotics in the first place. There are probably books.

Sam shifts, curving his other arm under his head.

"What were you thinking?" Dean asks again, calming his voice. "Did you really think offering yourself up to them would stop them?"

Sam rubs his forehead on the pillow. "No. I was pretty sure it wouldn't. It wasn't what they wanted anyway."

"It sounded like what they wanted. I'm pretty sure big ugly was clear on that." Dean wipes at the blood again.

"It's not me they want, it's you offering me," Sam says, and Dean gets another stitch in before that actually settles in his brain and makes sense.

Except it doesn't. He folds a pad of cloth and presses it against the wound. "Say that again."

"They never talk to me, Dean. They don't ask me...they only ever ask you," he says slowly and then twists so he can see Dean's face.

"Like I would!" Dean says and Sam closed his eyes and lays back down.

"I know."

"Wait. Is this supposed to make senses, like, at all?"

"It does. You just don't know why," Sam says and reaches out for the bottle, almost undoing Dean's stitch work.

Dean makes an impatient sound and grabs the bottle, pouring a cupful then helps Sam ease over so he can drink. Dean starts to rub his hand over his face but his hands are smeared with Sam's blood. He wipes them off and drinks straight from the bottle. "Is this one of those things I never remember?"

Sam raises his glass then drinks.

"Will you tell me anyway?"

Sam gives him a long, hard look that Dean can't make sense of, then drains the cup and tucks it against his chest. "Do you remember how the world ended?"

"You know I don't," Dean says, and folds more cloths to wipe up the blood. "Lay back down. Let me finish this. And keep talking," he adds.

"You can't remember because it never ended," Sam says quietly, and Dean hesitates trying to take that in.

"I remember before."

Sam shakes his head slightly. "Before isn't really in the past. It's just not *here*. This is what can be, what could be."

"It's what is, Sam," Dean says. "You've been hitting the moonshine a little too hard. Or got your brains rattled."

Sam chuckles, a smile curving his lips; neither contain humor. "I wish. You remember Chicago, right?"

"I do. I remember going there, with you, to meet up with Dad. I remember there were murders or..."

"Where did we go?"

"We went to the...where the murders...the..."

It was right there, right on the edge of his memory, he could see it: the old hotel, converted into apartments, kind of cool apartments if they'd been kept up better. Fancy architectural elements, graffiti on the walls, an elevator that didn't work...stairs. Checking the rooms and they'd split the floors...Sam had gone up--

"Do you think the demons will attack again?" He finishes the last stitch on the last claw mark and realized his hands are cramped.

"No," Sam says, muffled and hoarse, like he's been screaming.

"You want some water?"

"Water would be good."

The water in the pitcher is tepid but Sam drinks it slowly, holding out his cup for a second round. His hair is sweaty, clinging to his head, his face, and he's shaking -- a combination of blood loss and pain, probably.

Carefully Dean washes Sam's skin and lays a clean bandage over the wounds. "I'm going to check on the babies. You'll be okay?"

"I'm fine," Sam says.

"Okay. Try to get some rest. I'll bring back lunch," he says and looks over the mess he's made. There's bloody cloths everywhere, even the sheets are stained. It's a wonder Sam didn't bleed out. The room smells of sweat and blood and the sharper scent of the alcohol, and something musky and cloying and sour.

Dean gathers all the cloths into a bag and gets up. "You want the door opened or closed?"

"Open," Sam's whisper is barely audible and Dean pats his bare hip and lays a lighter blanket over him. Sam's got bruises and scratches all over him that Dean doesn't remember seeing before. He must have hit the ground harder than he thought. The room is close and dark and he opens the door to let some light in.

It's not as bright anymore and he glances up, expecting clouds.

It's nearly sunset.

Dean stares at it, at the near empty street, noting the fires are lit. There are few people outside as dusk settles.

"Sam," his own throat is dry and not because he's thirsty.

"Yeah."

Dean looks back to where Sam is curled on the bed, face pale and barely looking at Dean at all. Dean stares at the stark white bandage on Sam's back. The wounds were deep and long. He'd only just finished stitching them. It shouldn't have taken him this long.

"Did I just lose a whole day?"

"Yes."

He remembers the morning. He remembers staring out the door at sunlight, the way it fell across the floor and the bed, giving him light to see by as he laid the first stitches into Sam's skin.

He doesn't remember closing the door.

Opening it has dispelled some of the close, heavy smell but as Dean slides down with his back to the jamb he realizes the sour, cloying scent that lingers is fear.

Sam is watching him now with wide, glittering eyes. The scratches on his arms and chest, the ones Dean had seen on his legs and hips – they're all fresh, new, not hours old.

"Would you like me to give you a gun?" Dean asks him.

Sam moistens his lips. "If you want. I don't think it matters now."

Dean swallows and gets up slowly, moving cautiously. He finds the shotgun, and loads it, rock salt and rowan, ash and iron, and slides it across the bed to Sam, stock first. Sam pulls it closer, fingers on the trigger.

"I can walk in the daylight."

"I know, Dean. You aren't that kind of demon," Sam says quietly.

"I won't remember this either, will I?"

"No. You won't."

Dean stares at him, not sure what he's feeling. He knows who he is, who Sam is. What Sam is to him. *Everything in the world.*

"I never meant for this to happen," he says, moving to the door again and picking up the bag full of cloths stained with Sam's blood. "But you should let go, Sam."

Sam gets that look on his face sometimes, and his chin lifts, his eyes narrow and his lips thin. There's a stubbornness in his brother that defies logic, defies reason, and probably defies a few natural laws as well. Sometimes, Sam can be the rock *and* the hard place.

"It's never going to happen," Sam says evenly, steadily.

Dean sucks on his teeth and nods, picks up the bag. "Okay. You think you could eat something?"

"Food would be good," Sam says.

Dean doesn't bother with weapons. The demons won't attack again and he follows his nose to one of the houses. Get Sam some food, let him get a good night's rest, and tomorrow will be another day. A couple more days here and they'll move on if Sam is fit to ride.

Then, they'll probably start making their way to Chicago, although Dean has yet to figure out why Sam is so insistent on going there every damn year. But he'll go with or without Dean, so Dean just goes.

He watches his brother's back and Sam watches his. That's just the way things are. They always have been and they always will be.

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VII.

Dean's shadow and footsteps have long since faded before Sam relaxes his hand on the gun. It's not even that he thinks he might actually use it, or wishes that he'd had it earlier. Dean's already forgotten, and in a very real sense, Sam's already forgiven him. Forgiving Dean is easy, like breathing. You can't blame someone for being what they are.

Sam doesn't think about it too much or too hard. He can think and probe and prod and assess, formulate theories and hypotheses, but none of it can ever be proven unless he's willing to test it and most of the time he's not. He's not in possession of all the facts and while he might be willing to risk his own life and soul, and he might even be willing to risk Dean's life, his brother's soul is pretty much what's on the line here and Sam isn't willing to risk that one even a little bit.

Not to mention that it kind of falls into the department of redundancy department since everything he knows or has or wants to have pretty much begins and ends with Dean's soul, forever and ever, amen.

In the beginning there was Dean and Dean was the world.

He has a hard time remembering exactly when he figured that much of it out. Years. Maybe even a couple of lifetimes before his memory, his real memory, started to seep through. Before he found himself on the edge of the crater lake once called Chicago with his brother at his side, his anxious, cranky, ever-adaptable brother, worried that Sam had finally gone off the deep end.

Sam isn't dreaming. He thought once he might be. Once upon a time. Dreaming, hallucinating, delusional. Locked in a nightmare he couldn't wake from. But he's not. He almost wishes it was because then he might have more hope for an end to it, that he could wake up, and it would all be behind him.

But that isn't what this is. He's willing to be proved wrong, but he has a hard time, an impossible time, believing that he'd dream this kind of horror endlessly, that he'd keep returning again and again to where it all started.

Where it all ended.

Chicago is the new Mecca for him. The new Jerusalem. Ark and Covenant all in one. A holy grail of twisted steel and stagnant water that can be parted and crossed. It's a pilgrimage he makes, that he *has* to make.

At first Dean tried to stop him from going. He didn't like it; he didn't understand it. He fought and argued. He reminded Sam they had other obligations, had threatened and pleaded, and once even beaten the shit out of him and made him sit right there on the edge of the barrier while the narrow window of opportunity opened.

But that wasn't part of the deal, it wasn't part of the way things worked and when the time came, Sam had looked at him and said, "You can't stop me. You have to let me go."

It had cut him loose. Let him go like Dean never would have.

After that, Dean never tried to stop Sam again. And even afterward it still took Sam a long time to realize that the man beside him, who watched over him, guarded him, kept him from getting killed over and over again, who in all ways and manners was Dean – even in his capacity to love -- couldn't possibly be his brother.

Sam isn't entirely sure who or what he is. All he knows is he isn't his brother, even in the sense that they'd come from the same mother's womb. At first Sam thought maybe he was a shapeshifter of sorts, like the one in St. Louis, but he wasn't. Sam's tested that theory a couple of times and wonders if fratricide is still considered a major sin if you shoot your brother and actually kill him even if you aren't a hundred percent sure he actually is your brother.

He's shot Dean twice, three times if he counts the life before. Only the last two times the gun had been loaded.

The first time he'd been so unsure and terrified by what he'd done he'd haunted the edges of Chicago for nearly six months before he could be sure. He'd hunted and scavenged and prowled. He thinks he did a lot of screaming and crying too, but there was no one to see it happen so he's not entirely sure he did. The second time he'd done it just to be sure this Dean would come back, and he did. Another theory tested and proved.

Dean probably is a demon of some sort, although Sam tends to think of him as a familiar -- when he thinks about it at all. In most all ways, he is so very much *Dean*, that it doesn't matter. As near as Sam can tell, his entire reason for being is to keep Sam content to be here.

Sam isn't entirely sure why he -- it -- keeps coming back although he suspects it may be becoming more *Dean* with each recycle and he's not entirely sure what that means.

He's told Dean over and over that the world as they know it is defined by a thousand acts of kindness or sacrifices that Dean committed before the world ended.

You gave up a whole world to save me. You suffer now, endlessly, to save me from suffering that same fate -- you remember the one. The whole Mom and Jessica and all the others dying in blood and fire and torment? You remember that part, Dean? You remember that part where your whole life was defined by Mom dying? That Jessica made the same choice?

No. Of course not. Of course you don't remember because it wasn't actually you. It isn't you. It never was you.

Dean's almost always sorry. Sam's pretty sure he's sincere about it, that there's regret there, more every time, like the longer it mimics Dean in every aspect, the more like Dean it becomes, to the extent that the last time it asked Sam what it could do to help.

Help me save my brother.

It had looked at him with Dean's eyes, and Dean's face, and Dean's stubborn, we-can-do-anything-as-long-as-we-stick-together attitude and said, Okay. I will. I'll go with you.

It loves him. Inasmuch as any creature like it can love at all, this one loves Sam with everything it has, or is. It is as trapped in this as Sam is.

Of course, it had forgotten the entire conversation a few hours later and Sam had made the last leg of the journey alone, like he always did. And when he came back, it had been waiting. The sorrow in its eyes had been real, the pain in its face so familiar Sam had completely lost it. *There's no way out of this, Sam*, it told him. *I wish there was, but there's not. He'll never give you up. He's not going to change his mind. He's given you a whole new world, a new start. He'll never give you up.*

How do you know?

Because I never would.

And maybe that is true, but the thing that engineered this, made this bargain, has created a world where everything in and about it, down to Sam's ever present companion, reminds him of Dean. The

whole world has changed, restructured itself. There are new rules, new challenges, even a whole new future. Everything has changed.

Except Sam.

And the longer Sam holds to himself, the less firm a grip the world has on the changes wrought.

Sam's just as terrified that he might be changing the world into his own image as he was when he realized it had been made into Dean's. It's a bad bargain if it's true, because Dean's world is one bright, shining hope after another. There are things to fight, yes, but they can be defeated. They can win the war in Dean's world.

In Sam's...not so much.

But it is what it is, this thing that brings Sam as much comfort as it does pain. It's a constant reminder of what he's fighting for, what's at stake. This thing that looks and moves and feels and loves like his brother did, that Sam alternately loves and hates, that terrifies and comforts him. It loves him like Dean did, and sometimes like Dean never would or had.

And this Dean is remembering more. Not just of the life before but of whatever it was before it became Dean. Sam has to shove and prod to get it to happen, and he pays for it every time, but it does. It remembers. And it holds those memories longer.

It hates him for that, when it remembers. It won't kill him -- not that it would matter, but it can vent its frustration at being thwarted or deceived or however it views its different kind of half-existence.

Of course, it could also be just a reflection of the frustration of the demon that set this in motion to begin with. Sometimes Sam thinks it is, seducer and tormentor all in one, granting his heart's desire, betraying his simple hope with lies.

Demon. Devil. Old Nick himself. A thousand names and thousand faces. Sam hesitates to call it Satan or Lucifer because as near as he can tell, what Heaven that might yet exist is entirely uninterested in any of this.

Outside the Rest, it's gone fully dark. There's a lamp on the table and Sam thinks he should probably light it but Dean will be back soon, and he'll alternately scold and snap and still make sure Sam's all right. Dean will ask about the gun that lies between them when he finally crawls into the bed.

Sam moves cautiously, finally, feeling the stitches pull. They'll hold. He aches elsewhere too, but he's in no shape to heat water for a

hot bath and in no mood to bathe in the stream and let the cold numb him. The pants he pulls on are homespun and not denim. He'll save those for traveling, because already they are harder to find where rot hasn't set in or the zippers haven't corroded.

He'd kill for an aspirin but the home-brewed liquor will do as well and there's willow-bark tea and feverfew in a tin on the provisioning shelf.

Dean left the coals in the hearth banked and Sam manages to coax flames from the embers. It's about all he can manage when he hears Dean.

He turns too quickly, gripping the mantel. He's left the gun on the bed.

"You up for some stew, fresh bread?" Dean asks him, eyeing him critically, then smiling at seeing Sam on his feet. He's got the food in a tin bucket covered with a cloth.

Sam's not really hungry but he nods anyway. "Everything quiet?"

Dean shrugs and nods, sets the food down and gets bowls. "Went down to the line. Only thing stirring out there is rabbits."

"How are the newborns?" Sam asks and makes his way to the table, detouring to the bed when Dean's back is turned and picking up the gun, easing the safety back on.

"You know, if you're gonna shoot me, do it to my face," Dean says casually, as easy as if he's asking if Sam wants water or wine.

"I'm not," Sam says and shows the gun to Dean.

Dean studies the safety, then Sam's face. "But you had it off."

"Just in case. You were gone a long time."

Dean frowns at that, puzzled, like he's trying to remember. Sam lays the gun on the table between their bowls before sitting.

Dean spoons out the food and sets it in front of him. "Something happened."

Sam pokes at the thick sauce and finds recognizable vegetables. He's not so sure about the meat but it's more curiosity than concern. It tastes like ash. Salty ash, but ash. It's no slight to the cook. Along with everything else, he finds it difficult to taste anything. He eats anyway. "What happened?" he asks.

Dean sits down across from him, goes after his own food with more enthusiasm. "I don't know. But something did. I don't know what it was, and you know I don't remember. You want to tell me?"

It's all Sam can do to swallow what's in his mouth. He's not up for this again. Not so soon, and it startles him that Dean's this aware.

It's the three new souls, he realizes. It's not so huge a leap, and it doesn't matter that they are infants. They're shoving the old world out. Sam would take bets that there will be three new Reavers making the rounds before those children take their first steps.

"We come back as ourselves," he says instead, stirring his food around. "Everyone else...they don't look the same, they aren't the same, but me...and you, we're always us."

Dean's brow furrows, but his confusion doesn't dampen his appetite. "No matter where we're born or to who?" he asks.

Sam nods and tears at the small loaf of bread.

"Dad too," Dean says thoughtfully. He's right, but Sam doesn't point it out to him. Dean gets up suddenly and Sam has to force himself not to startle or reach for the gun, but Dean's just getting up to get the bottle and two mugs. He pours for them both but just stands holding his, staring at the slowly dying fire.

"You should finish eating," Sam says. "Get some rest. I'll watch first."

"You need the sleep."

"I slept all day," Sam lies and makes himself finish his food. He's going to need the fuel.

"I miss coffee," Dean says, and Sam chuckles, an honest laugh.

"Yeah, me too."

Dean flashes him a quick grin and sits down, wolfing down his food. When they're both done, he takes the dishes and lets them soak in a bucket of water. He builds up the fire, sets the kettle on to boil. They have chicory but it's not the same except for the jolt. Sam's still stiff, but the alcohol helped some and he finds the Rest journal and his own and settles near the fire to read.

Dean strips down to nothing and slides into the bed, pulling the blankets up and watching Sam.

"Do you still dream?"

"Everybody dreams, Dean," Sam says casually. Maybe it's a little cruel but he's not feeling particularly generous tonight.

"I don't," Dean says flatly and rolls over.

"Yes, you do. You just don't remember them," Sam says and flips pages, tilting the book toward the flames to see better.

"Fuck you, Sam," he mutters, but there's no heat behind it.

Sam stares at him anyway, feeling the ache deep inside, the strained muscles, and the lingering rawness in his throat. His hand rests on the gun and he eases the safety off again. "In your dreams," he says on a whisper.

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VIII.

It's full dark when Dean wakes again; even the fire has burned low. He listens, but he hears nothing outside or in, no rustle of pages or creak of wood. He moves silently, rolling over.

He's got excellent night vision, always has, and even so Sam is nothing but shadows, slumped in the chair, chin on his chest. The journals are stacked beside him on the table, and Dean would bet the bottle next to them is empty now. The gun rests across his lap, Sam's fingers curled around barrel and trigger and, luckily or carelessly, Sam's got it pointed at the fireplace.

Now that he sees him, he can hear Sam breathing, slow and shallow. He can't be comfortable and he'll be stiff come morning. Dean doesn't think he's been asleep long.

He eases to sitting with a half-formed plan of getting Sam to lie down for the last few hours of the night. Even if he doesn't sleep, it would be better than sitting in the chair. Of course, he *is* asleep so maybe that's its own reward.

He gets a foot on the floor and the bed frame creaks. Sam jerks awake with a hiss, already shifting the gun.

"It's me, Sam." It's unnecessary to actually say it, Sam finding recognition or reassurance pretty quickly, and Sam shifts carefully in the chair. "You should lie down for a while," Dean tells him, getting to his feet.

Sam nods and puts the safety back on the shotgun, setting it down on the table before leaning forward, rubbing his face with his hands. "Yeah. I probably should."

Sure Sam isn't going to shoot him, Dean moves to poke at the fire a bit and add more wood until it's burning again, low. It casts more light across Sam's face, across his skin. The bandage has gone dark.

"Let me change that," Dean says and finds the water in the kettle is still warm.

Sam doesn't answer, just leans forward so Dean can get to the bandage on his back. Dean uses the warm water to soak the cloth free and then more to bathe the wounds before bandaging them again. They look okay.

The gun remains on the table and Dean glances at it, memory flitting against the inside of his head like a moth on a windowpane. The Rest is even more protected than most places, and the salt lines trace even the windows and under the doorsill as well as the grounds beyond. There's rowan threaded through the trusses of the roof.

There's no reason for Sam to be holding a loaded gun unless the danger is already inside.

The thoughts elude him again, like they always do if he tries too hard. Like his dreams. Sam is right: he does dream. He remembers the function of them but not the substance. Sometimes the function seems less than breezes or as ill-defined as heat. Other times, he wakes up to cold and a sweat and a hollowness in his chest that makes him glad he doesn't remember.

The built-up fire eases the coldness but not the hollowness. Sam's skin is warm under his hands, maybe even a little feverish, and Dean lays a palm across Sam's forehead. Sam doesn't flinch, if anything he leans into it like his head's too heavy to hold up any longer.

A fresh pad of clean cloth covers the neat stitches and Dean wraps a long strip of it around Sam's shoulder and chest to hold it in place, in case he gets restless. "Let's get you horizontal," he says, urging Sam up and to the bed. "Need anything?" he asks when Sam is finally lying down.

"We should ride out, back to Orchard Pond and ahead to Creekside," Sam says. He sounds sleepy now. "Pass the word. Three born here, but I bet there were others last night. It's only going to get worse."

Dean pulls the blanket up over Sam. He's warm now, but he's afraid it will turn to chills by morning. "You need to turn your brain off, Sam. There was no one pregnant at Orchard Pond." Creekside, a day west, might be a different story. "We tell them, anyone, the demons will attack every time there's a baby born, we'll have either a panic or a revolution."

"They have the right," Sam says and rolls to his back until he remembers his wound. Dean wedges himself a seat on the edge of the bed, feeling the chill of late spring and early morning on his legs.

"Bullshit," Dean says. "They're demons. They've got a whole underworld to play in."

"There's no food in hell," Sam says and his eyes are dark and glitter bright as he stares at the ceiling. Wide open and Dean still

knows Sam's dreaming, kind of. Poking at the edges of his own nightmares with a sharp stick.

Dean should have left him sleeping in the chair.

Dean leans over him, his hand braced on the bed, face above Sam's. The fire's light is illuminating his face and he's glad, because it means Sam can see him. "It's a numbers game, Sam. That's the deal. Three tonight -- somebody will die, tonight, tomorrow, hell, we could lose a hundred to the flu or to a fire...it'll balance itself out. It always does. They took *advantage*. It was no more than an excuse. It never is."

Sam's eyes are fixed on his face, pupils blown, hardly listening. He moves a hand, reaching up, and Dean can see the flickering light painting the back of Sam's fingers, red and gold and yellow and streaks of dark. A piece of wood cracks and flares in the fireplace and for a moment it's brighter still.

Sam makes a low sound in his throat and Dean wants to take back what he's said, even though his words aren't what's bringing this grief to the surface. Sam's tired and hurt and worn thin. He gets this way, this time of year, this close to going there, going back. Dean's seen it a hundred times and it never gets any easier. He catches the outstretched fingers, almost crushes them.

"You aren't dreaming. Not yet," he says fiercely and the sound stops. Sam blinks up at him. Sam curls his fingers, tightens his grip and tugs, lifting his head as he does so.

The shock of lips to lips isn't really unfamiliar, and the shock is only there because it's Sam driving it. Sam tastes of ash and the pollen dust flavor of feverfew and willow-bark, sharp and dry. He tastes bitter and angry, though the kiss is anything but, and Dean thinks this is a horribly bad idea because Sam's hurt and he's barely awake.

When Sam pulls back his lips are wet, his face is flushed, and his eyes are clear again. He pulls his hand free of Dean's and finishes what he started, light finger-strokes across Dean's face, along his cheekbones and forehead, along his jaw and across his lips. Then he makes the sign of the cross that means nothing any longer on Dean's face; forehead, lips, and over Dean's heart. There's no redemption here. Dean knows that as well as anyone. There are other signs, other faiths, a hundred gods and a thousand rituals lost across cultures and times. None of them have survived except the old ones, the ones

grounded in earth and time, when the sun was a god and the moon his errant mistress.

Even when Sam's hand drops back down, Dean can feel those touches, burning his skin, not painful but they linger. It's no blessing. It was never meant to be. Dean sits back, rubs at his face and chest to eliminate the feel of Sam's fingers. Any other time, a kiss like that from anyone, even Sam, Dean would take as an invitation.

This is more of a challenge and it pisses him off. It has to show, because Sam's tense, watching him, angry in his own way; and he's taunting Dean, tempting him with body and eyes and for one brief second Dean can see it, feel it in his belly and groin, Sam thrashing under him, nails digging into his skin, Dean's hand across his mouth, across his throat.

He shoves himself up from the bed, breathing harshly, heart thudding, head aching. No. No. Not like that... yes, they have, but never when Sam was unwilling or at least agreeable. He never asks, true enough, but rarely denies. A dozen times, maybe more in this lifetime, each time sweeter than the hard candies that always show up around the solstices and equinoxes.

Maybe there's no sin left in the world except there is and Sam's it. It's why they can't look at him, the other people, even after he's bled for them. Sam's brought it with him from wherever, whenever.

Dean finds his pants and pulls them on with unsteady hands. Then he finds his bag and starts packing. "That's it, isn't it? You're the temptation, why I can't remember. Why they try to goad me." For a brief moment it's clear, bright -- Sam's the reason for this hell they call a life.

Save me and you save them all.

Sam's laughter startles him, and Dean looks back to see him propped on one arm, firelight turning the white bandage on his chest to sunset red, his skin to copper, his eyes to fathomless black. "What?" Dean demands. "Tell me the truth for once, Sam."

The laughter stops gradually and Sam drops back onto the bed. "I always tell you the truth. When it matters."

"And you get to decide when it does? Bullshit," Dean says and finds a shirt, pulling it on.

"Some things you can't twist to suit yourself, Dean. This is one of them. I don't tempt you to anything you don't already want, make you pay for anything you don't already owe. You've got it backwards."

Dean doesn't remember moving, or closing his hand over the knife in his bag. He doesn't remember jerking Sam off the bed or shoving him to the floor, driving the injured shoulder into the rough floor planks, or pressing him down with knees and hands, or even kissing him so hard Sam's lips splits and bleeds from being caught between his own teeth and the pressure Dean puts on his mouth.

He remembers none of it but he finds himself there, with Sam pinned beneath him, chest heaving and eyes closed.

He wants to throw up, or reverse the blade, drive it into his own belly to see Sam's loose trousers pulled low on his hips, the drawstring and waist torn or cut.

He doesn't remember it but it's familiar, like his own face, like Sam's rare smiles, familiar like dawn or sunset. The knife falls and Sam twists to his side when Dean lets him go.

"How many times?" he asks and slides back, sitting down hard.

It takes Sam a minute to find breath enough to answer, breath that isn't ragged and pained. "More recently. I take it as a good sign." Sam can't quite get his arms under him and his shoulder's bleeding again. He still doesn't flinch when Dean moves carefully, helps him up, eases him over to sit on the edge of the bed.

"A good sign of what? Sam...what the hell is happening to me?" He has to ask because he doesn't know. He keeps thinking he's going to remember but what he remembers doesn't match what he knows. His brother is everything to him and Dean can't imagine wanting to hurt him - and he so obviously has.

Sam leans forward, wipes at his mouth. "You're part of the old world, Dean. So am I. We're being pushed out, becoming more of what we were and less of what we are. You are...just more you."

"No. No. Because this, this..." he says and lifts Sam's chin, brushing the blood away with his thumb. "This isn't something I want, something I'd do."

Sam closes his eyes and shakes his head. "No. It's not something Dean would do, but you aren't him. You never have been."

"I'm...of course I am. Jesus, Sam. It's all riddles and puzzles with you," Dean says disgusted and gets up again, resuming his packing. Fine. If Sam thinks they should ride ahead to Creekside, he will. They don't both need to go and Sam's pissing him off with this mystic seer crap.

"You either don't believe me or you can't remember," Sam says steadily. "Which is it? You remember the life before this and the one before that. Right?"

"Yeah. Of course I do," Dean says, and he does. The details shift, the faces change. He can remember back, as can the other Reavers. Between them all, they've got a pretty contiguous history of the world since it ended. Sam did that; was the one to insist that Reavers record, to leave the journals at the Rests. Harder to forget when you've got it there in ink and on paper. Easier to keep track because the collective memory the Reavers share isn't complete, even for Sam. Memory requires an awareness of self that the very young don't have, except in the perception of themselves as the center of everything.

"You can't remember what happened five minutes ago, though."

"I woke you up...thought you should lie down." Dean says and shoves rolled up shirts into his bag. "And you give me grief. You need some sleep, Sam. Real sleep," he says, and laces the bag shut. "I'll ride to Creekside. If I push it, I can be there and back before night-fall.

"Dean...look at me," Sam says, and Dean sucks a breath, puts on his game face. He knows there is absolutely no reasoning with Sam when he's like this.

It slams into Dean like a jack hammer, making his head ache. His brother looks like hell. His lip's stopped bleeding but Dean can see the still red marks of fingers on his throat, bruised and scratched again, like every time Dean turns around, Sam's managed to get hurt worse.

It may be truer than he realizes, but even staring his brain shutters the thought away.

I'd never do that. I wouldn't hurt Sammy that way.

But there's no one else here and Sam would have a hell of a time doing all that damage to himself. So, either he'd done it or... or...

"Dean would never hurt me," Sam says quietly. "Not like this...not..."

"I'm not possessed," Dean says.

Sam shrugs. "I don't think so. I just...I don't know what you are, only what you aren't."

"I held you when you were like three days old, Sam. I *remember* that," Dean says but even as he says it, he's not sure. He held a baby just last night. He's done it before...he's delivered babies. He knows what they feel like, so small, practically weightless: five pound bags of

salt. "I pulled you out of the fire when...when..." *Jessica. Her name was Jessica* "When Jessica died."

Sam's not looking at him any longer. He's sitting again on the edge of the bed, hands gripping the frame.

He wouldn't hurt Sam. Dean, who he is, what he is...he'd never hurt his brother. Not like this, not like *that*.

But he can feel it. He's got Sam's blood under his nails, can taste it in his mouth. If he put his hand on Sam's throat those marks would match perfectly.

The room's too small, too close, and too cold.

"I should be back by nightfall," he says and leaves.

Sam doesn't even look up.

The horses are skittish, nervous. It's dark and Dean hasn't bothered with a lamp. He can do this in the dark, has before; bridle and blanket and saddle, securing his pack and his supplies. He'll have to change mounts in Creekside to make it back in time...to be back when he told Sam he'd back. The last thing he needs is Sam riding out to find him after dark, and he would. But he needs to rest up. He's hurt; battered and bruised and...

He swallows and leans against his horse, grabbing for the thought and holding it, digging his own nails into his palms.

He takes a deep breath and pulls his own journal out, grabbing a pencil, worn down, but easy to find. His own journal isn't nearly as densely packed with events and logs of their journey's as Sam's -- Sam writes enough for both of them. But he flips to a blank page and writes quickly, a short message, one he won't forget. He needs it to stay there long enough to remember to cut it into his flesh or burn it. It doesn't matter which.

don't hurt sam

If nothing else, it would make him stop, think...if he remembers to check.

He can't see well enough, and backs up, tilting the journal, flipping back a few pages and stops.

He never reads his own journal unless it's to check facts, and usually he uses Sam's.

A few pages more, flipping quickly, and he feels the hollowness return. He needs more light...and the closest is the Rest.

Sam does look up when he comes back, getting to his feet warily and he's got the gun in his hands before it even really registers with Dean that he's scaring Sam again.

"Why didn't you tell me to read the damn thing," Dean says and it comes out as more of an accusation than he meant it to, flipping pages and holding them up for Sam to read, for himself, and more pages back. Sometimes the messages vary, but they are all frighteningly familiar.

"I have. I've tried. . .I can't make you remember," Sam says. "You can't be *both*. You're either Dean or you're not. . .and when you aren't, nothing I say makes any difference. And when you are. . .none of it makes any sense."

Dean pulls his knife and Sam cocks the gun but Dean isn't interested in Sam or the gun, although he almost thinks it would be worth it just to have Sam kill him now. But it's the fire he wants; the fire and the blade. He sits beside the fireplace and pulls off his shirt again, using it to handle the hot blade.

The wider edge makes a perfectly straight line across his flesh, and he holds it in place while the flesh sears. He'd like to scream, but he keeps his eyes on Sam's face.

Dean bites it back, lifts the blade to inspect the burn. "I don't. . .I don't heal. . .freakishly fast or. . . anything. Do I?"

Sam comes closer and ease down to his knees, using the shot gun like a brace. "No. No. . . you don't."

Dean nods and heats the blade again. It's harder to make the curved side of the "d" and it's going to look like some kind of funky fake Roman lettering. It doesn't matter. But he can only get to the "t" in "don't" before the shock starts to settle in, and he's shaking too hard to finish it. He stares at Sam, and maybe he should be surprised to see Sam's face pale and wet. He's forgotten the gun. Dean holds out the blade to him. "You have to finish it. . .you have to, Sam. Please. Before I forget why."

He does anyway, but when he tries to stop Sam, Sam shows him his own journal, over and over again.

Dean's pretty sure he's going to be sick before Sam lays the last straight line of the letter "m" on Dean's forearm, the flesh inflamed and swollen.

It's Sam who soaks towels in water and lays them across the branding on Dean's arm, and they're a sorry pair when they get to their

feet. Dean still feels sick, nauseous, and he's sweating and he keeps forgetting if he's sick or hurt until Sam changes the cloths.

He wakes once to Sam bringing in fresh water, broth, and he can see people outside, worried and anxious. Bad luck for a Reaver to fall ill in your village and he wants to laugh at that. It may be mid morning. It's light out. Sam changes the bandage on his arm. It's still swollen, reddened.

Dean stares at it, at the memory he's burned into his flesh.

He'll remember this. It will leave scars. Sam's fingers are gentle when they rub a salve over the burns to ease the pain; aloe and beeswax and lanolin.

He remembers. He remembers what and when Sam leans over and presses lips to his forehead to tell him to sleep, he remembers why.

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IX.

They stay a day longer than they mean to. The incoming Reaver, Rebecca, is surprised to see them. She keeps glancing at them over her shoulder as she spreads her bedroll on the floor by the fire.

Sam's recorded it all; the births, the attack, the damage done and repaired, and he goes with her to the edge of the barrier. The salt boxes are nearly finished and they help with the last. The tension in the village eases some, but Sam's pretty sure there will be a vast improvement once he and Dean have left.

Dean's chafing at staying. "I'm fine. I don't need both hands to ride or to fight."

His arm is bandaged loosely now, packed with salve, and Sam's watching for infection. It's still red and his hand is swollen. Dean thinks it's venom that burned him, venom from the fight, his memories rearranging themselves from older fights, other lifetimes.

Then Sam takes the bandages off to change them. The swelling makes it difficult but not impossible to read, and still Dean has to stare at it long and hard. He checks his journal. He counts the other times he's left himself a message.

Forty-three. There are forty-three entries, a few scratched through because they don't make sense any longer, if they ever did, and one fairly lengthy entry that Sam remembers Dean making maybe the third or fourth time they'd gone through this.

Dean's fingers trace over his own handwriting. Rebecca is checking on the newborns. Sam is trying to make sure they haven't depleted the stores at the Rest too much, making a list of what needs to be replaced. His own skin is slightly flushed, but neither Dean nor Rebecca think the wounds on his back are infected. The skin's already tightening, itching, an impossible place to scratch, although that's probably a good thing.

"You should have killed me," Dean says quietly, and Sam shakes his head.

"No. It's worse. It's worse when I'm alone."

"How could it be worse, Sam?"

Sam doesn't have an answer for him. Not really.

"Do the math. It's not that often. It only happens when we're alone."

"We're alone a goddamned lot of the time," Dean snaps back. "Every time I do something I make an entry? You said you wouldn't lie to me when it matters."

Sam's surprised he remembers that. "It doesn't happen every time," Sam says patiently. And it's true. A few times a year when something else breaks through, usually after a fight, after some other trigger tinged with violence.

Or when Sam wants the fight, the reminder that he can't trust his own heart.

Dean makes an impatient sound and starts randomly shoving things into his bag with one hand. "Once should be enough." His hand closes over Sam's wrist where he's counting out bundles of dried herbs. "Do you hate yourself that much?" he asks with insight that has nothing to do with what he is but who he thinks he is.

Sam doesn't have an answer for that either. Dean's nails dig into the tendons at his wrist and Sam refuses to look down, to show how much it hurts. Dean does, though, and catches a glimpse of the scabbed etching on his forearm, and releases Sam suddenly.

He's appalled but still angry. "You don't deserve this, Sam. None of it."

Neither do you. You never did.

It's not about deserving, but Sam doesn't correct him, just shoulders his own bag to take out to the horses. Deserved or no, it was his fate, not Dean's. He can be grateful and angry at the same time except the gratitude gains him nothing and the anger has worn thin.

Sam gets a few hours more sleep than he usually does the night before they leave, either because of Rebecca or because Dean's more aware. Dean's the one who puts the loaded gun between them on the bed and for once, doesn't sleep with his knife under his pillow. Sam doesn't say anything because it's unlikely anything will happen with another Reaver asleep just a few feet away.

But Dean is restless and not from pain. He almost gets up, ready to stalk the village all night long.

Sam pulls him back, pulling Dean back against his chest. The gun is a sliver of hardness between them and Sam gives them about even odds of it firing accidentally. He sets the safety and folds an arm across Dean's waist.

"Sam..." Dean's whisper is soft but his body's tense. His injured arm is stretched awkwardly on the bed.

"You're what I have left," Sam whispers back, against Dean's shoulder.

"But if you could trade me for him..."

"In a heartbeat," Sam says evenly. He won't lie about what matters.

Dean's fingers thread between Sam's and he's asleep before Sam is.

Rebecca helps them finish their packing in the morning, but she stops Sam as he starts to leave the stable to get the last of their supplies. She never looks at him directly, but tightens the girth on the horses, her hands competent and strong.

He knows who she is, even by the name she uses now, this time, but she's nothing like the woman he remembers. She's dark and ruddy, sturdy, stocky, and broad shouldered. Thick black hair is braided over one shoulder. There's already gray in it. There's a scar across her left arm: claw marks.

"Do you think we'll ever stop remembering?" she asks him, and Sam doesn't look at her, either.

"Maybe. Someday. When we aren't needed," he says. It's not even reassurance. "It's what we owe," he says, and she glances at him quickly, lips pressed together thinly but she nods.

"What we owe. But we've stolen from ourselves."

Sam nods, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. "Robbing Peter to pay Paul. It still has to be paid back."

She nods, then quirks her lips up in a quick smile before leaving him.

Dean's arm is wrapped for the ride. He wants to remember, but the road is dusty and Sam is still worried about infection. Burns are tricky things.

Dean's never offered such a thing before. He's written the messages to himself, showed them to Sam, promised never again. But his moments of awareness have been quicksilver fluid, sliding away before Sam can suggest anything even remotely like this, or Dean to offer. Denial and accusation comes when Sam tries to point out Dean's own self-awareness.

It is more than a failure of memory, it's more like some active survival instinct rising up in a vengeful attempt to forestall any hint that Dean's reality could be faulty.

It's hard to make your point when your brother's busy breaking your hand or arm.

Maybe he should stop thinking of it as his brother, but he can't, and if he's honest he doesn't want to. There's enough of Dean there enough of the time to make it seem like one of the better bargains Sam's made. Enough familiarity in face and mannerism, in what he knows or remembers, in his laugh, in his competence and bravado, even in his courage, to make this life bearable -- and Sam can't give up, won't, until he's fixed it somehow. Restored what should be, if only he could figure out how.

And he's buried this version of Dean often enough to know that being without him, even knowing it's mostly lies, makes everything else harder. It's not like Sam doesn't already feel like he's missing half of himself, half his soul, his heart, maybe even the better half of his brain. He's pretty sure Dean would have figured this out by now.

But, of course, he did. Figured out that he could take Sam's place, take his fate, his punishment or destiny -- give everything up and then some.

Except that's not right and Sam knows it. There are rules even to chaos; ghost or demon, it makes no difference -- they all have their place and they are no more or less bound by those rules than humans are. Understanding the rules, even the most basic ones, is the real difficulty. Dean tended to like the scattershot approach. Toss a bunch of things at the problem and see which one sticks. They've done that more times than Sam could really remember both in this life and the ones before. It has to be one of the more frustrating -- and endearing -- things about his brother.

Sam was marked somehow. Chosen. He doesn't know why, and he isn't sure what it means, only that it's been following him since he was an infant. From the first infancy he can remember, which he shouldn't be able to remember. There were others like him, marked, watched. He'd met a few; Max, who'd ended his own wretched existence rather than live in fear. Dana, who seemed to have everything Sam had ever wanted and then tossed it off in a flurry of drugs and too much money. Raised the dead on a lark and then didn't know how to put them back to rest.

There were others that they'd only heard about, probably more that they never had or would. Whatever the reason, whatever the mechanism, the demon that had taken his mother, that had taken Jessica, had called in its marker.

Dean had covered the bet, but everything Sam knows tells him he shouldn't have been able to. That it was too easy -- that the demon took Dean's offer to "renegotiate" too quickly.

Sam thinks it's a strange kind of arrogance to think it should have been him, can only be him, because really? If there was something significant in the deaths of mothers and girlfriends, then obviously not just anyone would do in fulfilling whatever power or plot or plan the demon holding his brother is trying to execute.

He's made the simplest offers. He always starts with that. *Me for him. You wanted me. You had me. I didn't ask for this. Me for him.*

That demon, the only one that matters as far as Sam is concerned, thought that was the funniest thing ever. *Nobility doesn't impress me. Sacrifice is what you do to save others, not to save yourself.*

But you took Dean's sacrifice. You took him instead of me. Why not me? What's the difference?

Something that dwells in blood and fire shouldn't be so cold. But it is. Fingers like ice leave raw places on Sam's skin, dead and cold. *Your brother knows the difference. He's made his choice knowing he deserves it.*

He doesn't. He doesn't...

It's not the ones likely to fall we want, but the ones unlikely to. Broken piety is the sweetest food.

Sam doesn't understand that, either. He's never been pious, and purity left him when he was about nine, a gun in his hand and shadows in his closet. But it's there again -- the standards he doesn't understand, the rules he's willing to break if he could only figure them out.

"If we want to make Creekside by sundown, we should go," Dean says, remaining at the door to the stable until Sam acknowledges him. His arm is bandaged, he can't see his own warning, but he's careful still. Sam gathers up the reins and leads the horses out. Dean neither asks nor takes any assistance. They leave Gage's Mill behind while the fires for breakfast are still burning.

The morning is frosty cold but it only lasts until the sun moves up, turning frost into a heavy dew and the dew to a million bright diamond points of light.

They stay off the old asphalt roads, although sometimes they ride parallel. The roads are cracked, broken in places, even without the weight and wear of cars on them. Time alone is breaking the hold of the old world and the people of the towns and villages of the wide spread farming communities -- they've found no new use for the broken blacks and grays except as markers. They've made their own maps.

Sam can remember driving through towns before with Dean and his father, bona-fide ghost towns, held in stasis, out of time, by this or that county or state historical preservation society. There are more ghost towns now, falling wrecks where the wood has surrendered to insects and the elements and the iron and steel are corroded and bent. They'll salvage the iron sometimes. They've got forges hot enough for that, but the plastics are brittle, the glass shattered in a hundred fragments of color.

The old world is melting into the landscape and someday the broken roads will lead to nowhere. They've abandoned the deserts and the highest places. Sam hasn't seen it but he's been told the big southern cities have entirely succumbed to the land; Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte...all buried under encroaching trees and kudzu so that you can only see the smoothed over lines of what were once skyscrapers. North America, what it was, has its own jungles now.

There's the remnants of a town halfway along their route. It would go ignored entirely were it not for the pond that's edged out, probably from some structured development, a perfect suburban landscape now not so much haunted as just abandoned. Emptied. Sam doesn't know what happened to the people who lived there. None of them knows. They just stopped *being* as near as anyone can remember.

They let the horses drink and he and Dean pace the water's edge to stretch their legs. Dean finally finds what looks to have been a brick wall. Sam's surprised it holds his weight when he sits: it looks that ready to crumble to dust.

Dean fingers the bandage and lifts the end near his wrist; stares at it. Sam can almost see the memory return, washing across Dean's face, turning the normally clear hazel eyes cloudy and troubled. "If you take from the dark..."

"--it takes back." Sam says, and squats to re-secure the bandage. It's awkward to tie knots with one hand. Dean lets him.

"You really think it's that simple?" Dean asks "We pushed back the dark..."

Sam shrugs and sits in the dirt, arms around his knees. "Maybe. We gave them no place to go. We took away the opportunities they had to roam at will. We left them only shadows -- our shadows. They weren't created from nothing."

Dean's lip tilts up and he glances over the tumbled echoes of a world long gone. "Great way to let humans know they aren't the only thing in the world." He runs his fingers over the bandage, like he can feel the raised welts there, Braille for the seeing. "Sam... I don't think you should go to Chicago."

It's not a new opinion, but given Dean's awareness Sam leans forward. "You never do. Why this time?"

"There's nothing there."

A revelation would be nice, but Sam's learned to live with disappointment. "There's nothing here, either, but here we are."

"No. No, I mean... whatever it is you think you can do. It's not there. It's *here*. It has to be. There's no other reason for you to be stuck here."

Sam's thought the same thing a time or two, but he shakes his head. "This... if I accept this, I think I lose." Like he hasn't already. "This is giving up. This is saying okay, I can't figure it out, sorry, Dean. I tried." He meets the gaze that's both familiar and alien. "It's not good enough."

"You don't have anything it wants," Dean says, getting up abruptly.

Sam can almost see it happen, the rippling effect it has on Dean's expression, on his manner when whatever it is tries to claw its way out of what he's become.

One pull of the trigger after another. Dean's shifted countenance more in the last twenty-four hours than he has in the past year. Sam gets to his feet and Dean stares up at him. "We should get moving again," Dean says and gets to his feet as well; his fingers curving around the bandage on his arm.

Remembering, even without seeing it and Sam follows, untethers his horse to mount.

Idiot, he thinks, when the stock of Dean's shotgun cracks across his jaw, his cheek. He tastes blood and the horse squeals, dances nervously

Dean swats at the animal, moving it out of his way, his own mount still tied to the broken brick and rotting rebar. Sam has to roll or be trampled. The horse's hooves miss him by inches; Dean's boot catches him full on in the stomach, driving the breath from him.

He doesn't even have time to tell Dean to look at his arm before the butt of the rifle connects with his head again.

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The sparkling sunlight of midday has gotten softer, edged with red and gold, by the time Sam opens his eyes again. His eyes water and there's a dryness to his mouth that still tastes of blood and dirt. There's a tight, painful knot in his stomach that has nothing to do with the bruise he knows is going to form there.

They haven't moved. Lifting his head, Sam can see the broken brick, the edge of the pond. Behind him he hears a horse, the whisper of movement.

It doesn't take him long to realize he's tied, bound at hand and ankles, tight enough that he can't feel his hands or feet except as dull, throbbing echoes to the pounding in his head.

"Are you going to keep me tied up for the next week?" he asks, and he knows Dean hears him despite the hoarseness of his voice.

"No. I figure those will last only slightly longer than the daylight." Dean's voice comes back at him, behind him. Closer than Sam realized.

He steps over Sam and stares down at him. It's the same face, same eyes. He hasn't suddenly sprouted wings or fangs.

The bandage is off his arm and he smiles when Sam's eyes dart to it. "Probably not your best idea, Sam. Or mine either. You said it. When I'm him, it makes no sense. When I'm me...it makes no difference." He picks at one of the barely formed scabs and blood glistens on his skin, made bright by that last of the sunlight. His foot comes out again and Sam tenses, but Dean only puts the flat of his heel to Sam's chest and rolls him to his back. "So...you wanted answers. Maybe you'll get them. See what a little demon baiting will get me."

Sam closes his eyes. "Even if they kill me, I'll just come back. So will you."

“You sure about that, Sammy? Because you know, I’m thinking maybe there’s something in this for me. Give you up, see what they have to offer. Because they know something, Sam. They know you’re the reason we’re caught in this endless rewind. You think the whole world should bend to your whim?” he asks and squats beside Sam, running a thumb over the split in his cheek. It comes away wet and Dean sucks the blood from his finger. “You really are a selfish bastard. It was a bad deal. I gotta wonder if your brother realizes that yet. And why they keep asking me, if I’m not really him.”

Sam doesn't have an answer for him, wouldn't give it even if he did. "What do you think you'll get? They're still bound by darkness."

"Maybe," Dean says and gets to his feet. He stares at Sam a moment longer then starts making a circle, counter-clockwise, using his heel to mark out a rough outline, but he doesn't close it.

He brings salt from his saddlebags, lays a line around Sam, but leaves a gap. It's not closed. There's no protection in an open sided circle, but if he closes it... Sam twists to try and watch him, but Dean is building up the fire now, until it blazes bright and he loads his weapons, strings his own bow.

He's going to bargain, Sam knows.

It might even work.

The sun creeps down and as darkness falls, Sam can already hear them, the rush of wings, the rustling of grasses. Even the insects fall silent.

He doesn't even struggle. The knots are tight; Dean's good at them. A dozen times he's wished or wondered what would happen if... it looks like he might find out. Although there's a bitterness to this -- the timing, another ten days or so until the vernal equinox and he could complete his pilgrimage. It's his own weakness that he only feels a fraction of the regret that he should but he has no new questions and no new answers to take to Chicago. It's a pilgrimage, not a planned assault.

Dean stays just outside the unfinished circle; close enough to step in, far enough out to block the gap.

There's three from the air and Sam can see them descend, leathery wings just edged in fiery gold as the sun finally slips off to let the world sleep. They could be angels, he thinks when dusk blurs their features.

There are rumors of angels and Sam thinks he's caught glimpses of them but sometimes he's not sure that's what he sees. Angel is a convenient name for things *not-human* that walk in the daylight. But they are hard to see. Sunlight wraps around them like refractions from a mirror -- if you look straight at them it all bends and blinds, you can only ever see them from the corner of your eye and sometimes more clearly when the sun isn't as bright. When it rains Sam sees them most clearly, like the rain gives them shape and form and presence because it bends around them too, even when there's no wind. He remembers a music video he saw before he went to college, women of water, walking on water. Like that.

Not ghosts though, and they aren't here to save anybody, he doesn't think.

"Traitor twice over," one of the demons says, looking at him but it's talking to Dean. This one's small, a skeletal thing mottled grey and green. It looks like tree moss, its voice rasps like dead branches rubbing together. "First to your own and then to that which binds you. Is that for us?"

"Maybe," Dean says. There are no barriers here save the one Dean's set and the demon looks at the salt line, yellow eyes narrowed. The other two with it spread wide and the horse whickers again, tugging at its line, fear making its nostrils flare.

The demons breathe in the animal's fear like Sam breathes air. Human or animal, it doesn't matter. Fear is fear, it's like nectar to these kind, appetizers, the smell outside a feast as it's being prepared.

"Maybe you can have him. Maybe you can help me?" Dean gives them his most charming grin. "Tell me why?"

The demon's grin mocks Dean's. "Can't remember that, can you? Kill him and you will."

Dean considers it and takes a step in closer to the demon. "It just starts over again. You've killed him before. Me, too," he says.

"A soul can only be stretched so thin," the demon says and edges closer. Its long fingers uncurl and curl back. Sam can almost feel them on his flesh.

It's not fear he feels, not really. Yes, he fears the pain that's coming; there's no way not to. But there's a dance Dean's doing here that Sam doesn't understand, not the steps and not the music.

"So, what? There's a time limit to this little deal you've made?" Dean asks.

"We didn't make this bargain," the demon hisses. "This is yours. You set the boundaries." Its gaze slides to Sam again. "That's the price. Split it often enough and it becomes meaningless."

"Really," Dean says thoughtfully and steps way from the gap, leaving the opening for the demon. "So he's like a cat, only with more than nine lives."

The demon grins. "More like the mouse. You have your answers."

"Not really. Not yet...but..." he gestures, and Sam tenses as the demon steps through the break. Wings fold neatly along its back as it crouches. The fingers uncurl again, long nails stroking across Sam's face. Like Dean, it tastes the blood it gathers.

"Dean. It won't change anything," Sam says.

"I thought you wanted answers, Sammy," Dean says, standing just beyond the demon's shoulder. The salt pouch is in his shoulder and he grins, tips it, and closes the gap.

The demon hisses and squeals whirling, the other two take to air and Dean cocks his gun. "New deal, leather breath. You have what you want, but you don't get to take it with you unless I get some answers. He's my token of good faith."

The demon's claws close around Sam's thigh, drawing blood. Sam hisses, and tries to wrench free. "I'll shred him into little bits."

Dean pours a second circle of salt around himself and sits, watching them. "Knock yourself out, but come sunrise, you'll still be trapped in there. Give me what I want and I'll let you out before then and you can have him as a consolation prize for being so damn stupid and greedy."

Sam finds Dean's gaze on him, something unreadable in his eyes, mouth set thinly. "What will break the bargain?" Dean asks.

"You'll have to ask the one who made it."

"You'll notice it's not here right now." One of the other demons swoops down and Dean is quick to fire, leaving it writhing on the ground, dying and angry. "It's got to be unfair. You kill one of them, me, we come back. When I take care of one of you, you stay gone," Dean says and switches weapons from gun to bow, driving one of the arrows into the dying demon's heart. He notches a second and aims at the demon hovering over Sam. "Here's something you don't get to do often. Choose."

The demon snarls and wrenches Sam upward, using him as shield. Dean's aim doesn't waver. "At this distance, this much tension on the bow, it'll go right through him and into you."

The demon's breath is foul and the claws tear through Sam's shirt into his skin. He drops his head only to have the demon wrench it back. "This one is marked, was, from the beginning. The last to fall. The one who didn't. A gamble lost...because you...you, that which you were, took his place. Offered yourself. It was no bargain we needed or wanted. The world, all of it, would be ours in time. For us, now, time stands still. We feed on scraps. Wait for the humans to follow their natures and get greedy. We do not *hunt*. We cannot *corrupt* while he remains uncorrupted."

Dean cocks his head at that. "That's it? Corrupt Sam and this whole thing comes undone?"

The demon snarls out something like laughter. "You don't even understand your own natures. It's why you will fail in time. Your theologians had it wrong. There's a thousand ways to heaven and only one road to hell."

"So, you've got him now. Corrupt away. It's what you want."

"Corruption of the flesh is not enough. If you remembered, you'd know. You were always ours. Then and now. But redemption is bought cheaply for your kind. A life here, a life there. Self-centered creatures that you are, you never were able to tell the difference. Have I satisfied you?"

It can't be that simple, Sam thinks, and trusting anything one of the demons says is never a good idea.

Dean stares long and hard at the demon before stepping out of his own circle, watching the third, but Sam is sure there were others, waiting in the darkness. "Told me what I needed to know, for now," Dean says and uses his boot to brush aside the salt, opening a gap. The demon eyes him warily, fearing another trick, before Dean steps back.

It takes a better grip on Sam and drags him out, wings unfolding.

And Dean still stares at him as Sam feels himself lifted, he holds his breath when Dean raises his gun, aiming for him.

Dean is a better shot than that but Sam still feels the hot blood hit the back of his head, the claws rip through cloth and flesh as the dying demon lets go.

He hits the ground hard, is only vaguely aware when Dean grabs his arm and drags him back into the circle, this time closing it around both of them.

The horse doesn't survive their fury.

There is more pain when Dean cuts his hands free than from the gouges in his arms or the burning sensation of the demon's blood on his skin.

Then he hands Sam the knife.

Sam's hands are numb and he needs both to hold it.

"I hope any of that made sense to you," Dean says calmly.

"Why?" Sam asks and coughs. Dean unshoulders the canteen and opens it, keeping a wary eye on the shapes and shadows moving around them. Sam doesn't put the knife down, but he doesn't flinch back when Dean holds the water to his lips.

Dean takes a sip himself and sits down next to Sam. He fingers the scarring on his arm. "You thought this would keep me as Dean, as him. You were wrong," he says and stares at the knife before deftly plucking it out of Sam's hand and then leaning down to cut his ankles free.

"That's not why," Sam says and isn't surprised when he's shoved back down, Dean straddling his waist.

"No. It's not. The part of me that burned this into my flesh dreaded ever losing you. I?" It's still Dean's face, but there's nothing of his brother in the expression, even as familiar as it is. "I'll be free of you one way or another, but not until you're free of this bargain." The blade slid under the collar of Sam's shirt. "And until then?" Dean presses a hand to Sam's chest and leans all his weight on it as the blade cuts through the cloth. "Corruption of the flesh will do me just fine," he says with a leer and leans close. "Feel free to fight me."

When Sam tastes his own blood, he thinks maybe he should have, but Dean's body pins him down, and there's darkness still around them, eyes watching them with a certain amount of satisfied and cruel glee. He can hear them laughing when he cries out.

But no matter what this Dean has done or why, he's given Sam what he's wanted; a way out.

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X.

Awake to himself, Dean finds little reason to sleep save from habit. He also finds little reason to keep using the name of a mortal (well, maybe not mortal exactly, any longer) he no longer has any desire to imitate. If the desire was ever his to begin with. But if he had any other name before the advent of this new world, he no longer remembers it and designations hold less significance for creatures that aren't human.

He could make some point of it, he supposes, and smiles into the grey that falls just before dawn. There's amusement in the idea of him constantly harping on Sam not to call him Dean, given how often Sam has been annoyingly vocal in his objections to being called "Sammy".

Except Sam hasn't. Not any time in recent memory. Like, of all the things he could object to with the image of his brother constantly by his side, that ancient nickname is too trivial to rail against. Or maybe he thought Dean simply didn't remember.

His memory is far clearer now. What his mirror personality could not hold onto is now layered in Dean's consciousness as irrefutably as the branding on his arm.

That remains too. He's lost the gauze, torn it from his arm to bind Sam's hands again. His forearm and the writing there are half-obsured by blood (both his own and Sam's) and the dirt clinging to the salve that's long since failed in its purpose.

Sam sleeps, finally. Exhaustion, either physical or emotional, finally tugging him under when unconsciousness failed to provide relief. He doesn't move when Dean shifts to his side to study the shadowed face and body.

There's a rustle and murmur beyond the still intact circle of salt. They've remained, those less bold, feeding on scraps because Sam's not immune to fear, he's just better than most at not letting it overwhelm him. Dean could almost feel pity for those that linger like hopeful jackals, except he can feel their fear as well; it's almost sweeter than Sam's and it's been awhile since he's been able to sate his own hunger for it. Then again, it's not as satisfying as maybe it should be. His tastes have changed; become more *human* in their scope.

He's gained a taste for human flesh, and not in the gnaw-until-the-meat-falls-from-the-bones kind of way, despite the bite marks he's left on Sam's shoulder and along his hip.

He'll need to treat those wounds and the others, he thinks idly. The irony would be too much for him to appreciate if Sam succumbs to infection this close to finishing this thing.

He can make out the hulking mass of bones and flesh that make up the two dead demons and beyond that, the scattered carcass of the horse. It will be a long walk to Creekside. He'll still need to wait for dawn to break before he can get his supplies from his bags. His lurking cousins would happily tear him to pieces instead of Sam, and while they'd be wary of him, they're also hungry and angry. Even he can't take them all on at once.

He gives half a thought to the idea that now that he's come into himself fully once more, that dawn might actually hold some peril for him, but the human flesh encasing him remains intact. It was less binding than transformation that gave him this face and this body and returns it to him again and again. There's mortality attached to him as well, now, a necessary trade-off to allow this illusion to perpetuate itself.

Leave him to us...and we'll let you go.

It's more whisper than command, more plea than demand. His once-kin are more single-minded than he remembers, which is why they are and always have been easy to bind or banish.

His own bindings are far more tenuous at present, but as necessary as this flesh he wears because free will isn't a trait of demon kind. Those that achieve it by their own means are quickly put down or just as easily trapped by their own lack of decisiveness. It is an advantage humans have over those that wear their souls on the outside as demons do.

It's a fascination he didn't expect.

There's nothing a demon can do to hide what it is without the assistance of illusion or misdirection. They wear their souls like armor. That humans are designed to use this soft and easily damaged flesh to protect and obscure their own souls, their true natures, seems counter to all that order demands. They can't even know each other fully, hiding so much. Or, at the very least, they have to work much harder at it.

Although in Sam's case, it's actually been his best defense. Souls take time to mature and Sam's has been forged hard and sharp, both in the old world and in this one. Not something Dean's master anticipated.

But it may be broken now, although not by the means intended. Betrayal can corrupt a soul and Sam has yet to betray much of anything, least of all his brother, no matter what Sam might think. He is selfish, but only in the ways humans need to be to survive.

His fingers hover over Sam's face, pushing the matted, dark hair back. There's a frown between his brows even asleep, a tightness to his jaw, all unaware.

There's a thousand ways Sam could have ended this and he hasn't because he can't see them. He still might not and telling him won't make a difference. There's no insider trading allowed with souls.

Dean's got no illusions that he's not as much a pawn in this as Sam. Although if this were a chessboard, Sam would be the white queen, left exposed on too many sides by bold knights and tradition bound bishops. The king, of course, has been of little help, except in keeping the black queen hemmed in. But there's a check looming, and Sam's the one with the space to maneuver. The black queen is in a fixed situation, holding an unassailable position but unable to move at all.

Dean's always preferred checkers.

The murmuring beyond the circle is fading, the grey becoming tinged with red; a blood dawn and it's probably more appropriate than not. It turns the blood on Sam's face, arms, and belly black; the rest of his skin looks flushed and warm even though it's not.

Inside he is, though, and Dean thinks he might miss that most of all. The temptation to mingle with human warmth is stronger than even the most elevated among his own can resist. Humans fear a hell of fire and desolation. Hell's colder than that. Darker. Less desolate than just barren. Empty.

Maybe that's the real price of wearing your soul on the outside. You can't protect what's always exposed.

He's left Sam's hands bound behind him and they are tinged blue, but the rest of him is still breathing, still warm. Dean can take this anytime he wants, but it's more than desire or even the need to feel Sam's fear rise to the surface.

A fascination, yes. Maybe more like an infection or addiction. Sam half-wakes when Dean shifts him over, smooths his hands over Sam's skin from shoulder to lower back. It occurs to Dean that as he is, he could run rogue through the villages, upset the little bubble of stability the Reavers provide. There could be whole new whispered fears of Reavers gone mad with the burden of their guilt.

A world gone mad again, but ultimately it wouldn't matter. He knows what humans are capable of. They'll let others fight for them, as the Reavers have, but most, when frightened enough, will turn rabid and vicious. It's the kind of world he once craved but there's less appeal now, subtler flavors to fear than the rank and file would feast upon.

Subtle, because humans will suffer much to gain what they want, even between themselves.

Soft flesh yields under his hands, and Sam makes a sound in his throat that's more than a whimper but less than a moan.

There's pain. Dean can taste it in the increasing pace and shallowness of Sam's breathing. See it in the flex of muscle and the shift of limbs to both accommodate the weight on his back and give ease to the raw, tender places that Dean assaults again with his own flesh. Penetrating the dry, tight, *hot* places, fingers gripping already sore muscles to give himself more leverage, until Sam's almost twisted on his side, his forehead pressed to the ground and his breathing stirring the dirt under his lips.

Even so, Dean's not particularly violent, not even a fraction of what he'd done in the darkness, or other times.

But he remembers times gentler still and there's some fractional triumph and even pleasure to be found in cooperation. He's felt it with others too. Eager women and some men. A different flavor to offering and taking as humans do, one to the other. "Maybe if you'd offered once in awhile, I'd have taken less," he murmurs into Sam's ear.

Sam's chuckle is more gasp than laughter but the amusement, however bitter, is real enough. "Lack of denial wasn't enough? Sorry. You were never *that* convincing."

"Oh, that hurts, Sam. Really it does." Dean slides a hand across Sam's hip, reaching and coaxing and Sam does groan, then tries to curl in on himself. It's instinct more than any real expectation of success. There's fresh blood smeared across his back again; the stitches have torn. Dean's arm slides against the slick stuff when his other hand

reaches around to grip Sam's chin, pull it up. "If you'd allowed yourself to forget, this would have been far less painful and over sooner. Betrayal can come from neglect too, Sammy," he hisses in Sam's ear and covers his mouth and nose with his hand.

So, yeah, it's not really offering or actively participating, it's all instinct and Sam's monkey brain fighting for survival. His body has a different idea about what that means and what it entails.

Sam's breath is hot and wet against his hand, teeth trying to score, to force Dean to let go, to provide air or respite. Dean hardly has to work for it at all when Sam's thrashing beneath him, even knowing he'll lose this fight. They tend to revisit this in similar patterns.

The tension in Sam's body breaks suddenly and his head is a heavy weight against Dean's palm even as Sam spills onto Dean's other hand and the dirt below. Dean doesn't let Sam's face press to the dirt, but it's the only consideration he offers, and heat flushes his body as he empties his own lust into Sam.

Dean rolls off and to his back just as the sun finally breaches the horizon. Beside him Sam is limp again, but breathing.

Dean feels that tiny tremor of anxiety fade when the sun touches his face and he remains. There's something to be said for having both day and night to work in. Shadows have their comfort but they are unstable protection even in the dark. Humankind had certainly proved that.

Leave it to them to push back the darkness for their own selfish desires. In so many ways this is all more the fault of their entire cursed race than even the fallen could have engineered. Forcing artificial light into the world, crowding out those that lived in darkness. They've laid claim to the land and the resources and maybe that's their right. Demons were never so adept at reshaping their world.

But the darkness was never theirs to conquer.

He has to hunt for the knife. The knots at Sam's wrists are so soaked with blood and sweat, they've become like an artificial scab.

Dean doesn't bother to scrape back the salt, but when he steps over it he feels a tingle.

It's surprising, like a small shock and he frowns and crouches, brushing at the dirtied white crystals with his hand and feels a definite burn on his palm. A warning.

He chews on his lip. Maybe not so surprising. The more he becomes himself, the less the protection this flesh will offer him. He needs to remember that.

Sam stirs, but he's clumsy and not fully in command of his body or senses. Dean uses the stock of the rifle to break the salt line, then reaches down and pulls Sam up and over his shoulder, traversing the short distance to the edge of the pond and leaving him there.

Some of their bags have spattered blood on them from the horse, but there's clean clothes and the salves and unguents and bandages are neatly packed in a pouch. He lays them out then once more hauls Sam up, but he's mostly on his feet as Dean drags him into the water.

It's cold enough to pull a curse from Sam, even as he almost slips. Dean forces him under but keeps him from drowning.

The memories that rise up when he soaps Sam's skin and hair, aren't really his. He knows that now, but there's no distinguishing them from his own and his own are still muddy, indistinct, too long suppressed.

He slips back almost without noticing it at first, making sure Sam's wounds are as clean as he can get them. He'll need hot water to do a proper job as he pulls Sam from the water and treats his wrists first even though they're probably the least of his injuries. Sam's eyes are unfocused despite the shock of the cold water and he only offers a token resistance when Dean binds his wrists and ankles again with rope this time, but not as tightly.

"Why bother?" Sam asks, shivering now, settled in a grassy patch while Dean builds up the fire.

"After all this, you think I just want you dead?" Dean huffs. "Think of this as being to our mutual benefit. You have what you need."

Sam blinks at him and Dean rocks back on his heels. "Do you remember the story of Lot and Sodom?" he prods.

It takes Sam a moment to find the connection but he nods, still shaking.

The water Dean is heating is no more than warm but he pours it anyway, pushes the cup into Sam's bound hands and makes him drink. Sam sips and for a moment it looks like he might vomit it back up, but he takes another drink and uses both hands can hold the cup himself. "Are you telling me you've got some kinship to the people who would

have ravaged angels?" Sam asks. It's a coherent thought, even if his voice is uneven.

"Cute. But no. I'm not human and you're no angel. Bargaining with the powers that be, Sam. That bit of negotiating is what brought you -- us -- here."

"I don't need a history lesson," Sam murmurs. "I was marked. I heard that. I already *knew* that."

"The last righteous man. The last to fall," Dean says and moves behind him with bandages and water and a freshly threaded needle.

"The deal was made, Sam. You were only the wager."

Sam flinches only slightly when the needle pierces his skin and despite his inclination to draw it out, Dean only repairs the damage wrought as quickly as he can. Sam is silent the whole time Dean sees to his wounds, bandages those he can. Dean frees Sam's ankles to let him pull on pants and shoes but slits a tunic up the sides to slip over his head and uses a strip of cloth to belt it before dressing himself.

He consolidates their supplies into one pack: mostly food, salt, weapons and ammunition. They'll probably have to spend another night on the road before reaching Creekside. Dean makes Sam carry the food and salt.

Sam is limping but Dean keeps the pace easy. They'll rest as needed but Dean's less concerned about keeping to the schedule and pace the Reavers set for themselves than he is that Sam be ready to face his own options.

"Shouldn't we all have turned to pillars of salt the moment we remembered?" Sam asks him and Dean grins.

"I didn't mean it quite that literally. Also that was Lot's wife. Oh, come on, Sam," Dean says, outright amused. "How difficult a leap is it? Lot bargained with *God* for fuck's sake. It's one thing for human beings to be the favored of all creation, but none of you were ever that righteous. You've been holding that inclination for the common good over the rest of us for a millennia. We got tired of it is all. What? Is this too simple for you?"

Sam looks confused and he stops, letting Dean tug on the lead wrapped around his bound wrists. "Find one righteous man in Sodom and the city will be spared. That's what Lot negotiated."

"Yes. Yes...you get a cookie. Only then what happened?" Dean asks. It's almost worth it to see the gears grinding in Sam's over analytical brain.

"There was only one..." Sam says. "Lot. And he left."

"--and you get a glass of milk too."

Sam shakes his head. "No. I wasn't the only one. That's not possible."

Dean makes an impatient noise and tugs the rope, setting Sam stumbling into walking again. "No. Not in the whole wide world. Hell, Sam, your brother sent most of those he knew with you. Salvation for those most likely to succeed. Of the marked, Sam. You got to lead the A-team. Uncorrupted, not incorruptible."

"And that's it? Corrupt my, what? My soul and I win the wager?"

"Well," Dean grinned again. "You win your brother. The game is ours to lose. Or win. Come on, Sam. It's not that big a stretch. This whole world is defined by your selfishness. Narrow your focus a little."

Sam stops again and Dean sighs. "Cut me loose."

"Uh, no. Because if I do, I think you'll do your level best to kill me, which means I'll have to beat the shit out of you and then have to carry your sorry ass all the way to Creekside. That's not gonna happen."

"Yeah, it will, because one way or another, you'll have to drag me there."

Dean smiles at him and loops the rope twice around his wrist before tugging hard. It takes a second vicious tug to drag Sam to his knees. "You've got a piss-poor way of showing gratitude. You've spent the collective efforts of a hundred lifetimes trying to figure this out and I give it to you and now you don't want it?"

"I want it more than you could possibly understand," Sam hisses at him. "Tell me you think it makes sense that you could simply *ask* one of your greedy cousins and have the answer handed over to you. Over to me. It's never that simple. This world is winning its own survival, with or without me. That's what's happening."

"Have I ever told you, you over think things? Because you do," Dean says. "One life for your brother's, Sam. A life taken for selfish reasons, for no other reason than you can. Hell, pick a child just to be doubly sure. Bingo, your soul's corrupted, the marker is called in. Your brother gets his freedom, the world reverts to what it was and you get to pay the price you're already so sure you owe."

Sam smiles at him and Dean isn't sure he likes it. "Reverts to what it was. Tell me you really believe that. Tell me that this one death

actually means that much -- because it's as much a sacrifice as any other and for some reason that never seems to work out for your kind. What's in this for you?"

It's instinctive and Sam sprawls backward, a perfect imprint of Dean's boot on his chest. "Even demons have ambition, Sam. I can think of better things to do with my time than crawl at the edge of shadows preying on the wary."

"I don't think you're going to get rewarded for failure."

Dean drops beside him. "Don't think I won't find a way to get satisfaction."

Sam doesn't even flinch only drops his head back, squinting up at the sky. "It'll be a poor second prize. You can lead me to the answer but you can't make me kill." He licks dry lips. "You're not even thinking this through. Exactly what do you think I win if it takes the death of an innocent to free my brother? He'd be trading one hell for another."

"Not his choice, is it?" Dean sneers.

Sam starts laughing and Dean settles back, disgusted. "You are weaker than I would have believed. It's not like they won't come back."

Sam pulls his hands to his face and wipes at his eyes. "But they won't. I thought it would be... we'd run out of room, out of time and end up with a fixed number of Reavers, but that's not what's happening, is it? They've played their part. No bargain can go unresolved forever. You have to either call or fold. You, or whatever you answer to, you're stuck with this."

Dean grips Sam's arms and forces them over his head, his face inches from Sam's. "It won't matter to your brother, Sam. It won't change for him. You remember where he is. Breathe deeply enough and I bet you can smell it, the flesh roasting on his bones, his eyes seared open and unseeing, that scream of his echoes in your head every night. Don't think I don't know it. That's the real horror of hell, Sam. It never ends and he'll never stop feeling it. You said it, giving in to this is the same as telling him he isn't worth it."

The tears in Sam's eyes aren't from laughter any longer but he doesn't break their locked gazes first. Dean does, rolling back on his calves and then to his feet, jerking Sam up to sitting and unsheathing his knife. "Well, maybe we'll have better luck in your next incarnation."

"There won't be one," Sam says.

"You seem awfully sure."

"Betting my life on it. All of them. You've got enough of Dean left in you to see it. There's only forward or back. This isn't the world you wanted. The rules won't change when no one remembers what they are. So, now you have the choice."

The blade leaves a thin line of blood along Sam's throat, but Dean presses no deeper. The etching on his flesh throbs as the skin tightens further, healing, but the skin around it isn't the ruddy tan of the rest of his flesh. It's darker, thicker.

"You've got nothing to offer."

"I've got nothing to lose," Sam says. "*They all come back.* It's never been about what I'd do, only what my intentions were. Tell me killing to save my brother is an offense that corrupts anything."

He's right and Dean fingers the scabs on his arm for a moment. The blade slips lower and slices through the rope. Sam rubs his wrists then looks at Dean. "Thank you."

His gratitude is honest. It makes Dean want to beat him until he can't talk. Instead he picks up his packs and starts walking. He doesn't look to see if Sam follows, but he hears him a few minutes later, gravel scraping under his feet.

They are still headed for Creekside which is a victory of sorts, Dean supposes.

He's been too long in this flesh, far too long since he actually thinks Sam is more right than wrong. He can summon Dean's memories but not his essence. He's lost his grip on it and since hell never willingly releases its hold on any that dwell within its confines, his only other option is that he's lost his grip on hell.

The skin of his arm itches where it's growing leathery and hard. He hasn't worked this hard to escape the gutters and trenches waiting for the scraps the humans toss his kind.

He kicks at the dirt, stares around at this bright, bitter world. He can't even smell the decay any longer. It's lingered all this time, clung to him.

He knows what the reward for failure is. Maybe he can find himself a nice, feisty female demon, settle down and raise imps and goats. They can spend their vacation terrorizing the countryside.

He's tempted to kill himself just to avoid it, if it would do him any good. "Hey, Sam?" he waits for Sam to catch up, but Sam's in no

hurry. The salt in the pouch at his side makes Dean wrinkle his nose at the scent -- too clean, too pure. "You remember when your brother told you he'd rather die than settle down in suburbia?"

"Yeah. I'm not so sure he wouldn't take that option now."

They match strides out of habit. "I think he would. I totally understand the revulsion."

Sam eyes him like he's lost his mind. He's still limping and Dean slows fractionally. "You know, even if you go to Chicago, it's not like anything will really change. You still have nothing to offer."

Nothing his master wants.

"What did he offer you?"

Dean chuckles, scuffs the dirt again. "This..." he lifts his hands to the bright air around them. "The elevated among us aren't limited to darkness, but there's limits even then. You have to push something else out of the way to climb our corporate ladder."

They've made it only a few miles when they hear the sound of horses behind them, and Dean turns first.

Rebecca rides like she was born to it, leading Sam's horse. "It came back in the middle of the night. I saw your campsite. You left a mess," she says, dismounting.

"We thought it better to move on since we were hoofing it,"

Dean says easily but Rebecca's looking at Sam, at the bandages on his wrists, the additional bruising on his face, the claw marks visible on his arms.

"Strange for them to come out so far," she says and eyes Dean with a level gaze.

It would be Rebecca, Dean realizes. Past and present and how much does the irony of it burn? Sam's right. It's unraveling faster than he expected, maybe faster than anyone expected, even his master.

But no...it settles then that there was more frustration to this than absolute conviction of success. They'd called him traitor last night for betraying his own kind but that was mere ambition.

"You look like you should ride for awhile, Sam," she says and it's a deft maneuver to lead his horse between them. Sam's gear is still intact, gun and knives, his journals.

No, it's always simpler than that. He's lost the veneer of humanity. He just hadn't realized it was so obvious since Sam already knew.

The gun in Rebecca's hand is steady.

"Rebecca, don't," Sam says.

"You know what he is."

"I know. I've always known."

"And you brought him among us? As one of *us*?"

"You'll notice the sun is shining, sweetheart," Dean says and grins at her.

He's wondering if *he'll* come back when Sam steps between them. "Becky, I need him to finish this."

"Finish what? We're stealing from ourselves, for ourselves," she says and the gun presses to Sam's chest. "They take enough."

She shoves him aside and Dean doesn't even try for his own gun. The alternative doesn't have much appeal -- he'll take the unknown; random chance is far closer to chaos and that, at least, is familiar.

He should remember this, the burning impact of a bullet to his chest. She only takes one shot, but truly, she'd have to be a truly wretched marksman to miss this close. He doesn't feel the second, only hears it, louder, sharper and Rebecca looks startled as well. Her eyes remain fixed on Dean's face and he's not sure how that's possible when he knows he's falling. It takes him a moment to realize she is too and that the dark leather of the vest she wears is growing darker still as the blood spreads and stains.

Sam looks neither shocked nor appalled. Not even horrified.

"I don't think this counts as one for your brother," Dean rasps out and can taste blood in the back of his mouth. The bitch managed to pierce his lung. He can't help but laugh though.

Rebecca's eyes are open and unseeing and Sam pauses only long enough to close them before crouching next to Dean, using the scrap of cloth from his belt and then his shirt to pad and bind the wound. "It's just a bullet," Sam says and there are tears on his face again even though his voice is steady. Dean isn't sure if they are for him or for Rebecca.

His breath rattles wetly in his chest, but he manages to get mounted with Sam's help.

Sam lingers though, staring down at the body of a woman who was once a friend. There's no place to dig a grave even if he had the tools, and not enough rocks close by to build a cairn. He kneels anyway and presses his lips to her forehead. Dean doesn't have to hear him to know there's an apology there.

When he mounts, he's dry eyed and Rebecca's blood has stained his hands as much as Dean's has.

"Three Reavers missing. Someone will start looking," Sam says and leans over to catch the reins of the horse Dean's on to lead it.

"We're not missing," Dean says.

"We will be," Sam says and turns them north.

It's all Dean can do to hold on both literally and figuratively. If the bullet hasn't killed him yet, it probably will. Odd that now he's presented with it, his own death is less appealing. "That was a wasted opportunity if ever there was one," he says. Poking at Sam is distraction enough.

"Maybe. It was pretty selfish," he says.

"Splitting a pretty fine hair there to save your brother," Dean says, but he wonders what changed Sam's mind.

There's a stiffness to Sam's back that seems more defiant than hopeful. "I wasn't trying to save my brother," Sam says and urges both horses to a trot. It jars Dean enough to pull a grunt of pain from him but Sam doesn't slow.

It's miles before Dean realizes Sam wasn't trying to save himself either.

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XI.

Sam wishes he could claim it's some brilliant flash of insight that unraveled all the complex threads weaving this nightmare together, but it isn't. And there's still a high probability that he might be wrong, but it really doesn't matter any longer. He's heading them roughly toward Chicago and days early but that doesn't matter either. He doesn't plan on coming back to this life without his brother and since he doesn't actually think it's possible to bring Dean into this life, it's a pretty moot point.

If you think I'm going to let you kill yourself after all this...

He can almost hear Dean say it; royally pissed off, that flush he gets to his neck and cheeks when he's really angry and not just aggravated. He'd like to see that expression again. Dean never gets that angry about things he doesn't care about and the things he does care about can be counted on one hand. His brother's a man of narrow but passionate interests.

He glances back to see his familiar companion bent low over his saddle, but he's still breathing. Still bleeding, too, although that looks to have slowed. Sam probably needs to do a better patch job on him, but it can wait. He's not going to be able to ride long himself, not if he wants to make this trip with any strength left at all. All his bones feel loose in his skin and he's aching in places that really don't appreciate the hard leather of his saddle.

Dean would applaud the urge to put as much distance between them and the need for explanations as possible. If they can move on until nightfall, it's unlikely anyone will pick up their trail, and Sam's got his doubts on how hard they'll look. A dead Reaver, *Rebecca*, a couple of dead demons, and a disemboweled horse. Chances are they'll reach for the easiest explanation, but Reavers tend to be slightly more protective of their own.

He doesn't disagree with this facsimile of his brother, but the decision came far easier than he'd expected, or maybe he's just past caring. He's not quite sure that he could casually walk up to someone and slit their throat, but he supposes it doesn't make any difference. He's always been able to kill, it's his willingness that gets checked more often than not.

The world didn't suddenly stop, or the ground open up. The demons didn't suddenly rise up in the daylight.

Well, no more than usual.

It's a little more twisted than even he can grasp. Dean, this Dean, is his, to deal with or not, he thinks, but it's more than that. Three centuries makes a tight bond even between enemies.

He might well have killed Dean himself, had it come to it, but there's something to be said for taking responsibility for evil, even when it's not your own, and Sam had started doing that five or six lifetimes back.

The earliest he recalls is also the longest time he can recall either of them surviving. Early on, before they'd even managed to track down all the various villages and settlements - and hadn't that taken them years, years for Sam to remember all the places he'd already been, that they'd already been - long enough to realize not just their lives had changed but the geography as well. There is too much population concentration in the Midwest, not enough on the coasts. From New Orleans nearly to the border of Canada; not necessarily the most hospitable of places despite the arable land. People tended to settle near water and rivers and then spread outward, not suddenly spring up in the middle of, oh, say, Montana.

Places he'd been, even if he didn't recognize them any longer. Places Dean had been, had spoken of. He supposes it's a good thing Dean had made it as far as New Orleans: the loss of jambalaya to the known world would have been a real tragedy.

He's a little punchy, he knows. A little crazier than he'd been the day before, or the day before that.

He really should have paid more attention when his father and Dean had tried to teach him over and over again how to know when someone was bluffing. There were always signs; even demons had tells. It's a small comfort to know his brother had missed this one as well.

It isn't even anything the demons the night before said particularly, except for this: if this wasn't the world they'd wanted, if they hadn't wanted to lay better claim to the night and the dark places, then why any of this? You don't make bets to lose and the fate of the world can't really be played like the stock market, where you can make money even when things fail. It smacks of playing your last dollar on a super lottery ticket. All or nothing.

The odds always broke for the house.

Demons hadn't created the world; demons created nothing, They only altered the environment to suit their needs, not entirely unlike humans. And it didn't matter which god or gods or what branch of science you put your faith in, there was the world and then there was everything else. It didn't matter who or what had been there at the start, only that they hadn't been there *before*.

And Sam had missed it because, like God, or a more amorphous creator, or the big bang, Dean had been there before Sam. Before he was born and every day thereafter but despite the uncanny echo of Dean in this world, Dean is neither creator nor destroyer. He's only the fixed center, the stable isotope, unlikely to break down or change.

Even now.

The last to fall. Had Lot remained Sodom and Gomorrah would have survived. That's a point of old world theology he bets the church didn't look too hard at for fear of revealing a far less authoritarian God than they needed for discipline.

It makes him wonder what Lot's wife saw that turned her to salt.

Salt that is one of the surest protections against demons, against the evil that stalks the earth.

He can only hope he's better at bluffing than he is at reading them.

He stops them once and rebandages Dean's wound. There's blood on Dean's lips, but he's got nothing much to say to Sam and Sam isn't sure if it's because he's too hurt to actually formulate thoughts or if he's just run out of words.

He finds them a stopping place just outside of what used to be Springfield. Running water and enough firewood to hold the darkness back, but he's not sure he can make the salt he has left last for more than a couple of nights. He'll need to collect it back up in the morning.

"You could just leave me," Dean says on a wet sounding breath when Sam gets him settled against a rock. He sounds less like Dean than ever, but he watches Sam with an expression that's either entirely confused or else contemplating the hundred or so ways he might be able to rip Sam's heart out.

Sam heats up water to ease the bandage off. The wound starts bleeding again but the bullet's gone through. Probably a good thing because his hands aren't steady enough to have to go digging for it.

When he offers Dean water to rinse and spit, by the third time, there's little blood left to be cleared. That's good.

"I'm lousy hostage material," Dean says. He can manage a cup of brothy stew -- soaked jerky and handful of boiled oats and grains. Beef porridge.

"You aren't a hostage," Sam says and eats his own food slowly, watching the sun edge closer to the horizon. He's going to have to protect the horses as well. Dean eats, but he's watching Sam, a slight frown on his pale face.

"I don't have any other answers for you either."

Sam gets up to bring in more firewood, eyeing their campsite, judging space and how best to arrange them all. The salt line doesn't have to be thick, it just has to be solid. He clears rocks and debris before bringing the horses in, tethering them closest to the creek. He'll still have to stay awake to make sure they don't try for the water or otherwise obscure the line he'll lay.

"You could keep riding. If they come, I can keep them occupied."

Sam glances over at him and smiles a little. Dean doesn't even know he's doing it. "We'll be okay," he says and Dean makes an impatient sound. Sam ignores him.

It's nearly full dark by the time Sam finishes and it's almost more effort than he can muster to throw more wood on the fire before he settles in beside Dean. His back is tender when he leans against the stone but he'll deal. The pain will help keep him awake.

The horses are quiet and even long after moonrise, Sam can hear nothing outside their circle except the barest rustling of wind and the muttering of the stream. The insects hum along, but he tenses every time they stop for a moment, waiting for them to resume. He's got his gun loaded and the bow strung just to his right, and Dean's resting to his left but only barely touching.

Dean tries lying down but his breathing rattles wetly in his chest and when he sits up again he coughs up as much phlegm as blood.

There's nothing Sam can do for him.

Sam dozes once, unable to keep his eyes open, and wakes when Dean leans against him heavily. For a moment Sam waits, listening to the liquid breathing, and then he reaches over to find a pulse. It seems strong but Dean's skin is cool. Sam on the other hand, feels flushed

and achy and when he reaches over to press his fingers to Dean's throat, his shoulder twinges sharply enough to bring tears to his eyes.

It will take them three days at least and that only if they push hard. If Dean were less injured, they'd ride through the night and they might still have to. Thus far it seems as if nothing has followed or found them, but Sam isn't trusting luck or good fortune.

By dawn, the horses are straining toward the water and Sam eases Dean back against the rock to see to them. Standing brings a wave of dizziness and not a little nausea and he wonders if he's not more shocky than he thought.

Nevertheless he leads the horse to the water's edge and then promptly loses what food he had in his stomach from the night before. Cold water on his face helps some but the world's a little less sharp than it was the day before.

It takes time to gather the salt and he does that first, as much as he can. When he's done, Dean is awake and watching him and he's managed to reheat the water from the night before. Sam throws a handful of herbs into the water and starts loading up the horses.

Hard biscuits and tea are the best Sam can manage and he uses the rest of the tea to bathe Dean's wounds again before bandaging them, using the swollen leaves as a compress of sorts.

He manages to get Dean into the saddle but needs the rock for himself.

The day passes much like the one before. Sam heads them roughly north again. There's a village a bit further west, along the long arc of villages lining the western side of Illinois, but it's too far out of their way.

They take a break at midday, but Sam's more worried about the horses than them.

"If you kill us before we get there...kind of defeats the point, doesn't it?" Dean asks him.

"I can't protect us out here," Sam says. He's not sure he can at Chicago either, but he has some supplies there, a rough shelter. The demons and monsters and dark creatures tend to give the cities a wide berth. He's never really understood why except that no one lives there, but even when the Reavers go to them for salvage the demons rarely show.

"You're going to have to sleep some time," Dean points out. He sounds stronger and he's not as pale now that they've stopped moving. "If you don't want me to help, why not leave me back there?"

He sounds genuinely confused but Sam only shakes his head. He's not entirely sure himself, except this Dean is as much his responsibility as his brother. But he digs in the saddle bags, come up with a pistol and the other shotgun. He loads both and moves them to Dean's mount.

"You said you won't come back," Dean says when Sam helps him up again.

"I don't think I will. I don't plan to," Sam says and Dean grips his wrist, staring at him intently. Sam grips the horse's mane but doesn't try to pull away. "Humans can't change their natures. They won't keep to the bargain made, they *can't*," he says quietly. "We can't. The demon you killed the other night was right. This world is moving on...the ones being born won't remember and eventually even those who do will be gone. We've never been good at reliving the past."

"You've still got nothing to offer," Dean insists.

"Rebecca's dead."

"You said that wouldn't matter. You sold me."

"I think it does, now. It's not what he wanted, but it's as close as he can get to not losing entirely. Selfish intent -- to save you."

Dean drops his gaze, stares out over the broken meadow and scattered corpses of trees. "But not your brother. Sam, even if my -- if he takes it -- do you have any idea what you are actually facing here? Your brother won't thank you."

"Yeah, well, Dean's always had a problem expressing gratitude," Sam says and gives him a leg up.

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It takes them four days, not three and by the time they reach the barren area that marks the outskirts of what was Chicago, Dean's moving easier and his color is better. His arm is still weak and the cough follows him the way he follows Sam even once Sam drops the lead on his horse.

Sam's feverish. The wound in his back has gone sour on him, even though Dean's cleaned it twice. He's drained it and the pus that

flowed free smelled foul enough to make them both gag. Sam's just fuzzy enough in the brain to wonder if this isn't some kind of cosmic, last ditch effort to keep him from finishing this.

It's another few days until the vernal equinox, before the day and night balances out the light and dark.

Chicago collapsed in on itself. Sam isn't sure of the specific geology beneath the city and never bothered to find out, but the city collapsed, Lake Michigan rushed in to fill the hollow spaces, and now it's a surrealistic landscape of broken skyscrapers, bridges that arch to nowhere, and roads and highway that lead into a mirror-black water that actually burned for years before the fuel slicks were expended. Now it looks like a huge pothole on a wide road where the water scares even the rats, and what foliage grew at the edges has long since died off. The ground is as contaminated as the water. They have to be careful of both.

Sam built a shelter here, years ago, of broken asphalt and concrete. There's drinkable water a few miles away but it's more cave than cabin. Beside it is the failing, fractured blacktop that leads east and north into the city, running flat and straight until it disappears into the stagnant water.

"You could go," Sam murmurs into the darkness, two days after they make camp. "Take the horses."

Dean's taken on more of their necessary tasks, like he's done a hundred times before and Sam thinks he knows why he's stayed but he won't say it and neither will Dean.

"I've waited with you, for you, nearly every time," he says gruffly. They don't have enough water to bathe Sam to keep his fever down. Sam had asked Dean to cauterize the wound the night they first arrived, surprised when he balked, but it's past time when it would make a difference. Sam can feel the infection down to his bones.

"Let me go with you," Dean asks the day before, and Sam can only see him through fuzzy tunnel vision.

"I've never stopped you before. It was never me that stopped you," Sam says and then lays a hand on Dean's arm, fingers curling around where his name is inscribed on the flesh. Dean looks less like his brother than he ever has, or maybe Sam's just seeing more clearly now with fever and fatigue filtering out the things that are unimportant. "Don't let me miss this. If there was anything, ever, you felt you owed me, make it be this."

Dean looks angry enough to beat him but he only gets up and stalks away. Sam hears him mount and wonders if he misread him completely.

A few hours before dawn and Dean hasn't returned. It's all Sam can do to turn the other horse free, drink the last of the water and shoulder the light pack he's going to need.

It's not the distance as much as the timing of it all, Sam knows, and puts his foot on the broken asphalt as soon as the sun breaks the horizon.

He's made it a mile before he hears the horse behind him, but he doesn't stop, even when the horse does and the slap of flesh on the animal's flank makes him smile.

"We're kind of scraggly-looking for saviors," Dean says when he catches up.

Sam's smile doesn't leave him but he doesn't look. He can't see Dean; his vision's narrowed to the road in front of him and he's afraid if he does anything but keep looking and moving forward he'll fall over and never get up. He's too close to even test that theory. "We aren't saviors," he says. He's not, anyway. He could be wrong about Dean. It's wrong, and the twisted logic of that makes him stumble.

Dean's arm comes around his waist and steadies him. "Isn't that what we're doing? What you're doing? Trying to save the world?" He says it with a dryness that's somewhere between sarcasm and outright sneering.

Sam swallows. "No. I'm only trying to save my brother."

"Same difference," Dean says and his grip tightens.

Sam can see where the road starts dipping into the lake now, a few hundred yards ahead. It drops sharply and even from here he can smell the sourness of the water, stagnant, so fouled even algae won't grow in it. It's slick and greasy-looking and there are places where it looks like glass. It's ancient antifreeze and oil, rotting vegetation and long dead animals. It's the La Brea tar pits without the preserving properties and history. When you step in it, it doesn't so much slop against you as try to soak into your skin like some kind of twisted moisturizer.

"Sam..." Dean sound hesitant, slowing, but Sam pushes forward. "I don't think swimming in that is a good idea."

Sam ignores him, half expects him to drop back. He's surprised when Dean's grip tightens, not to stop him but like he might be willing to drag him forward, no matter what he thinks of this.

He'd explain if he could, only he's not sure Dean's -- this Dean's - experience will be the same as his. There's a reason why, in all the times Sam's made this journey, he's made this part of it alone. At least his thinks there is.

Nevertheless, the water soaks into his boots and his pants, cloth sucking it in like a sponge until Sam can feel it on his skin. It's neither cold nor hot; it's the temperature of his own fevered skin. It's like the air only thicker, oilier, and he can only vaguely remember the fear he felt the first time he breached this barrier, the first time he even found the courage to try or realized it was possible.

Dean makes one more muted protest before Sam sees it, feels it, when the barrier goes thin, when the reflected shadows of the clouds above turn to different shadows in the water, when they move and dart around him and the sound of Dean's nervous breathing starts to get lost under a different hum of sound, under a rush of air and the jostling of currents against stone and glass. They didn't call Chicago the Windy City for no reason.

Even before it seems the blackened water will rise to their chests or over their heads, it gives way to the shadows of evening, of after dark, pierced with bright lights and sounds that haven't been heard in centuries. The shining sun of the barren plains they've left behind give way to the halogen incandescence of streetlights and headlights and neon marquis.

Dean falters, like he didn't expect this, and maybe he didn't. Maybe he didn't know or was never meant to, or maybe he's still the last-stand effort between failure and complete failure.

Sam can see people too, although they're shadows, ghosts, just like the buildings and the cars, moving slowly at first but picking up speed until they seem to almost blur by him.

The world as it was keeps to its own frenzied pace; it's a narrow corridor of time and displaced space between what was and what is.

Even blurred and indistinct, Sam can feel the throb and hum of the city under his feet. There are more souls occupying this one section of Chicago than occupy the whole of the world that's been his own reality for the last few centuries.

And it's not illusion or dreamscape, it's not false or faked. He used to think so, but the raw pain in his shoulder came with him. The rattling looseness of his bones, and the wet-slick feel of the sweat on his chest and his legs and along his hairline all came with him. He's come here before missing fingers, with scars and wounds and once without his left hand entirely. He's been here as almost a boy and as an old man and every age in between.

The two worlds aren't even parallel, not really. The one he knows is pushing toward a new future, maybe not bright and shining, but a chance to do it all differently, maybe. The old one is still moving faster, most of its occupants unknowing, innocent and naïve, unseeing of the destruction that's coming.

In this place, with Sam's presence, they don't run parallel so much as overlap, the old world biting the tail of the new and the new one leaping forward, putting distance between them.

He'd explain it to Dean if he could, why those last few pieces seemed to complete the puzzle he's been working on life after life after lifetime. That new lives were starting the process and the old, the ones that remember, are giving way. That a near-demon with his brother's face and body and his curious will not to be thwarted or bested, would suddenly remember why and who and what it was.

That Sam would or could finally admit to himself that his brother, who he loved beyond all things reasonable or right or even decent, hadn't so much manufactured a future in his sacrifice but just a different kind of hell. One where there was no chance of them reconciling.

He chose this route because the road brings him closet to where it all started and ended: the last vestiges of a decades-old public housing project that never quite succeeded. To the old narrow row houses with their businesses on the street level and their living quarters above. To the one turned into a hotel that only vagrants actually ever used until it was condemned and abandoned but never torn down because the buildings that flanked it wouldn't survive the deconstruction and their owners weren't done with them yet.

The door of it looks to be boarded over but it gives easily under even Sam's diminished strength. Inside, the noises outside, muted as they were, fall to a hush and murmur.

Dean lets go of him and Sam has to clutch at the wall to keep from falling.

"Sam...I can't..."

Sam's surprised he's made it this far. He does look then, feeling lightheaded and maybe even a little disappointed. He still looks so much like Dean, from the quick darting of his gaze to the stairs, to the way his body strains to move forward only to stagger back. There's no lack of determination there, or will.

There are some barriers even love can't breach. Death is one of them.

Sam manages to stand and moves closer, reaching up to touch the familiar face, drag a thumb over the frowning lips. There's blood on Dean's shirt again, as red as Sam's own. "It's okay. I'd never have made it this far without you. Thank you," he says, and the frown deepens, the green eyes darken and narrow.

Dean's mouth under his is unyielding at first, in anger or something else. It doesn't really matter to Sam what this thing, this creature, who's filled the gap in his life, his heart, and his soul, feels or doesn't feel. Actions or intentions aside, there's only been one other person in Sam's life, in any of them, he's trusted with so much of himself. It doesn't stop because he's trying to break that trust on two fronts.

But Dean's mouth softens under his and his fingers dig harshly into Sam's hair and then into his shoulder. The pain is welcome, right this second.

It's just a kiss. Not even a particularly good one, but it's the first Sam's ever offered.

He doesn't wait or look to see if anything's returned. He makes no promises and Dean doesn't say anything either. The stairs are all Sam can see. The rotting wood and linoleum, the graffiti-obscenity-laden walls. He passes a shadow on the second floor, a blurred shadow that's indistinct and yet familiar, moving too slow when everything else in the city is moving too fast. He'd comfort his father if he could, but John was left to find his own answers, the same way Sam was.

Even before he reaches the third floor, the air is heavy in his chest and his muscles are leaden and move too slowly. It's not fatigue or pain. The air is becoming thinner, hotter, rolling over Sam like a sudden heat wave, but it's the dry, bitter, hungry heat of fire that's stealing air and strength - but not his resolve.

He can see the glow of it around the frame of the door. Can feel it stretching through the walls where the ancient paint is already

starting to bubble and boil and scorch the plaster underneath. He doesn't have the strength or balance or even the panache to kick the door in. It isn't locked anyway.

It's mind over matter when he reaches for the doorknob, feels the metal sear the flesh of his palm and he has to actively fight his own brain not to let go, to turn the knob and push.

Even knowing what to expect, he still finds himself recoiling, wanting to drop as intense heat billows outward, singeing his hair, his eyes. The hairs on his arm shrivel and turn to ash and even trying to breathe is like drowning. Everything in him screams to run, that he can't survive this, that his flesh will burn from his bones. He enters anyway, staggers and drops. He's worn as few clothes as possible and he pulls at them as they start to smolder and then catch fire, stripping himself bare.

There's no more air near the floor than higher up. The heat and fire that rolls across the ceiling and down the walls is so intense there's not even any smoke. If he looks hard enough the bed in the room, the furnishings, would be blackened representations of the furniture in his old apartment, the one he shared with Jess, a bedroom where he dreamed and talked about a future he really thought he might have someday.

If he thought about it hard enough, he might even see flickering remnants of his own nursery here.

But he's less concerned with his surroundings than he is with the source. There's a shadow in the corner, untouched and uncaring, though vastly interested, and Sam ignores it too. The center of the room is clear, the floor boards scorched and only long experience allows Sam to move when his body says there is not enough air and his mind is already screaming for release. The blood on his wound dries into a hard scab, there's no moisture in his mouth, and if everything were not already covered in a hellish red glow he knows his skin would already be red and blistering.

Deceitful and desperate or not, a bargain is a bargain and Sam doesn't have to wait long for the flames above him to start peeling back, for the source and target of the inferno to show himself.

If Sam had the moisture left in his body, he'd weep. If he had the strength he'd reach up and pull Dean down from the ceiling, but the shadows and the fires have to surrender him once more or Sam would have snatched him free a thousand times before.

Bargain or no bargain, the fire releases Dean unwillingly and Sam has to brace himself when his brother falls, has to be careful when he catches him, because his skin is charred and blackened, flaking under Sam's fingertips.

Almost immediately the fire retreats, sullen and unhappy, pulling back into the corners of the room, still smoldering along the walls. Air rushes in to fill the vacuum left behind, and Sam leans over his brother, knowing even the cooling touch of unheated air will be agony to a body that has no flesh to protect it.

Dean can't speak or move yet. His eyes are open, looking glazed and clouded, his mouth open in a rictus that speaks of endless screaming. Sam can't even feel him breathing or hear his heart beating for the rushing in his ears.

The shadow detaches itself from the wall and Sam ignores it. He'll get to the devil in his own good time.

There's agony in watching this, too, and more than once Sam has recognized his own cruelty in returning here year after year. It's Persephone's bargain, except instead of six months in hell and six months walking in the sunlight, Dean gets a single day and it takes him most of it to heal enough to understand once more the difference between constant agony and blessed relief. The relief doesn't last very long at all, the last of the pain and the damage peeling away just minutes before the day closes in on itself again and it starts over.

Sam doesn't move, even when the charred flesh starts to flake away, revealing raw, bloodied, fresh, new skin below. Not even when Dean blinks and his mouth closes fractionally as he takes the first breath that isn't laced with scalding heat back into lungs that haven't healed fully yet.

There's no place on Dean's body Sam can touch that won't hurt him, nothing at all he can do for him over the long hours. His muscles cramp and his own burns, which don't heal, sing to him in waves of pain and small seizures that he ignores as best he can.

Somewhere along the way his own body finds moisture enough to both sweat and form tears and he smears them on the freshly forming skin along Dean's temple.

Dean still can't speak. That will take more time yet, but his eyes, beneath the pain and the agony are bright and clear and there's some point where his tears mingle with Sam's.

The shadow behind Sam is silent, but Dean's eyes dart to it and Sam strokes his head carefully, lightly. "Shhhh. Shhhh." Sam says. "Nothing it can do to me now that it hasn't already done." Even now, in the face of everything he's endured, Dean can't stop, won't stop. It's what's drawn this out for so long.

Dean is more stubborn than hell could ever hope to be.

Dean can move before his voice comes back, the accusation in his eyes something Sam really can't take when he can take everything else. Not accusing Sam of bringing this on Dean, but accusing him of trying to undo it. Then and only then does Sam bother to look up, half casting his gaze over his shoulder at the demon, the devil, waiting there.

The hand/claw that grips his shoulder is ice cold. It's a weird kind of comfort but the shock of it makes Sam hiss. It steals the heat from his skin. Eases the burns he'd rather endure if only because he should share that much with his brother. It isn't lost on him that the same touch could ease Dean's agony as well and it isn't offered.

"And what promises do you bring me this time? What pleas?"

The voice is deep and low, pleasant even, in that rubber-on-road humming kind of way.

The cold in Sam's shoulder has gone from being a relief to its own kind of burn, like he can feel the blood slow and start freezing in his veins. It closes up his throat, sends his stomach somewhere down beneath the floor, the building, into the sewers. He can taste it in the back of his mouth. Somewhere, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a flicker of light; sunlight on a prism, glinting off water and he swallows.

"You wanted corruption. A single act of selfishness. There's blood on my hands and not by accident or from protecting an innocent."

The claws dig deeper and Sam feels a more painful grip on his wrist; Dean's blistered fingers and sharp edged nails digging into his skin. There's only a rasp of sound, a whisper that has no words but he knows what his brother is saying.

"It's not that simple." The voice rumbles down into his bones.

"Corruption is not a single act or a single intention and you were protecting someone."

The claws dig deeper and jerk him backward. Dean cries out in a horrible gurgling sound as the support Sam's offered his body is taken

away suddenly and Sam can regret that but only for a moment. Or maybe for the rest of eternity. He hits the wall hard, sending a shock through his body and wrenching a groan out of him when the walls shudders and charred plaster falls from the ceiling. In the corners, the flames burn a little brighter.

"It doesn't matter," Sam manages. "It was a limited time offer. You should have said something sooner."

That flickering brightness that he can't quite see shimmers again, but Sam only barely notices it when the form that holds him to the wall like it's trying to hang Sam there, shrugs and the shadows fall away.

There's nothing quite like a blinding brightness to show you how dark the world's really become and even knowing what it is, who it is, doesn't enable Sam to look directly at him. Myth or faith, there's only one creature that could ever bargain for everything and it doesn't matter if he calls himself Lucifer, or Ahriman, or the Pope.

Man was created when God's first favorite disappointed him and thus free will was born and never left the world again in anything that came afterward, be it the Neanderthals on the plains or the pansies going crazy in Missouri Mosely's window boxes.

"And yet you came anyway, knowing you only had to wait."

That deep voice cuts to Sam's guts and his groin, because there's promises there, there always have been. Sam would like to spit in its face but he still can't look and his eyes are fixed on Dean's face. He's forced himself over to his side, and his skin is still horribly raw, blood painting skin that hasn't healed yet, cracked lips trying to form words that he can't say with no moisture yet to loosen his tongue or untighten his throat.

"There's more than an end to his agony. That was supposed to be me," Sam says. "Your own minions think I was a poor bargain but it was never about me or us...it was remaking the world in your own image. You promised obedience. I'm surprised anything smart enough to create the universe bought into that a second time."

Sam isn't sure he's right, or he hasn't been up until this moment, until he feels the sear and burn across his belly, the ripping pain as muscles are severed and the thin sheath threatens to let his insides spill out. He can feel the blood welling up in his throat but he's owed something for all of this. "I took a life for my brother and I was already dying when you started this."

"You've traded nothing for nothing. The world will fall anyway. Did you think what I offered is less than what will come? Because it will be far more random. There will be no selection, no order." It leans in and the words are bright and sharp as ice. "Six hundred and sixty-six souls over seventy-four generations. They all fell. Until you."

Sam doesn't actually believe that -- not that he's the only one not to fall, but that he did it on his own. That odds always favor the house and the bringer of dawn apparently has forgotten that as well. "You can lose me or take what I bring," he says. "My brother's life for my soul. You've already got your claws in it. It's the best I can do."

"Sam..." It's more breath than voice and Sam wants to close his eyes but he can't. "Don't do this...it can't..."

Sam doesn't know what it's taken for Dean to pull this much of himself back from hell. He's not healed. He shouldn't be able to move, much less talk. "You marked me from the start," Sam hisses out. "I was already dying. I've killed. It's enough," he says and those bright shimmers in the corner are growing brighter.

He was dying when this started. Caught unawares, off guard, the same ripping pain in his gut he feels now. He'd felt like an idiot, never seeing the shadow behind the door, caught like an amateur and dropping to his knees without getting even a shot off. He'd had holy water in his hand and it had lapped at the feet of the thing before him and done nothing.

*Blessed are the light bringers for they shall show the way.
Blessed are the fallen for they shall rise up again.*

He hadn't even had time to call out for Dean, for help, to warn him. And for the third time, Dean had carried him from the fire that erupted, recognizing the trap for what it was, their father on his way to stop them.

Only this time the fires that came to claim Sam wouldn't let him go. Sam can still remember the challenge being tossed down, Dean gripping his arms and Sam staring down on him, knowing he was dying, bleeding out and his blood was fueling the fire already licking the walls.

And Dean wouldn't let go. Sam's blood had streaked his face, his clothes, his jacket, painted his lips red, and Dean would not let go even when the fire licked at his hands, his face, scorching his face and hair.

It would have been death, no matter how horrible. Sam hadn't done anything worthy of condemnation. Dean apparently thought he had.

But this wretched angel hadn't killed Dean, only used him to feed the fires that had come to claim Sam. Guilty or not, damned or not, Dean hadn't been marked; his soul wasn't part of the deal made. He could lose his life and his soul could be held hostage for Sam's failure, but there was nothing of him that could be claimed for ever, not by this creature who used darkness to cloak its own nature.

If the world was going to end again, Dean was better suited to see it through than Sam ever had been.

"Your death was already mine to command," it said, still angry, or hopeless. Sam didn't care.

"But Rebecca's wasn't," Sam said. "Not mine to take. You want me, you have me...but if you want a life to punish me for, it has to be hers, not his. You can't keep me otherwise. You'll have to let me die. That's a little too easy on me, don't you think?"

The blood dripping along his legs is already starting to burn and there's smoke curling off the already charred wood.

He's let go suddenly and he drops, unclear why until he sees the blur that was his brother, his father, reaching with more courage than sense.

It's already starting again, Sam can feel it. But he wants it said, wants it *done*. "Do we have a deal? My soul for my brother's life." It's not anywhere close to the deal the devil wanted but it's what he's got.

"For the blood on your hands, yes. Done," it hisses at him and shrugs John Winchester off like a fly.

Sam didn't expect the pain to start so soon. It's not from the fire or the gutting he can fully feel now, but from his brother's voice, the scream from an already raw throat. This time, when Sam's blood falls, it hits both his father and his brother and his only real comfort is that he doesn't think his mother or Jessica did anything more than die, however painfully because he can't see them when the fire sears his eyes and rips his own scream from his throat.

This won't end. He knows it. And he can be blind and deaf and dumb and still hear and see and scream. He can feel air rush into the room when the door is opened and he can only pray that his father will get Dean out, knowing that anyone who chose to listen stopped doing so the minute he made his deal. Maybe even before that.

Imagine his surprise when he feels himself falling again, when arms and hands -- several of each -- pull at him until he's dropping, caught, and then being carried where cooler air licks at his skin.

There's that dropping sense of being gutted again, a muffled scream that isn't even vaguely human and the fire follows them out into the hall and down the stairs.

His father's bearing most of his weight and Dean's hand is on his chest but there's another arm wrapped around his legs and a leering, smug, not quite human face obscured by the fire behind them, the smoke and the sound of sirens.

"Technicalities are a bitch, you know, Sam?" that sneering visage tells him and then Sam loses it because they're all falling, stumbling out of the building and into the first breach of dawn.

Chicago, like New York, is a city that doesn't know how to sleep late.

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XII.

Dean can remember how it started but not how it ends and he knows that's wrong, that the end is here, under his hands, and that the cracked concrete under his knees, while hellishly hot, isn't actually hell. That the cool air brushing his face and his chest and his legs has no place in what he knows, only in what he knew, and if he can remember before, why can't he remember now?

There's sirens and voices and blood rushing in his ears, and someone pulls him up and away and he fights back because his hand is slipping from Sam's chest.

"We have to move, Dean. Come on, son." It's his father's voice and he knows that big hand and that deep voice, even raw and cracked as it is. He moves because Sam is moving or being moved and he's afraid if he loses him now, he'll never get him back.

It takes him a little longer to realize they aren't moving far -- only across the street and even here the heat is horrific and the blinking circling lights of white-red-blue-yellow make his eyes water. There's screaming and shouting and he has to look away when the fire stretches upward toward the roof. It will burn up, then down, and there's a fine mist in the air from the hoses, and he shivers despite the heat.

Someone lays a coat or a blanket across his shoulders, and it irritates the raw places he can still feel along his back, his legs, his arms. He can't feel his hand except where it's touching Sam's chest, only he's slipping again, his father turning Sam; and somehow Sam's head ends up pillowed against Dean's lap. He reaches for the dark hair and finds ash and oozing blood and sticky skin and still he can't remember how this ends.

It started with a bet. Before that it started with deception and lies, but half of a good poker game is bluffing, which is a kind of lying, and Dean's always been good at it. It started with Sam dying and ended with Dean being unable to and still he thought it was a good deal on his part, because Sam dying before him was never something he'd signed on for, never something he'd tolerate, never something he could *live* with if he had even the slightest chance of stopping it.

Someone gives him water and then holds the bottle because Dean still can't feel his hands. The water feels colder than it is, easing the

desert dryness of his mouth and throat, and sets off coughing that he's pretty sure is going to result in a broken rib or two.

Sam's hair is burned off to ash to his skull, and there's more on his back and his upper arms and Dean keeps trying to brush it off until he realizes it's not that Sam's clothes are singed and burned, it's charred skin crumbling under his fingertips.

This isn't how it ends. This isn't how it was supposed to end. He'd made a deal, damn it. Played his ace in good faith and wary for other sleeves and other aces and he'd made his bet, he'd won his gamble.

Every time he'd opened his eyes, seen past the fire and the pain and the aching burn that made him understand forever, Sam had been there.

Every. Single. Time.

Something in the building gives: old paint, a gas line, Dean doesn't know; and the screaming is louder as people get out of the way of the sudden expansion of heat, the white hot debris falling on already wet streets, and Dean can only curl around Sam, bent over to protect his already seared flesh. He feels a barrier settle around him as well. His father, he thinks, but there's too many voices, too many hands to be just the two of them, and Sam's hands are still and lax, blistered and blackened and curved like he was trying to hold onto something.

Dean stares at them, then at his own, and they look the same. It hurts more than it should since he can't feel them but he moves them anyway and they fit, just like that, into Sam's, fingers curved around wrists like some kind of horrific sculpture.

He doesn't even know if Sam is breathing but it doesn't matter because if this is how it ends, then he's where he's supposed to be.

But he still can't remember the ending.

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He's got burns on his arms, along the backs of his hands, his shoulders, and more on his legs. They'll scar, the doctors tell him but they have ways to reduce them in critical areas and so he gets tight fitting sleeves for his arms that itch and look like women's support hose but they feel similar to the wrist sheaths he uses for his knives so he can stand it. His palms aren't burned and no one can explain it and they stop trying to figure it out after a few weeks. There's new skin on

his back, red and puffy, and his hair's grown back, covering the burns on his head. He figures he'll have to wear it longer now.

Sam's hair is growing back too, but the burns are worse, all along his back and his legs; and it was touch and go there for longer than Dean wants to think about, between the burns and the blood loss, and if he feels a little guilty about leaving his father to do all the explaining about any of it, well, he can live with that.

He still can't remember how it ends, and, without that part of it, he can't tell his father how it started.

The fire ate through the entire block, reduced it to rubble, to burning timbers and smoldering pockets of still-hot ash. He watched it on the news and the feeling of *déjà vu* wouldn't leave him long after the news services had moved on to other things.

And on the seventh day, Sam opened his eyes and Dean knew why he couldn't remember how it ended.

Because it hasn't yet.

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The apartment John finds is a small, one-bedroom furnished thing, close to the hospital, but the elevator works and when the skies are clear, they can see Lake Michigan from the window. Everybody needs mechanics and John's a good one, but there's still the feeling that they're waiting for something else.

Dean's walked by the burned-out block a dozen times, just staring. It's too familiar and he's seen it before, only he doesn't know where. Not as it was. He *knows* it was there before, that he and Sam had searched it before they tripped over the door to hell. But he's seen this before, this burned-out hulk, only he doesn't know when.

"I was only a few hours away when you called," John tells him when he's finally got sense enough to ask.

Dean doesn't remember calling his father, not then. Not for this. He'd left messages, picked up coordinates. Chicago, Dad. We're going to Chicago; but he hadn't told his father where or when.

"I saw the fire...it couldn't have been more than a few minutes."

Except it was. Dean knows it. Down to his bones that can still feel the heat, it was more than minutes or hours. It was days. Days upon days that he felt the burn and the sear and blood boiling in his veins. Weeks or days or hours before he realized it wouldn't end, that

he could burn over and over or constantly and his brain would remain to catalogue every second of it, to process every synapse that fired in warning or sheer agony.

That he'd never be able to get a lungful of air but that he'd scream just the same.

That Sam had stayed there, no matter the deal, no matter the bargain, face and arms lifted up, unwilling to let go, unwilling to go, and Dean had only meant to save him from that.

He could lay a thousand sins at his own feet but none at Sam's no matter their disagreements or the different ways they saw the world. Dean knew he saw the world in black and white, in good and evil, and he'd always kind of sucked at the gray areas in between, and, far too late, he'd understood that the gray in-between was where the hard choices were made.

Minutes and hours for their father, days and weeks for Dean, and when they finally let Sam out of the hospital Sam would only say it had been a long time.

Even under the burns, Sam has scars on his body that Dean doesn't remember, some of them years old; and not all the grey ash the nurses had washed from his hair had been ash. The grey remained, streaks of it, the lines around his mouth and eyes grooved deeper than Dean's, but still not deeper than their father's.

"That thing...the thing that killed Mary, killed your mother. Killed Jessica..." John asks because he didn't know and Dean understands the feeling. He's won something back, he thinks, or Sam has, but their father, their father is waiting for a closure, an ending Dean isn't sure he'll get, that any of them will get.

"It's gone. It lost. We won," Sam says but it isn't what John wants to hear, needs to hear, and the restlessness builds in him again. They'll move on. Already there are reports of things rising up in the darkness in Texas, slaughtering cattle.

Dean stalls and pleads.

"Not yet, Dad. We can't go yet. We need you here. Sam needs to heal up. Just... not yet."

And John listens, for once, and goes to work and stares at his youngest son, at the scars, at the silences that have always been part of Sam but never like this.

This is patience.

This is waiting.

But it's Sam who's up early one morning, packing up what he has, the compression sleeves on his arms making him look like an animated mannequin. "We need to go," is all he says.

"To Texas?" John asks and Dean can only wonder when it became Sam who directs their movements. He knew for himself, had followed things Sam had seen, but never their father; and yet John watches his youngest son like he is a hunting dog.

Sam shakes his head and rubs at his face. "No. We need to...someplace isolated. Not far. You need to find us that place, Dad. Soon. We've got enough time, but just enough."

"For what, Sam?"

Sam stares at Dean, his eyes still with that wide brightness that makes Dean uncomfortable, that makes him wonder what the days and weeks had been like for Sam. But he moves closer and Sam's fingers closed around his wrist, like Dean is an anchor in an ocean only Sam can drown in. "We won," he says and stares at his father. "You never asked me what we won."

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It takes John time, but he has friends, contacts. North Manitou Island, in Lake Michigan. The park there is the destination but they settle in Leland for a few weeks, gathering supplies; and Sam fills out more credit card applications than any of them.

"It won't matter," he says. Dean knows he's right but he doesn't like it. He's gotten his brother back. But he doesn't recognize this Sam, except that he does: he knows the look of desperation in Sam's eyes like it's his own.

And Sam is the least surprised of all of them when Missouri Mosley calls John to tell him to make room for her, make space and plans for others.

They camp on the island, checking the buildings, the remaining orchards, playing tourist, but it's casing pure and simple; and with moonless night above them and a fire between them Dean asks for answers Sam hasn't been able to give.

"The end of the world," he says and Sam nods, stretched out and sleepy. "You've seen this?"

There are times when Sam can look straight at Dean and tell the truth and Dean can tell. There are other times when Sam can lie and

look away and Dean can tell. And now Sam looks away and tells the truth and Dean can tell... but he wishes Sam were lying.

"Variations of it," Sam says.

"And what? Someone's going to drop a nuke? Solar flares? Bird flu?" Dean asks, arms around his knees, ducking his head back and forth because he wants Sam to look at him.

Sam shakes his head. "You know how you can write something down, and then erase it and write over it? But even when you do, if you look hard enough, you can still see what was there before?"

Dean snorts. "So some great cosmic something is going to come and erase all that's here?"

"Not all of it," Sam says. "Not *us*."

"And you don't think we should tell somebody?" Dean asks but more because it's impossible and it makes no sense, and because he *believes* Sam.

"It won't matter."

"So this is what? What the fundamentalists scream about? This is the rapture?"

Sam shakes his head and Dean moves because Sam's eyes are too bright, and Sam's more raw, exposed, than he ever has been, even more exposed than his scarred flesh. "No. Not like they say, like they think. Like they believe. People will *die*. A lot of them. Most of them. This isn't the end of everything. It's just starting all over again."

Underneath Dean's arm Sam is all bones and angles, thinner and leaner than Dean remembers, harder in places, broken in others. Broken in ways that Dean can't fix, but he can patch Sam together and he can easily offer the contact Sam tries not to show he craves but is etched in every quick glance away and every twitch of his fingers.

"So this island...here. Us," he says, lips pressed to Sam's temple and rubbing Sam's back with his fingers. "This is the ark and Dad's the new Noah? We need some, girls, man," he says and Sam's chuckle heals wounds Dean's been ignoring.

"There will be girls. I promise. There will be girls," Sam says. "But, no...it's not the ark. It's not Noah. You remember the story of Lot and his wife?"

"Lot...Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah, and, man, tell me this isn't about the queers?"

Sam laughs again and for a moment Dean can see him, the Sam he wanted to save, the Sam he lost. He's still there. It's all the hope

Dean needs and he grins. "Okay, so not about the queers. All about being bad hosts."

"More like bad guests, but no. Not that either. It's just...it's corruption and no balance, too much order, not enough chaos, and...you remember what happened to Lot's wife?"

Dean doesn't really have to think about it, but he does anyway, because the night is clear and Sam's relaxed on his back with his head resting on Dean's thigh and he thinks that if they are going to die, it should be now, like this.

Sam's waiting, though, and he's not dying. Not now. Not this time.

"Okay, Lot's wife. She looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt. What's that got to do with the end of the world? With us?"

Sam's gaze slips away from him and he rolls to his side to stare out into the darkness. "We're the salt," he says and his fingers curve around Dean's leg.

Dean shouldn't be surprised that it's cold on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan in March, but he is. And no matter how many logs he throws on the fire, it doesn't get any warmer.

And who would ever think he'd crave heat ever again?

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They stay through summer and into the fall before Missouri shows up and she's not alone. She's got Jenny and Sari and Ricky with her and they look scared but Sari looks less so and she's the first to come up to Sam. He can't crouch as easily as he once did: the scarring on the back of his legs has left him stiff. Sari lays both hands on Sam's shoulders. She's a little taller, a little less chubby in the face, and still way too serious for a ten-year old girl. Her fingers find the scars at the back of Sam's neck and she pets them like a cat for a moment before hugging Sam, like she's missed him.

It's her "thank you" that breaks him, rather than her "I'm sorry", and Sam is still strong enough to lift her when he rises and meets Dean's gaze. "I told you there would be girls," he says.

When Jenny lifts an eyebrow, Dean contemplates killing Sam for half a moment, then smiles at her.

Killing Sam really never works out very well for him.

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The end of the world comes like dawn, comes at dawn on a day that doesn't feel any different to Dean. The tourist season is over and the ranger station is closed and they make the crossings at night, dropping off supplies, water, books. John wants a generator and Sam won't let him bring it. John says flashlights and batteries will last them only so long, but Missouri backs Sam up and so does Dean, even without knowing why.

The day before the last crossing John looks unhappy and even angry and he's got his eyes on Sam, who's sitting at the end of the dock they're using with Sari and Ricky. There's others too, a dozen or more. Some Dean knows and some he doesn't and John feels responsible for them all, is, in his own way, even if Sam is the one pushing this. But it's Dean who's actually been the one to organize, to sort out, to delegate, thinking he's acting as John's second, but Missouri keeps smiling at him.

He hates it when she does that.

"We don't know how long we'll be there. A generator, the fuel...we'll need it. There's no damn reason..."

"It's the electricity, Dad," Dean says. "We've changed the world. It's changing back. That's one of the things that's brought us to this."

"Because we hold back the dark." John snorts and crosses his arms. "Dean...you and your brother, you've been through a lot and Sam's still...he hasn't been right. You know he hasn't been."

Dean doesn't even bridle at that. "Right in the head? Maybe not. But he's been *right*, Dad. Everything's gone quiet. You've checked the papers. No ghosts, no hauntings..."

John shrugs. "Just nothing we've noticed. It's getting lost in all the other crap, the evil we inflict on ourselves." He stares at Sam, coming back with the kids. Ricky's found a turtle.

Dean's hand closes over his father's shoulder and he squeezes. "It would be different if Sam was only seeing it," he says quietly. "But look at him, Dad."

Only John can't, but he doesn't argue anymore, just turns away to finish loading the boats.

But Dean does, because, unlike his father, Dean can't look away. The demons are quiet, the curses dormant for months now. The ghosts have all gone, except for one.

Sam is twenty-four years old, but his hair is gray, and his body is bent but not from injury or awkwardness about his height. In the fading light of sunset, Sari and Ricky are bright and moving but Dean swears he can see through his brother. It's a trick of the light, he knows, but the trick is that the light bends around him. Maybe it's an aura, or maybe it's because Dean really does need the glasses Sam's been nagging him about.

Or maybe it's because Sam doesn't belong in this world. Not yet.

They board the boats for the last time and make the crossing, and all of them stick close through the night. Just as dawn breaks, Sam gets up, and Dean follows him to the edge of the shore, looking west.

The sun is behind them. It should be. But the brightness starts in the west and for the longest minute Dean is certain the world has gone completely still. The wind doesn't move, the waves don't lap the shore, the early morning birds and insects have all gone silent.

The light is not bright enough to blind and it doesn't look or feel threatening. It just washes over the land, over the skies, and finally over the water.

When the end of the world comes, Sam can't look and doesn't but he's solid and real in Dean's arms, looking back at the true dawn. When the two collide, Sam shakes but makes no sound and Dean doesn't let go even when Sam's weight drags him down.

It's Pastor Jim's voice that starts the song and Missouri's voice that begs the others to join.

The chariot may have swung low but it didn't come to carry them home. They are already here.

"We're the salt," Dean says quietly. "Will it ever be dark again?" He has to ask because nothing really feels different. The sun is rising, the water is moving against the shore, and in the underbrush Dean can hear mice and rabbits and the twittering of waking birds.

The light doesn't bend around Sam any more and when he lifts his head his eyes are clear and dry, and the half smile on his lips is more wry than sorrowful.

"Yeah. It will be dark again. We bring that with us too."

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XIII.

It's a week before anyone ventures off the island. A week John imposes because across the lake, to the west, Chicago is burning and other places too, and unlike Lake Superior, Michigan doesn't take long to surrender her dead. They plan to hit Leland first then move inland, no more than a day or two.

They've got supplies enough to make it through the winter if it comes to that but knowing the world has ended from the safety and isolation of their island, with familiar faces and food enough to keep them going, isn't the same as seeing how the world ended.

They'll need a bigger boat too. One of the ferries if they can manage it.

Dean wants to go and Missouri as well. Sam stands on the dock with Sari's hand in his.

"You're sure?" Dean asks and Sam nods. Dean's afraid Sam will disappear or something worse.

"I'll be here."

And he is.

He doesn't need to hear what they've seen. He already knows. The bodies are dried and desiccated like more time has passed than really has. *We're the salt*. The buildings are crumbling even though there were no explosions. There are fires but they'll die when the fuel for them runs out. It's not like the movies, where there are packs of starving animals and wild survivors roaming the streets. There are no zombies, no rampant diseases. This is a clean slate, not an annihilation.

There are no ghosts. Not yet.

Long after Dean has gone hoarse from telling what he's seen for the third time, and the others are still talking and there are plans to be made and fear to be faced, Sam grips his shoulder and Dean nods and they walk to the shore where the moonlight paints the water black and silver.

"It's not a punishment," Sam says, and Dean nods, staring at the water.

"It's a weird-ass gift," Dean says coldly, flatly, and rubs his eyes. The scars on the backs of his hands are slick with new red skin. "All those people, Sam."

"They're dead. Nothing can hurt them now," Sam says.

"That doesn't reassure me about *us*, you know," Dean says and his eyes are gleaming in the darkness. "Why us?"

Sam ignores the shine. "It's not just us. Not this time..." he says. "There will be a man, in Ohio. He raises horses. We don't know him. He doesn't know us."

"And I need to know this because...?"

Sam grins at him. "Because you are going to need to learn how to ride, really, really well."

"Great." Dean's silent for a long time, but Sam's learned patience. He's learned a lot of things, but patience is both the best thing and the hardest thing.

He's also learned gratitude. "Did we do this, Sam? Did we..." his hand gestures and Sam catches it, unscarred palms pressed together, sliding to the unscarred gaps on their wrists.

"What do you remember?"

"You were dying. Like Mom. Like Jess..."

Sam shakes his head and tightens his fingers on Dean's. "No. Not like them. Not because of them. This...it's what's left. We didn't cause this. You didn't. We were the flip of the coin, Dean. Heads we win, tails we win, or lose, either way. However you want to look at it."

"You should have gone, Sam. You shouldn't have stayed," Dean says, and he really doesn't know what he's saying, Sam thinks. Dean doesn't pull his hand away and Sam closes his eyes. It does him no good because he can still see the fire, can still see Dean's face. He's not sure he'll ever see anything else, but now they're phantom images, not dreams: memories he can't shed and isn't sure he wants to.

Maybe he should tell Dean that he did leave, over and over, and returned, but he's got no real reason to, and he supposes there is some kind of grace or blessing in the apparent fact that Dean was only aware of his own suffering when Sam was there. He tries not to wonder too much about what would have happened, could have happened if he'd never come back. If he, his very presence, is the cause of Dean suffering for even a few seconds, Sam thinks he might go mad. If he hasn't already.

Dean remembers the pain and the burning, all of it. He doesn't speak of it but Sam can see it in his face, in his eyes, in the fact that he pushes forward, always, to be the one to start the fires. He'd spit in the devil's face if he could, and it's more than bravado, more than courage.

Sam isn't sure what else Dean remembers because to bring it up means he'd have to tell his side of it and he's not ready to do that yet. Maybe never. Partly because it can't be undone or redone. At least he doesn't think so.

This time, everyone will remember how the world ended and Sam will still be the only one who knows why. He thinks Missouri suspects, maybe even Pastor Jim recognizes some of it, although he hasn't opened his bible once since the world ended.

"So we're here because of a technicality. A glitch in the program. The last flip of the coin. I'm not so sure being destiny's bitch is my thing, you know?"

A technicality. Sam hears that and suddenly feels colder than the October winds can make him. Beneath his hands Dean is warm and real and as reassuringly solid as the ground beneath his feet. He can feel the snap of wind through his hair, lifting the edge of his jacket, ruffling the sleeves of his shirt. He feels present and accounted for in a way he hasn't for a very long time, and for a dizzying second he feels like he's the pivot point on which the world spins, spinning as it always has and yet shedding the toxins from earth and air and water like a dog shakes after tromping through a river.

And that's wrong. It should be wrong, because he'd made the deal this time, body and soul.

"I shouldn't be here," Sam says, and for the first time he realizes it's true. This isn't the world Dean built, it's just the world that still needs him. Those who remain know that it's more than it appears and the ones they'll find, most of them they won't know, will never have touched. But something will have -- good or evil, wings or claws or fear or grace. In the end it won't matter what it was, only that it did.

But Sam isn't meant for *this* world. Hadn't expected it and he's been so focused on being glad that he'd finally done what he'd set out to do, he'd missed the fact that the bill hasn't been paid. The check will bounce, the credit card will be reported stolen.

It takes all the wind from him, presses the air from his lungs, robs his muscles of any strength.

Dean catches him, is watching him with wide eyes, mouth half open like he's ready to call for help, hands gripping Sam's shoulders with enough force to bruise. "Bull shit. Don't...don't you even..."

Sam's hand flails for just a second before gripping the sleeve of Dean's shirt. He can see the future stretched out along those broad black roads, cracked and broken and going nowhere, and he shouldn't be able to. Hadn't been able to before, there, *then*, had only understood better than most what the world had been made of and how it had been divided up, had recognized the parts left behind that kept springing up like crabgrass and weeds or new spring growth. Yet he can see it, here, now, what's to be; but he can't see himself in it because... he *shouldn't be here*.

"Sam...Sammy, don't pull this holy martyr shit on me now," Dean says, all fierce fear and bared teeth. He shakes Sam hard enough to snap his head back. "You are here. You don't think the hand or whatever that reset this whole mess missed you, do you? If you're here, you're meant to be here. Or none of us are." He pulls Sam close in, hard against his chest, like something might come along and snatch him away.

Sam can hear Dean's heart beating, too fast; can feel the steady thump of it against his cheek. There's some truth in what Dean says. This is deliberate and not accidental, but he isn't sure who's holding the cards this time.

Over Dean's shoulder he can still see the glow far west and south.

That road remains unbroken. "I need to go to Chicago. Go back." He says and it's true, still true.

"To what? There's nothing there, Sam. Even across the lake..." Dean isn't looking at the water and Sam can feel his eyes on him as easily as Dean's hands. It distracts him because he can't remember Dean ever touching him quite so much, like he needs contact to prove to himself Sam is real.

There might be something in that actually.

"It will take us weeks on foot. Winter's coming," Dean says, making it sound like a rational argument. Less time by water if they could spare the fuel, but that would put them all in jeopardy. It's argument enough. For now.

And time enough, Sam realizes, if the pattern holds true. Come spring, those who survive this get to prove they could survive this on their own and not just because of the ambiguous hand of fate.

Destiny's bitch, indeed.
Maybe it's a reprieve. Maybe he is owed that much at least.
Dean's hand fists in his hair, fingertips brushing over the scarring
underneath.
If nothing else, *Dean* is owed that much.

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The winter is harder than anyone expects, but not for the reasons they thought. It's bitter cold and icy once it settles in. But there's food and fuel enough to keep them fed and warm: if the wildlife on the island can survive the cold, after all, they can. They are better provisioned. They have books to read, even stories to tell, except after the first few weeks stories of the past seem too redundant and too painful to share any longer.

It's not even the close quarters, though there is that. Tempers inevitably fray but not to the point of blows. Missouri plays mother and counselor and John plays father and peacekeeper even though he's not the oldest man there. Pastor Jim is, but he's busy with his family: his daughter, her husband and three kids. The oldest girl is nearly fifteen, the youngest barely three. Then there's Missouri's sister and her husband; Jenny and her two kids; and Sam and Dean. Fractured, broken families, none untouched, unscathed, unknowing. Even before the world ended, they'd all seen things in the dark, even sometimes in the light, but the main thing was that they'd seen.

Sam could almost wish to be blind.

"Can't restart the human race with ten adults and five children," John says on one of the many cold clear nights when the ranger station they've taken over seems too small and too confining.

There's a ring around the moon, Sam notes, and his father's breath is lost in the glow of it. "There are others," Sam says. "You just have to find them."

"You can't tell us where?" John asks and his hand is heavy on the back of Sam's neck. It's a comfort Sam isn't sure how to take any longer any more than John's sure how to offer it. He's trying and Sam can ask for nothing more.

"Start with the places you know," Sam says. "Stay away from the cities if you can. They won't be there."

"Map would be easier," John says, and there's a hint of a smile in his voice but not on his face. Sam's aware that Dean's in the doorway, letting warm air escape.

"I don't know where they are, only where they are most likely to be," Sam says.

They mark Thanksgiving with a new purpose and fresh meat. Sari wants to learn to use a bow and Sam's not surprised when Jenny joins her at target practice. The women can all sew and the men need to learn. Pastor Jim's daughter, Alice, takes the children for a few hours each day and sets up a school. They don't learn history but they do learn math and reading and writing.

John makes more lists of what they need to find or salvage and what they need to learn to do and to make for themselves.

It's Solstice the first time they hear the sounds overhead and Dean is the first one up and armed.

The shadows don't come close enough to see clearly, but Sam knows what they are. Yellow eyes watch them in the darkness. And no one goes out after dark alone.

Dean eyes the shadows that flit just beyond range with a murderous gaze. "Did we bring those with us too?"

Sam shakes his head. "No. They were always here."

They don't attack, only watch. Not every night, but often enough to make them all wary. Sari and the oldest boy, Pastor Jim's grandson, Frankie, don't ask permission to stand watch, they just do it, small hands armed with bows, eyes alert to movement, ears tuned to the beat of leathery wings against the air.

Jenny glares at Sam like it's his fault that her daughter has chosen to be a guardian before she's hit puberty. Sam offers no defense. Jenny will have to choose too, eventually. There are no civilians any longer and the only victims there can be will be dead ones.

It's well past Christmas (and Pastor Jim lights a candle and prays, just in case) and the new year when Missouri's sister, Louise, realizes she's pregnant. Pastor Jim thinks that's a good thing and Sam doesn't argue with him but he knows now why the demons watch them in the dark.

Spring comes early. Louise loses the baby before the thaw and the demons leave them. Her husband, Toby, wants someone to blame and Sam's the one he looks to, the one he lashes out at. "You couldn't see this? Couldn't know?"

Dean's got Toby laid out on the floor of the ranger station, their communal home before he can even take a swing at Sam.

There's no way for Sam to explain that knowing when the world will end is different than knowing when an individual life will end. And that, even if he knew, he has no way to stop it.

Dean accuses him of nothing but he asks as well. "Did you know?"

Toby's blow would hurt less but Sam only shakes his head. "I never saw the birth."

"Do you think you would have if the baby was meant to survive?"

Sam doesn't know. Dean's hand on his shoulder eases some of the ache but not all. They are looking to him for answers he doesn't have. He can't blame them for that but it doesn't make it any easier.

He catches Sari watching him frequently. Missouri watches Sari; Jenny worries. Even John sometimes can't look Sam in the face. It only reinforces Sam's feeling that he shouldn't be here. Only Dean still treats him like he's real, like he's *normal* and Sam doesn't know whether to thank Dean for his constancy or thump him for being a stubborn ass.

The weather breaks in early March and John makes the decision without much protest. Winter hasn't left entirely but they load the ferry anyway, securing the station in case they have to come back.

Leland exists in shrouded curves of ice and snow, quiet and still. It's not entirely silent: birds and mice and rats are unimpressed by the lack of sound and movement; but the silence is too much for the people who are left, the sounds echoing against buildings that no longer have purpose.

John planned ahead the first time they returned here. There's a truck waiting, loaded with what fuel they could coax from other vehicles. There's canned goods and food and, eerie as it is, Jenny and Louise still take the children into a silent store, looking for clothes that will last through rough wear and growth spurts. It's surreal to be able to walk where they want, take what they need.

They don't venture far and never travel alone. At night they close the garage doors where John has stashed the truck and lay their pallets down between it and the wall, building a fire on the concrete floor and standing watch. Nothing disturbs them.

Sam loads a pack with clothes and a bedroll, chooses boots and heavy wool socks and spends a couple of days breaking the boots in. He can't walk the whole way and make it in time. The Impala is where Dean left it and they spend a couple of days checking it over, filling the tank, and packing extra fuel.

No one protests Sam's plans to leave but there is disquiet when Dean drops his pack next to Sam's that morning. Sam makes them nervous. Dean makes them brave. That much hasn't changed. John is unhappy but not surprised.

"Go to Canton, Dad," Sam tells him when John finally asks. "Take what they'll need." He means dry goods and sundries, things difficult to make. Needles and canning jars, tools and bags and bags of nails and rock salt.

If they drive straight through and stop only to refuel, they can be there in a day. The decay isn't accelerating and Sam thinks they'll make it, that the old world may last a little bit longer.

"I should go with you. Let Dean take these people there."

Dean doesn't even counter his father, which is different from before, but he holds up his arm, showing John the gap in the scarring between hand and forearm. John could argue that he's seen hell too, but he doesn't. He's seen it but hasn't stepped into it and emerged. Even he knows that much.

"He'll be a day or so behind you," Sam says, and he believes it then. He doesn't know what he's looking for or what he'll find or if he'll ever see Dean learn to ride a horse. He has to secure his right to be here but he's not even sure that's what he wants.

It's the gap of years, he knows but doesn't try to explain. There's no way to explain that he's watched centuries slip by and ended up back at the same place, more or less. John is still his father, but Sam has never been less his son than he is now. John seems to know it too, but he doesn't quite know what to do with that knowledge.

"*We'll* be a day or two behind you," Dean says, and gives Sam a glare that means he'll drag Sam kicking and screaming back, again, if he has to.

It's why he's going, after all.

"I'll give you a week, then I'm coming to look for you," John says, but he looks at Sam when he says it.

"Don't let them push the dark back too far," Sam says quietly in his father's ear when they part. John nods and hugs him hard, then cups Sam's head in one hand.

"Make sure you push it back far enough," he says. "Take care of your brother."

John's never told Sam that before and Sam turns it over in his mind while John and Dean say their good-byes.

Missouri's more cryptic but also more helpful. "I can't see down this road you're traveling," she tells Sam. "You've got to stop looking back, honey."

Sam smiles at her and holds her hand. "Can you see the road Dean's traveling?"

She squeezes his hand. "Your brother doesn't need roads. He makes his own." She leans in and kisses his cheek. "And all Dean's roads lead home. You remember that, next time you lose your way."

"Sam, let's go. Daylight's burning," Dean says and his voice is rough and impatient. When Sam gets in the car, Dean flips the rearview mirror down so he can't look back. "You know, the last time we went to Chicago, it kind of sucked."

Sam smiles at that. "The devil's not waiting for us this time."

Dean doesn't look that confident but he shrugs. "Okay. So what is?"

Sam shakes his head. "I'm not sure."

Dean slows the car like he's going to stop, mouth set. "Then why..."

Sam reaches over to lay his hand on Dean's on the wheel. "There's something not finished. Something I've forgotten and it feels like you," he says quietly.

"I'm thinking I don't need to point out that I'm right here," Dean says.

"I'd noticed," Sam says and leans back. It's not Dean he's forgotten, just part of himself, maybe. The part of himself he left with his brother and hasn't quite reclaimed yet.

Dean gives him a long hard look. "You know I'm not leaving you there."

"I know."

Dean presses the gas. It takes some maneuvering to get around the cars and trucks abandoned on the side of the road but soon enough they hit relatively open highway.

The landscape hasn't changed much, Sam notices. Not yet. He feels like he should remember this, all of it. There are some things you wish you could never forget but too often do. Then there are things you wish you could forget that stay with you forever. Being on the road with his brother is a little of both.

They are an hour out, heading south, along the edge of the lake, the water shimmering dark blue. Whitecaps have formed and occasionally Sam sees birds along the shore. Nothing else moves.

"Hey, Sam," Dean asks. He's slouched back against the driver's seat, his posture as familiar as his face, as is the slightly too serious tone to his voice that has Sam smiling before he finishes his question. He's idly stroking the Impala's dashboard. "Am I really going to have to learn how to ride a *horse*?"

.....

They say when the world ended, all of creation held its breath and made a wish. When it let out that breath six and a half billion candles all went out at once.

That left a lot of darkness behind.

But the thing about the darkness, or so the old ones tell the young ones, is that a single candle shines brighter in the darkness. If there's too much light, everything gets washed out and turns gray. You've seen it. When there's no moon, the stars are brighter. You light a fire in the village square and folks come around it to share that light. But if there's light everywhere, all the time, folks go their own way. They forget why it's best to stick together.

But what was it like? the young ones will ask. They know there was a before time. They can see it on the horizon, the crumbling skylines of cities no one lives in any longer, or along the roads that lead somewhere with signs that don't mean anything.

Once, the storytellers say, once all these places, these cities, were bright with light long after dark and not from candles or lanterns. Once people moved as easily in the dark as they do in the day.

Those are the scariest stories, because only fools go out after dark, beyond the watch fires, and if you have to, you'd best ask a Keeper to go with you, to keep you safe, to keep your path straight, because you can get lost in the world after dark. It changes after dark.

The Keepers will tell you not to let your watch fires burn too low. They'll tell you to hold your children close. They'll remind you to keep your salt lines unbroken around your house and to let the rowan and ash touch limbs, leave your willows by the water and plow around your oaks.

"Even the dark has its place," they'll say. "You keep to your place and we'll keep the dark to its."

Some people say the Keepers actually come from the dark. Between themselves, they'll call each other hunters. They'll call each other dogs or hounds, sometimes brother or sister and speak in words and about things that no one understands. They keep to themselves but they aren't unfriendly. Sometimes they travel alone, sometimes in pairs. Most towns have one, and those that don't will usually find a traveling Keeper showing up when they need one. It's a poor town, indeed, that doesn't keep a place for them to stay.

But most folks know the Keepers aren't really part of the dark, no matter how strange. They know because when the dark presses close, when the things that dwell in it try to take what they've no right to, the Keepers will press them back. They'll fight and die and do it laughing because they say, what we've got was given back to us. What we have, we've earned. They respect the dark, but they expect the darkness to respect the lines drawn, the bargains sealed, the choices made.

It used to be easy to see what the world was like before it ended. But mostly it's just stories. And the Keepers have the best stories.

"What happened? How did the world end?" The answer the Keepers give comes with a smile and a settling of folks around a fire or a table. "You're asking the wrong question. The real story is how did the world *begin*. And that story, that story goes something like this: Once upon a time..."

Some people say the Keepers never die but it's hard to say. Seems like they've been there from the very beginning. That from the first day of the world, they were already walking the paths the rest of the world would follow, but no one remembers when the journey began.

The Keepers say it started a long, long time ago.

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XIV. Epilogue

1 Thessalonians 5 - *§ But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. § For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. § For when they shall say, peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. § But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. § Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.*

The end of the world didn't change the seasons, didn't affect the length of days or nights, didn't rewrite physics or stretch time. Twice a year, darkness and light meet in the middle, equal.

The world ended in the fall, in the glimmer between night and day.

He can only wonder, now that spring is coming, now that the day has stretched out again to meet night halfway, if it isn't tonight that the world will actually begin again.

He's got a fondness for human myths, human history. Some of it is metaphor and always has been, but sometimes metaphor speaks more honestly than straight truth-telling.

Demeter made a deal with Hades, reclaiming her daughter for half the year. People liked that part of the story better than the part where Hades kidnapped Persephone, offering her pomegranate seeds to seal the deal. There was actually a bit more to it than that -- but the embellishments time has made on the story are more interesting than the real thing.

The part people forget is that Hades fell in love. The part people forget is that Demeter nearly destroyed the world looking for her daughter, leaving a wake of destruction in her path like an ice cutter pushing through the Northwest Passage.

The thing people forget is that Persephone never wanted to be the center of anything. She just wanted to follow her own heart, do her own thing, maybe open a Starbucks along the road to Damascus that

had live music on Fridays and free tarot readings on alternate Tuesdays.

The other part of the story that people don't like to remember is that Demeter was Hades's sister.

And humans thought the story of Hades and Persephone and Demeter gave a rationale to the changing of the seasons...rather than the very understructure of the world as it was meant to be.

Or maybe it was just a way for the darkness to rationalize its unending lust for the light, and the light's never-ending arrogance in thinking it alone should – or could – shape the world.

He can admit to doubt now, now that spring is approaching - not just in terms of new growth and longer days, but in the thaw he feels inside himself. There's an aborted urge to reclaim the dark and the cold, to go back, even, to the hunger and the unrelenting need to taste and smell and bathe in the fear that still permeates this world and its reduced population.

They've spent the winter on their own wild hunts, he and his brethren. Racing across ice laden fields under silvery moons seeking out the light and the warmth the same way other living things do.

He sees the lights approaching well ahead of his guests.

Well, one guest and a rival, but he's pretty sure he knows how it will play out.

And the thing is, he could win this: could hold back what's being sought, keep it to himself, betray the thing that's kept him here waiting in the dark while the world shifts and strains to fit its new skin.

I, he thinks, am made of ice and pomegranate seeds.

.....

The moon is full; they don't need the flashlights they carry. He's not surprised it's both of them; would expect nothing less. Having lost his brother once, even if he doesn't know it, Dean's not likely to let Sam too far out of his sight. That was the gamble played to begin with, the house advantage.

Sam looks very different. Not that anything less could be expected; and it's not the silver in his hair, or the lines around his eyes and mouth that have less to do with age and grief than they do with the weariness of a soul scrubbed clean and hung out to dry one too many times. The edges are frayed and worn, there are thin spots where all

that is *Sam* shines though. And yet there's evidence of repair, of patches and careful stitching, of places where the very fabric of his being has been rewoven.

He doesn't need to look far to know whose steady hands and unceasing care have wrought that bit of healing.

His own hands feel too large and clumsy even though they look the same down to the fingerprints. And the strength in his hands will never fade or wane with age, so really, in the end, he's the better candidate to hold Sam together until he can finally, truly let go, right?

Ultimately it comes down to the only real difference between darkness and light: one gives and one takes. It's a necessary balance: the basic nature of the world and those who dwell in it doesn't change. Darkness steals the colors of the world, takes away the details, bleeds off the heat. It's as necessary as the creeping dawn, vital as the cold that lets the earth sleep: otherwise the world would have burned itself out long ago.

He's spent a lot of time getting used to the warmth, and giving that up is maybe the hardest thing of all. *He* wasn't born to sacrifice. He wasn't born *human* and even that's stretching past structure -- he wasn't born at all. He was made, constructed, drawn from heat and darkness and, yes, from the very earth itself -- primordial muck and modern day wastelands and all the wearing down of stone and vegetable matter that occurs in between. That much his kind and humans share: in the end, when the end comes, they are only so much dust and ash.

Sam is staring now, at the burned out hulk of block's worth of buildings on this western edge of the city.

Chicago is both epicenter and ground zero. Probably not a legacy the former inhabitants of the city would actually want recorded, but they don't get much of a voice. Not any longer. Chicago doesn't have ghosts either, just remnants, fragments left over from when different times and different places overlapped briefly.

And, even so, Sam stares at the rubble with confusion on his face, a rub of forefinger and thumb across forehead and cheek that's as familiar as his face. He's looking like he thinks the ground will render some clue.

It takes long minutes to understand it, letting his gaze flicker between Sam and his brother, Dean watching Sam anxiously but giving Sam the space and time and privacy he must have requested.

It never occurred to him that Sam would forget, and he has to stop his own laughter from bubbling up. Here's a punishment for him, for interfering, for stepping in to save this one thing when his task had been to let it all fall to ruin.

He would bet if he listens hard enough there are angels laughing at him.

Sam's forgotten. With all that he remembered, all that he was forced to remember, forced himself to remember, over and over again...

Maybe it's not him the angels are laughing at. Maybe this is grace from an unexpected quarter... except Sam is here. So he can't have forgotten everything.

If he leaves now...there's no trace of him here. There never was. But he has little doubt that at some point he will be face to face with Sam again, an advantage if he plays it right, if he follows the task set before him. The darkness always *takes* and it's been that way between them from the start, long before he could remember being anything but the brother Sam had tried so desperately to redeem.

Sam, it seems, managed to cast his net a little wider than he'd intended.

It's less decision than curiosity, less curiosity than selfishness -- he is still that if nothing else. It's not nearly as dramatic as some of his brethren might make it, but then, he gave up his wings for this shell of flesh, willingly surrendered form to the substance of what was needed. It's a little late to complain about it now.

Sam is startled, caught off guard, anyway, which is strange for him. But he automatically reaches for the weapon that isn't there. Dean is shouting Sam's name and Dean is not unarmed.

"No. Don't!" Sam says, half turning, a hand out, putting himself more solidly between Dean and...well. *Dean*. "It's okay. Dean...it's okay."

"Sam...Sam, that's not me," Dean says, and the gun is cocked, Dean shifting to try to get a cleaner shot.

"I know. I've always known," Sam says but his eyes aren't on his brother any longer, and he's stepped closer, eyes searching a form still familiar but not exactly what he remembers --- now that he remembers at all.

He stops, though, turns back to his brother, pulls him away. The brother's eyes linger, eyes moss agate and hard, glinting with steel and

promises, but his head's tilted, listening to Sam. He pulls his gaze away once, mouth set thinly, negation in every muscle in his body.

He'd laugh out loud if he didn't want this so desperately. Somehow, laughing at the brother seems to be a bad idea. But there's a prickle of doubt when Sam's hands reach out to grip his brother's shoulder, to rub a thumb across the set jaw. He can't hear them, chooses not to, but he watches, sees what Sam misses in his arguments, the way his brother leans into that touch, the way his hand tightens on the rifle but the other grips the hem of Sam's jacket.

It's no surprise when the brother drops his head briefly only to bring it up again, returning his gaze to the threat he sees. He pulls away first, takes three steps closer, shoulders the gun and doesn't flinch at the stare-down with his own face.

"I know what you are," he says.

Dean smiles and relaxes, sees the flutter of consternation across his double's face. No, not double. This is the original, maybe even a master work. He -- the Dean that isn't -- is a forgery -- a good one, but not good enough to fool an expert, and Sam is that if nothing else.

"I remember you, too," the brother says and that is a surprise. He still doesn't drop his gaze. "The only reason I don't blow you into demon barbecue is because of that. You saved him once. Not because of anything Sam's said."

The brother is a good liar. Dean almost believes him.

"I don't suppose it would reassure you to know that I don't intend to kill him," Dean says and watches the sneer half form on his guest's face. Yes, guest, because this one is here by invitation, not by desire. There's nothing to be gained from antagonizing Sam's brother and harm to him would be the one thing Sam would never forgive, even if it didn't end up being fatal to Sam as well. Reassurance *is* necessary. "Or even..."

It occurs to him almost too late but he sits up and holds out his arm. The brother's eyes flicker, come back to Dean's face, then shift again, staring at the scars, eyes narrowed.

"No. The fact that you have to cut it into your arm to remember it doesn't reassure me at all," the brother says, but he steps back. "I won't be far."

Another few steps back and Sam's hand rests on his lower back, his shoulder behind his brother's. For a long moment the brother leans

into that before turning and walking away, not looking back. He only goes as far as the opposite side of the street.

"I don't even know what to call you," Sam says quietly. His eyes take in everything he thinks he might have forgotten, but nothing much has changed. The city is dead, abandoned, vacated. The ruins are as familiar a pile of rubble as they were when the doorway was boarded and graffiti decorated the walls. Ghosts of that graffiti can still be seen through the scorch marks on the bricks.

He still thinks of himself as Dean. Probably always will; there's some things that can't be shed as easily as the veils of humanity he's worn for so long. The veils are worn thin now but Sam doesn't seem to notice. Or if he does, he doesn't care. "Well, unless you plan on writing me letters now and again, it doesn't actually make any difference." He sits, inviting Sam to do the same. Sam doesn't, but he's not shifting, not anxious or nervous. He does duck his head, raking a hand through hair that has streaks of silver in it now.

"I shouldn't be here, should I?" Sam asks finally. "Was that you? A little sleight of hand at the end there?"

He shrugs, spreads his palms. The moonlight glints off the hard white scars on his inner arm and he traces them with a finger tip. Sam's eyes follow the movement and he moves closer, kneeling down and reaching, fingers curling around and tracing the raised flesh.

Sam's hands are warm. There's blood and life flickering under the ravaged skin, under the lines in his face that are as familiar as the darkness Dean dwells in. "You made the deal," Dean says and folds his own fingers over Sam's hands. The skin on his own hands is darker, mottled, the nails thicker, blacker, shinier. Not quite claws but the potential is there. The flesh surrounding those scars is still pale and pink, a skin condition in reverse. "I just finessed some details."

Sam looks up at him, mouth turned down. Even in this cautious mix of shadows and light Dean can see his eyes are green, maybe more alive than ever. They aren't haunted any longer. Or they are, but not for the same reasons.

Dean's not sure why he even bothers to remember this, any of it. Sam made a choice without even realizing it, but it's not like it was a surprise.

"Did you...did you bargain yourself?" Sam asks and his fingers tighten on Dean's arm, obscuring the scarring.

Ah. This is why I remember, what I remember. "Ask me what you really want to know, Sam."

Sam is quiet. Off across the street, in the doorway, his brother is tense. He can't hear, can probably only barely see, but he's tense, nervous, almost like he smell the difference in the air. Maybe he's expecting sulfur and brimstone.

Maybe he should be.

"Is there anything I can do?" Sam say quietly, but what he really means is, *do I owe you something?*

He can make demands now. He can make requests, and Sam will fulfill them. He's got what he wants back -- there isn't any price too high for him to pay.

"If you travel south far enough, you'll hit St. Louis," Dean says. "Watch the river, though, it'll be expanding, flooding more than usual this spring. And when you get to St. Louis, you'll find people...you'll find Rebecca."

Sam looks confused and Dean shows his teeth, chuckles. "The Devil agreed to the deal and the world reset itself. You can't be held guilty of a death that hasn't happened yet."

Sam still looks confused. Dean sighs. "Your soul is still your own, Sam. Even the devil can't exact a price when services have yet to be rendered."

Sam shakes his head. "No...I mean...I think I understand. I studied to be a lawyer, you know. A hundred lifetimes ago. Loopholes are my friend." His laugh is dry. There's humor in it but it's lost under truth of it. "I meant...you're stuck here, aren't you? Halfway between. Neither one or the other...not Dean but...not wholly whatever you are."

Human hearts are nearly as indestructible as human souls.

Dean's heart isn't nearly so tough, being freshly formed and not quite human at all. His fingers twitch at the urge to rip it out, thanks very much.

He takes a certain satisfaction when his shove sends Sam sprawling backwards against the cracked concrete steps. A flicker of movement from across the street is only a minor distraction when he fists his hands in Sam's shirt and hauls him upward again. The cotton tears but holds. "If I'd wanted your pity, I'd have done a better job hiding myself," he says. Sam isn't really startled by the violence -- not its existence -- only confused as to the cause.

"And you think I'm caught between because...?" he asks. The brother is close enough to take aim and he hauls Sam upward, effectively putting Sam between himself and the gun. Not that the gun would kill him, not now, not even like this. It's no doubt loaded with rock salt but even that would be more annoying than fatal.

There's truth to what Sam says but only some.

Sam no longer tastes of old ash and fire, nor of bitterness and anger. But there is regret and weariness. Dean can hear the brother's startled exclamation -- not at the kiss but at both the giver, who he can see more clearly now, and because Sam's hands have come up to grip skin and hair. But the brother doesn't stop coming.

"I'm not the one caught between," he says and shoves Sam backwards, never doubting that the brother will catch him.

He loves being right.

He also lets the brother look his fill: his opposite, his *antithesis*, the other half of a decidedly manipulated DNA string -- angel wings and demon bones and human eye color all tangled together, impossible to separate completely.

Sam rights himself but his brother keeps one hand clenched in Sam's jacket, the other holding the gun, cocked and ready. It's a little like a dance, the way the brother shifts forward, edging himself slightly ahead of Sam.

The brother has a nice recovery time. "You going to introduce us, Sam?" he asks and the curiosity is replaced by assessment.

Dean smiles. He can have a little sympathy for Sam, but he's not willing to give up the name he's carried for so long, not when he's giving up so much else. "I'd be the *you* he *didn't* die for," he says, seeing the denial on Sam's lips and the surprise flash through the brother's eyes again.

Dean can almost see the smart comeback forming before the brother actually registers what's been said. "He's not dead," he says but his eyes cut to Sam.

"Well, not now, obviously. What? You thought you were the only one allowed to make heroic, foolish gestures? All that pain and you didn't even get what you want, did you, Sam?"

The brother's eyes narrow but Sam isn't missing the point. "What do you want? What can I do?" Sam asks him and Dean is torn between wanting to knock him halfway across the street and take him right out

from under his brother's protective grip and make him forget all over again.

"I don't know, Sam. Can you set my world -- ours -- back in motion?" he asks, knowing Sam can't, wouldn't even if he could. That would be a whole new level of betrayal.

"This isn't Sam's fault," the brother says and he's looking a little less willing to let Sam take the lead here.

"This?" he gestures to the ruins around them. "No. Nor yours, if that's what you're worried about," he says and watches the brother's mouth tighten.

Sam pulls away carefully, disentangling himself without ever actually making his brother let go. "So...I owe you nothing," he says carefully. He's not checking the truth of it, he's laying the ground rules.

"There's a price for everything, Sam," he says, as hard and cold as he can be without baring fang and claw and being that which the brother is so certain he is, what Sam always knew he was even when he was hidden beneath the memories of another and in the thrall of something that even now demands obedience.

He thought he was being clever. He thought he was being noble - - as he can only be here and now in these few hours when all things are equal.

Sam's not the only one who's forgotten things and Dean is too late in remembering that the light always *gives*.

The brother's warning is almost lost under his own start of surprise to find Sam's hands on his face again, not hesitant at all, but sure. When Sam's mouth finds his, he suddenly knows why humans have to wear their souls on the inside and that seems trite and melodramatic to him, but it's no less for being true.

If his own skin, his own soul, were made of glass it would be shattering into a million sharp, deadly shards when Sam pulls back, drops his chin and meets the gaze Dean knows is both shocked and sneering -- he can't help. "You don't have to pay it," Sam says.

Dean swallows and tries to find the words, muscles bunching ready to shove this temptation away, break bones if necessary. The brother won't kill him, but he'd try and the conflict alone will draw others. It could be over now, instead of some indistinct future showdown. And that will come, he knows. This is no more than a window, or an open door that swings both ways, no different from before when the skin he wore, the *persona* he wore was shed by the

temptation of violence and a conflict as basic to humans and demons as breathing. They aren't meant to *share* anything.

He can do neither, but he can pull out that last shred of his own creation, force *himself* through the shell of borrowed and improvised flesh.

It takes less effort to do it than it does to make himself not react when Sam inevitably flinches from what he truly is.

The brother swears but Sam only clenches his fist tighter in the tattered remnants of the clothes he himself had washed a hundred times in a lifetime neither of them can go back to.

Sam doesn't even look away. His eyes get a little wider but it's less to do with fear and awe than just understanding.

The patch of skin on his inner arm remains pink, remains human, remains...

So maybe the arrogance of the light isn't so undeserved. It's stalwart and stubborn and holds its ground tenaciously, or maybe it's just Sam.

The change isn't that profound, Dean knows...he didn't get taller, or suddenly sprout wings, but he's less human in appearance than he was, and the hands gripping Sam's arms end in slick sharpened talons set against mottled brown-grey skin.

"Sam," his brother says the name only above a breath, and the cocking of the gun is profound in the quiet. "We should go."

"You should. I'm not..." He lets go of Sam, spreads his arms wide, smiles. "I'm not him, Sam. I never will be."

Sam swallows, lifts his eyes again. "I know that. I've always been able to *see* you. Dean," he says and only then looks away, at his brother. "Do you trust me?"

"You, yes," Dean says, eyes on Sam, never moving, never blinking.

"Then walk away. Make camp. I'll be back by morning."

"Sam..."

"He isn't you," Sam says steadily. "He can't take your place."

It's nice to know he comes by his intelligence naturally, and Dean that isn't can almost see the moment when it sinks in. It happens about the same time for Dean the brother as for Dean the other...*and you can't take his...*

There's a moment when Dean actually considers the thing that's not being asked of him, weighing it. He eases the safety back on the

gun and takes slow steps upwards, staring once more. "I've been to hell once. Don't think I won't do it again, if you hurt him."

It's no less than the truth.

It seems as though he'll have to give up the name after all.

Dean backs up, offers the gun and knife at his back both to Sam. No surprise that Sam takes both. "Sam... I will..." He can't say it. Won't, and it's less cowardice than it is confusion.

He can almost see the window of opportunity start to close. No now, not soon, but inevitable. This won't last forever. It *can't*.

Dean grabs at his brother roughly, awkwardly, unused to the need to physically hold onto anything. There's a whisper exchanged that causes Sam to make a sound halfway between a sob and a chuckle, before Dean steps back. His eyes don't leave Sam's face until he turns to walk down the steps and back across the street. He won't be far.

And Sam waits.

A hundred lifetimes. He knows how patient Sam can be.

"This is a bad bargain," he says. "Maybe for both of us but for you... This night... this equinox. Maybe the other." He shrugs. He isn't sure. He knows that if Sam and his brother had come sooner, even a few days, he'd have taunted and teased and torn them limb from limb and never paid heed to how sweet or how familiar Sam's blood was against his tongue.

Sam looks down, crosses his arm. The temperature is dropping, but he's not sure that's what Sam is warding himself against. "You or I, or both of us, keep this door open. We aren't the first... there's always been nights, seasons when this world and the next or the one before always mix more freely than any other time. Maybe it has to. Needs to."

He chuckles and sits again, turned away from the street, into the shelter of a doorway that hasn't collapsed entirely. "This world hasn't even celebrated its first birthday, and you're already going to be the cause of whole new legends. Sam Winchester, the Demon Keeper."

Sam smiles a little and sits down beside him, his gaze is on the street, on his brother; shadows and the glint of steel when Dean starts a fire. There's a coffee shop there. Was. The glass is intact, the building solid enough for now, but Dean doesn't go inside, defying cold and maybe even his own agreement to this by remaining outside. He's

illuminated then as the fire blazes low, pale face and hair silvered by moonlight and darkness.

"I've hunted all winter. Your kind..." he says finally and Sam nods.

"We know. They came to us...is it the same then? A constant balance?"

He should say nothing, reveal less. They are enemies, or they will be. But not *now*, not *here*. "Not...not the same. Barriers, yes. Balance...the darkness always yields to the light, Sam, but..."

"We're fewer now. It will push back."

"Maybe it's as simple as this world needing time to heal," he says.

Sam laughs at that, but there's no humor in it. "Maybe it should have started over with something else. Squirrels, maybe. Unless there's been some fundamental change to humans..." He stops and holds his breath for a long moment before letting it out slowly. His fists clench tightly and he drops his head.

Sam's hair is as soft as he remembers, longer now, tangled and curling at his neck. He can feel the scars underneath, the raised blisters of hairless scarring on his skull. The same is true of his arms. They are still strong, but there's no hiding the damage done, not from eyes that know how to look. "You know, Lot's daughters bore children and there's little mention of the father. Rumor has it demons aren't the only ones who sometimes visit their attentions on human flesh," he says quietly. "Or maybe it was incest."

"Don't," Sam says softly.

"I'm not who you want."

"Close enough," Sam says and it's probably the cruelest thing he's ever said.

Also the most honest.

"You know..." he says and his fingers stroke along warm skin, tracing the hardness of Sam's collarbone under his shirts. Sam's eyes meet his steadily, which makes it harder, but it needs to be said. "I can't be redeemed. I'm not fallen, Sam. I was raised up, made of earth to be this -- what I am. You can't *save* me from being this -- anymore than I can save you from being human."

Sam doesn't blink, and there's no surprise in his eyes at all. "If I'd come out of pity, I'd've killed you when I saw you," he says evenly,

softly. Promise and threat, except not. "Give me another name. I won't say his, not even to you. Not now."

Not wholly a substitute then, maybe not even partially. His own half-formed, newly minted heart is not quite so versatile. Unlike Sam's there's only room for one love and that will only last until dawn.

He pulls Sam further into the doorway, stretching out and feeling Sam shiver under his touch, but not from cold; and there's more warmth in Sam's eyes than in his skin.

"I suppose Hades is as good as anything," he says, his mouth against the curve of Sam's jaw. It makes Sam laugh for just a moment until he needs his breath for something else.

Demons don't actually need to breathe the way humans do. But then again, they don't have hearts that beat either. He supposes he'll get used to both. Even if only once a year.

.....

It used to be said that the dawn sings before it breaks, just as the day mourns before it gives over to darkness. Hades isn't sure he can hear the singing but he can feel the break.

Or maybe it's just the crunch of the fragile ice under Dean's feet as he approaches. Sam is still asleep, curled and wrapped up in clothing and the thin blankets in the pack that Hades left here a lifetime ago.

Dean still has the gun, but it's held low, pointed down. He stares at his brother and at the darker version of his own face. "He was with you...the whole time I..."

"You should ask him," Hades says and moves, rises and Sam stirs, half wakes, twists.

Hades gives Dean credit; he doesn't stare, or even frown at the glimpse of bare skin on either of them.

Sam untangles himself and meets his brother's gaze when it falls on him, gathering his clothes and dressing. On his feet he hesitates before leaning in, and his mouth is bitter and sweet. "I'll be back in the fall," he says and turns away. After a moment Dean follows him. Dean looks back twice. Sam never does.

He can feel the light encroaching on his senses, even though the sun hasn't risen. The shattered doorway leads to a subbasement

exposed first by fire and soon by time and corrosion. He wonders if
he'll remember this, even, in a few hours.
He doesn't wonder at all if Sam will.

~end~