


## **Cirque de Céline by Big Pink**

Hey, lookie here! It's the new summer fic. More fun than you can shake a dead rabbit at. Or other dead things. Totally not crackfic, on account of it's too long and takes itself way too seriously. Except for...you know. That *woman*. And her freaky-ass husband/babysitter.

Title: Cirque de Céline - Chapter One/North, He Said

Rating: PG/adult – swearing in two languages, eventual explicit sexual content of the het variety, and a certain Québécoise singer who warrants a special DangerDanger rating all on her own.

Summary: Response to the  [spn\\_north](#) challenge (Outaouais region, Québec). The boys keep secrets from each other while battling a demon at a Cirque casino extravaganza. Sin, pleasure, poutine, joul and...the voice that sank a really big ship! WIP, will be 8 chapters.

a/n: This story takes place after *Old Rebel Yeller* (which can be found in my memories page), but you don't need to have read that to understand this. Suffice to say, Dean's recovering from a bad dog bite, it's summer and it's before the Season One-ending story arc.

Disclaimer: I own nothing to do with Supernatural. Not anything to do with Cirque du Soleil (they're great, by the way, go see them NOW, please don't sue my ass). Not anything to do with La Céline and her husband/manager/father-figure (and, *really*, please don't sue my ass, I've got kids to support). I'm sure you're very nice people (maybe) and that you're not demons (probably) and that the events described herein are entirely fictitious (as far as I know).

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### **Chapter One - North, He Said**

Posted June 22nd, 2006

This time, it isn't Jess.

Sam sees that right away, can tell that it's another woman, wrapped in satin and flame, face surprised in the same way you might be if you walked in on a murder, which in a way she has. All Sam can do is watch, that's it, lying on the bed wide open, helpless and small. Ceiling just another word for sky, silent with moving clouds. He can't touch those either, no matter how long his long arms are.

But this time, it isn't Jess. And this time, it's different in another way, too.

Hanging in the air, unbothered by flame, is *sound*, a high note of unearthly acoustic shock, not beautiful, utterly beyond notions of beauty and humanity. The note summons, calls to itself like things.

Things like: *Flame*. *Wild*. Unknown, terrible *things*.

But it's not sky, it's not even ceiling anymore. It is a mirror and Sam sees himself there, the surprise caught on his face, broadly describing 'shock', an icon of the flummoxed, a superlative

of the expression. There is flame, always, around him and his surprise, and it is *hot*. Walked in on a murder. *His own*. Understands: dying by fire is the worst way to go, reserved for witches and demons and children trapped in churches.

Then it is sky, it is summer and it's still airless hot, the wash of heaven a vapor of heat-sealed white, not robin's egg spring, but anvil hot, punishing. The clouds move and a shadow falls across him.

Grass tickles his back, and Sam can smell the crushed scent of it as though it might ignite from the heat. Overcoming that, a terrible smell that causes the hair on the back of his neck to lift, that makes his breath hitch painfully. A smell of wild, of creation mysteries, musky forbidden knowledge, stone and ash. Lichen older than the pyramids.

The shadow blots out the blaze of sky, hovers close, right over him. Sam can't move. It is a huge beast, dark, impossible to make out the details but the red rim of the eyes and the hanging dewlap beneath chin and chest. It breathes and Sam breathes and he thinks he might just die now. That this is where all his roads have led.

And the flame comes again and the sky turns to ceiling and this time it *is* Jess.

Because it is always her, in the end.

All the while, that note hangs in the air, a sound only a dog could hear, a sound inserted like a questing finger, ripping open things that are more naturally left closed.

Finally, he screams her name, because his voice is the only thing that will reach her. But that too, is swallowed by the rending sound, and he knows that he is alone and that it will come for *him*.

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Goddamn, it is *hot*, Dean thought, turning over, the sheet winding around him like plastic wrap round leftovers, tightening. Sausage casing. Candy wrapper. Mexican finger trap. Damn. Rearranging himself, careful of his newly healed thigh, which was still tender, and the reason for which he didn't like to think deeply or long, Dean straightened the sheet, hoped that he hadn't disturbed Sam in the next bed.

The window air conditioning unit mocked him noisily, squeaking and whirring at unpredictable intervals, sometimes pushing hot air around, other times sucking air out of the motel room and distributing it freely to the parked cars in the lot.

Dean watched a set of headlights sweep the room with horizontal bars of yellow light, blinds not up to the task of actually making their room blind. He'd open a window, except there were mosquitoes and marginally effective screens; he'd spent last night laying awake listening for the whining death drop they emitted when coming in to feed, little Japanese Zeroes kamikazeing their way to his body. He'd woken up with a dozen bites and several smears of blood and insect carcasses. A good aim, even in the dark. Even asleep.

He didn't think Sam had slept at all.

Dean knew this in the same way that he knew Sam was back to the nightmares tonight, had just entered another cycle of muttering and whimpers. The whimpers caught Dean in an unguarded place, landed with the force of a lead bullet.

Maybe it was the keys, he forced himself to admit. Those damn keys that Sam had thrown away in Virginia, the last vestiges of his life with Jessica, gone with all the finality of an amputation. A ghost limb, thrashing about in dreamland. Put his teeth on edge, hearing that first moan.

That's how it usually started, these past weeks. The moan, and Sam would toss a little, mutter shit Dean couldn't make out. Sometimes, Dean had discovered to his horror, Sam dreamed with his eyes open, unseeing. The moans, the tossing, the muttering, the whimpers and whispers. Jess's name. Followed by a silence, a laden silence with Sam's freaky eyes moving back and forth as though he was reading a fucking menu, lips moving over unpalatable choices.

Then the screaming.

Dean contemplated waking Sam before it escalated into screams. Maybe tonight it wouldn't come to that. *Let him sleep*. The moans stopped suddenly, and Dean listened, as though he could reach Sam with his ears alone. Nothing. Breathing slowed. Shallow. Turned over. A sigh, not a moan.

*See?* Dean thought. *Nothing to worry about*. And just like that, was asleep.

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One thing Sam knows about is plains. Wide open spaces, flying with things that liked to kill, whether it was deer flies that didn't so much bite as take chunks out of you, or stinging ice pellets that sought confusion above all else, mind-muddling nighttime drives with Dad, ice colliding, condensing, confounding.

Prairie, he knows. Or knew. It's hard, in this timeless place, to understand if something has been known and changed, or has always been understood and is changeless.

Here he is not being burned alive, he is running, prodded by forces unknown, and there is danger and subtlety and subterfuge, but none of that changes the fact that he must run.

Dark beasts collide beside him, around him, unseeing, unknowing, startled, frightened.

*It's not right*, he has time to think before the ground disappears and he is not running, but falling.

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Sam sat up with a jerky confused tangle of breath and phlegm. He had caught a summertime cold back in Virginia, staying out all night and worrying about Dean. Now it had passed, mostly, except when he was lying down and the vestigial moistures collected in his lungs.

He couldn't remember what it was about this time. Earlier, yes, it had been Jess, but it had changed somehow, here in the northern part of upper New York State, as though they'd come into a different sphere of influence, a different time zone. Like when the radio station slowly started to crackle and fade between cities and you had to fiddle with the knob to find something else.

This was something else.

He glanced over to where Dean lay sprawled on the bed under the window, the sheet wound round his torso, but his legs dangling off the edge, sleeping almost sideways on a bed that had been amusingly advertised as queen. The bandage was gone from his leg a week ago, his hand mostly healed except for the vivid pink scars. They'd fade, given time. Sam wasn't worried about that. Wasn't worried for anything except how he was going to talk Dean into moving.

Moving *now*. In the morning, it wouldn't have been a problem, of course. Dean was always up for a drive, but it was – quick glance at his watch in the dark – it was 2:47 am. And Dean was not going to like this, for a whole lot of different reasons. Still, it wasn't going to wait, and Sam ordered his explanation as though he was actually going to give it voice: I think something's trying to kill me, Dean. Same way as killed Jess. And I think we ought to drive right into it, because it's going to kill and keep killing until it gets to me. And no, there's nothing you can do to protect me, all you can do is come with me, because I don't think I want to do it alone.

Yeah, that'd work out just fine.

Sam decided that he'd just become Forward Motion Man and not explain anything. Dour Inscrutable Man. Just Trust Me Man. He ran fingers through his hair, staggered to the bathroom where he brushed his teeth with a finger and paste, not able to find his toothbrush at the bottom of his bag. Sam turned on the overhead light on as he spat into the sink. It was like a fucking klieg light, illuminating the sleeping room beyond like an incendiary bomb.

Inevitably, swearing ensued.

“Sam, what the *fuck*?” were the first predictable words. Then Dean sat up, blearily consulted the bedside clock, stared at Sam's back as his brother stuffed their few belongings into a duffle bag.

“We're going.” Not much of a reply, or an explanation, but Dean seemed to take it in stride. Sam threw Dean a pair of pants and a t-shirt, which Dean – still more than half-asleep – pulled on unquestioningly. Sam couldn't have timed it better: a little earlier and Dean would have been ballistic and cranky; an hour later and he would be permanently and immediately awake. But this was Dean's magic hour, when he would fall back asleep inside two minutes given a soft seat and a moving car, when you could move him from one location to another without disturbing his nocturnal pattern, when the need for oblivion outmatched everything else, including blunt curiosity.

So Sam drove and Dean curled up on the passenger seat, not the back, nominally signaling that he was alert and instantly making a lie of it by snoring, sliding awkwardly against the side panel, his head dropping into the space between seatback and door. Sam was constantly amazed at Dean's ability to sleep in the midst of extreme adverse physical conditions. More surprised that he usually awoke cheerful.

Dean was resilient, had demonstrated that over and over, but this last thing with the dog had taken it out of him, had left him more brittle than Sam had ever remembered, which was why the canine jokes had worn thin after a few days and why Sam wouldn't burden his brother with things he could do nothing about.

Sam drove north, came to a crossroads, chose north again. Kept driving through low hills and scrubby dark trees. It didn't scare him that he had no idea where he was going; that seemed to describe most of his life. That was just the physical location, the name of the place that he didn't know. Because in the most elemental sense of it, he knew *exactly* where he was going.

He had an appointment with a demon, and there was flame and someone was going to die. And that was the piece that he wasn't about to tell Dean when his brother awoke in a state that grappled with questions like a Doberman with a meaty stick: Sam didn't know who was in danger, not exactly, but it felt like it was going to be *him*.

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Dean only woke up when Sam drove off the road.

Forgivable, perhaps. Sam had closed his eyes, after all, which wasn't a recommended state for maneuvering a heavy vehicle down an unknown, unlit roadway. Lucky for them both, and for the Impala, that Dean had had enough sleep and woke up completely alert and ready to move. No matter how much his hand ached as he did it, ignoring the searing *owowow* of the mostly-healed dog bite, Dean flung himself onto Sam's sagging body and pulled the wheel to the right. The car turned back onto the road, jerked Sam's nerveless body directly onto Dean.

Who swore conversationally and pushed Sam back to upright as the younger man blinked dry-eyed and owlsh and the car rolled to a stop in the middle of the deserted road.

"I fell asleep," Sam explained, just in case Dean had missed it. Dean nodded, once. Better this way.

"Get in the back. I'll drive," he said, trusting Sam without understanding him. It came fairly naturally by now.

"Nh," Sam replied.

"What?" There was a limit to understanding Sam under these conditions, however. "Use a fucking vowel in there, dude."

"North," Sam managed, flipping himself inelegantly over the back of the seats, his All-Stars the last part of him to make the transition, and then only because Dean threw one freakishly large foot back to join the rest of its owner.

"North, what?" But Sam was asleep again. Dean got out the passenger side, more to stretch his cramping legs and clear his head than anything. His watch said 5:36. He cracked his back, felt the muscles ripple up and down and a twinge that was the only indication that he'd been jammed between a seat and a door for the better part of...

Shit, where the fuck was Sammy taking them? He seemed so sincere that Dean wasn't going to doubt that his brother thought it important. Only one thing was that important and that secret: demon dreams. Stupid useless freaky hinky – had he already said useless? – worth mentioning again *useless* fucking powers. Couldn't even bend a fucking spoon.

*I need a coffee*, Dean thought, looking around.

The sky was an indeterminate gray, weirdly non-time specific: early evening, late afternoon, just before a good thunderstorm, slightly before dawn. Just after dawn. No sun, not yet, or it was hiding. Trees, nothing but trees. Where the hell were they? The road was gravel, and potholed and looked like it was going nowhere.

Even in a dark room with his eyes closed and drunk, Dean could tell north. A good sense of direction. North. Okay. We'll play it your way, Sammy.

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*Don't sneak up on him, he doesn't like it.* Sam reminded himself of this, staring up at the Impala's roof, watching the sunlight dapple and change on the canopy above, the dome light long ago burned out, recently replaced along with the driver's seat cushion and window. Dean had said that he wanted to keep the steering wheel, even with the bite marks. Sam hadn't commented, had kept that silence between them as Dean worked through whatever that dog had meant to him.

Oh god, the steering wheel...and sat up quickly, saying Dean's name almost directly into his ear.

"Oh, *fuck*," Dean yelped, jerking his head around in alarm, the Impala responding by leaping forward at Dean's involuntary pressure on the gas.

"Sorry," Sam replied, climbing into the front seat. "Sorry about last night." He peered out the window. More trees, a paved road now, sun not high, maybe eight or eight thirty. North. They were going north, still. "Sorry," Sam whispered and hoped Dean wouldn't ask.

Fat fucking chance.

"Sam, I like an adventure as much as the next guy, and this little tour of the northern states has been *swell*, but I swear to god we're somewhere in Vermont by now, maybe Maine, and I haven't seen sign of human habitation for hours."

"What's the gas situation?" Sam asked but looked at the same time, just in case Dean was going to make light of it. Nearing empty was the answer.

Dean shrugged. "I'm more worried about the lack of caffeine. Give me a cup of coffee and I'll walk to a gas station."

Sam grinned, aware that Dean wasn't asking the obvious, was waiting. Worrying maybe, but waiting.

"Well, we're on a paved road now, so that's a good sign," and immediately, the road turned to gravel again. Dean didn't even look over at him, but his mouth quirked in a little grin.

Just as suddenly, the road hugged a soft blind corner and they met up with a highway, a stop sign signaling them to take it easy. The highway ran smack dab down to a long bridge over a large river, a river too big to be merely ornamental: a serious river, the sort that it would take half the winter to freeze over, the kind that could manage the passage of tankers and tall masts.

Across the way, hazy in the morning heat, was a city: a big city already wreathed in a thin line of brown smog.

A few clues: the stop sign said *arrêt*. The cars flashed by and Sam read the license plates: *je me souviens*. Beside the highway, a blue sign with fleur-des-lis and a meaningless number. A large green sign pointed the way to Châteauguay and Ste-Catherine and Montréal, straight ahead. Across the highway, a gas station, recognizable by the pumps and little else. The signs read *Couche-Tard* and *gaz*, and *bière froide*.

“Wow. So you went north,” Sam breathed, as though it were a pleasant surprise.

Dean’s eyes were wide, but he shrugged with one shoulder. “You wanted north. I went north.”

“You didn’t *see* the border?”

“Guess not, Sammy!” And that was as much as Dean was going to tolerate, obviously. “Dirt roads, middle of fucking nowhere...longest unprotected border in the world, Sam. What the fuck did they teach you in school?” They glared at each other for a long moment. *Don’t push him, he’s not asking me why, not yet, so I haven’t had to lie, but it’ll come.*

Sam took a deep breath. “Think they have coffee as well as *gaz* at the *Couche-Tard*?”

Dean pulled forward, preparing to cross the highway. “Café, Sam. Even I know that.”

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Getting through Montréal was a little like street racing in Tokyo drunk with a blindfold. Not that Dean had tried that, but every cherished concept about how humans were supposed to act on a freeway was completely destroyed by the time they left the city behind them two hours later.

Two hours of bumper-to-bumper with no recognizable road niceties such as ‘lane’ or ‘yield’ or ‘turn signals’, randomly interspersed with many obscenities and speeds of up to 85 miles per hour, which Dean thought was ridiculously fast, even for him, especially as 100 was the posted maximum. Kilometers, Sam had clarified, but between gritted teeth. In Dean’s experience, Sam was not a white-knuckle driver, but he’d allow it this time. *Est* turned into *ouest*, which turned into something else called a *voie fermée*, but that led them nowhere.

Then, a bus passed them on the inside lane, a big touring bus with dark windows and a stylish swoosh of verdant emerald and a glitter of violet, and Dean noticed how Sam stilled.

“Follow that one,” Sam said.

So Dean did. He cut off about five cars to do it, ignoring the horns and the imprecations shouted out the open window: *Tabernac! Anweille! You fucking cunt!* But the bus was easy, it involved no quick interpretations and guesswork as to meaning, just required a certain ham-fisted tenacity. Dean knew himself to be possessed of that in spades.

Thank god they had a full tank of gas. *Gaz*. After the harrowing crucible of Montréal, Dean settled back, followed the bus, wished for another cup of coffee. *Café*. Despite the lack of sleep, despite Sam’s stupid hinky suspect nightmares, Dean grinned cautiously. An adventure, that’s

what this was. Disguised the fact that he wasn't asking and Sam wasn't telling and they could keep that up for another few miles. *Kilometres*. Like a fucking European vacation, if you discounted the nightmares.

But if they were actually chasing the nightmares now, *hunting* them, there'd be no vacation. Not on his watch, even with Sam and his stonewalling.

They followed the bus along a smaller highway, occasionally spotting the river – might be the St. Lawrence, might not be, wished they had a map at least – heading west, away from Montréal, through silver-spired villages with *magasins* that were *ouvert* and fields of cow and sheep. The highway shimmered ahead and their windows were open, catching the smell of *river* and *cow* and *grass*. The river led away from the metropolis, into hinterland, narrowing, and Dean felt as though they were going back in time. That was a little too close to hearing the cries of Civil War ghosts on battlefields, so Dean glanced at Sam, hoped his brother hadn't noticed the sudden scowl.

Looking at Sam, he was less than pleased by what he saw. "Sam?" he gentled, trying it like a foreign phrase. Sam looked rough, like he'd been beaten as he slept.

"Yeah?" Sam had released his death grip on the dashboard, was now peering anxiously at the road signs.

"You know any French? At all?"

Sam shrugged – Dean wasn't looking, but he felt the evasion. Dean raised his voice a little over the rush of the warm wind. Behind his sunglasses, his eyes felt sticky. "Sam?"

"No, not much. How different from Spanish could it be?"

Dean wasn't going to answer that, mostly because he wanted to say 'a lot' but didn't know if that was the truth, so he just shut up. The bus, with Québec plates and lettering that identified it as coming from Outaouais, which was way too many vowels for Dean this morning, rumbled along reassuringly. Dean vaguely hoped it wasn't heading for a border crossing that involved an actual border crossing guard. Not with the weapons they had in the trunk. Hard for a bus to sneak across the border like they had.

"Sam?" he tested out again, but Sam was like the mid-Atlantic, dark and restless and unfathomable. "Sam."

"Hmm?" Not exactly an opening.

"Where are we going, Sam?" He'd been avoiding it because he didn't want to be lied to and Sam had been lying about this for weeks. *Just a dream, Dean*. But Sam, how am I supposed to fight what you won't name?

*You're not a dog*, Sam had said, back in Virginia. Dean didn't want to think about that, either.

They'd been coming into a city for a while now – three story buildings with wrought iron stair rails, the occasionally recognizable housing development, a series of *Couche-Tards*, and a McDonalds. Something out of Pulp Fiction, Dean thought into the silence. What do Parisians call a Quarterpounder with cheese? *A royale with cheese*. And that was the extent of his French. Oh,

wait: *voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?* Yeah, he oughta mention *that* to Sam. Sam would laugh and laugh.

They were so fucked.

“There,” Sam said suddenly, and the highway multiplied alarmingly, Dean’s stomach clenched, and the roadway filled with cars on a death mission. Taking a deep breath, Dean tightened his grip on the wheel, swerved two lanes to follow the bus onto an off-ramp circling a deep quarry lake, a single fountain blasting skywards. One turquoise tower, the Hilton logo at the top, the city filling in the skyline beyond, crowding the river they’d been following. Saw signs for ‘Gatineau’, but Dean had no idea what that meant, or where they were.

The bus circled the Hilton, and they took another side road, this one marked Boul du Casino, and suddenly a huge beautiful sign emerged roadside, a large teeming parking lot behind, nestled cheek by jowl with the hotel. Casino du Lac-Leamy. A roulette wheel etched in neon, twenty stories high.

“Oh Sam,” Dean breathed, easing the car to idle, letting the bus take its spot in the parking for *l’autobus (souterrain)*. “Oh Sam,” he repeated.

*You got us to Vegas, he thought. You and your stupid superpowers.*

He turned to Sam, just before a loud honk behind them signaled that he ought to keep moving, find parking. It was past noon, he was hungry, and he was going to take his psychic brother gambling in a French casino. Dean Winchester didn’t know if there was a god, but he thanked him in both English and Latin. Discovered he knew something else: *Merci*.

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It lasted all of ten minutes, Dean’s happiness, the time it took to park, lock, and walk into the casino’s cavernous lobby. One look at what was there, what was the obvious destination, the reason Sam had brought them here.

“Sam, your superpowers? They *suck*.” And Dean wandered away in disgust, toward the bright shiny lights of the slot machines, row upon row not unlike a graveyard, walked into the inevitably-accented dulcet tones of “Pina Colada” emanating from a house band perched high on the casino’s interior ramparts in front of a mirrored ball the size of a hot air balloon.

There would be no getting over this. Sam knew he’d said that before, sure, but this was different, was a debacle on a literally monumental scale. This was a vinyl banner more than thirty feet high and twelve wide, full-color, hanging in the main lobby just beside the concierge desk, near the bored girl at the guestless coat check. The banner stretched from vaulted ceiling to red carpet, just behind the marble staircase leading to *étage supérieur casino* and *les restaurants*. Emblazoned on the banner, way larger than life, IMAX big, was a face. A face bathed in stylized fire, ecstatic as an Italian saint. Glory be to something. Beside the instantly recognizable face were smaller visions of fire-eating tumblers and painted fairies and girls who bent like pretzels dangling from bright ribbons.

*Un soir magique. Cirque du Soleil avec la voix du Québec -- Céline Dion! Un grand spectacle pour tout le monde: Inferno!*


For the anglos in the audience, in smaller letters: *A magic night with Cirque du Soleil and Quebec's voice – Celine Dion! A fantasy for everyone: Inferno!*

The French text was Sam-tall, and surrounded by the same emerald green and violet swooshes as decorated the bus they'd followed here. Was the reason Dean had taken one look, rolled his eyes, and slouched off to the slots.

Every dream coalesced in a sick twisting mess of sound and fire and Sam wanted to run so fast he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself rooted in the lobby.

Because this was it. This is where it ended. Not the casino, not the roulette wheel, not the craps tables or the baccarat. Not with Jess. With *her*, and with the flame.

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a/n: Many thanks to  [lemmypie](#) and [jmm0001](#), who always make it better and make it fun. All French mistakes are mine; my French is terrible. Except when I drink La Maudite. Then, my French is *smooth*.

## Chapter Two - Spanish Web

Posted June 28th, 2006

Bloody hell, this chapter of Cirque de Céline just goes on and on and on...but it ends in orgasm! So everyone wins!

After a rather relentless day of saving the planet at the climate foundation, I found myself in a meeting with video makers, talking about going to Nunavut (actually, way, way north of Nunavut) to film some research for the Weather Channel. Now, I'm thinking, for a Canadian, what better thing is there in life than the Weather Channel? Gentle music and every once in awhile that blonde who makes Paula Abdul appear sober. I just love her and her slobbery mauilings of 'frontal systems' and 'slip streams' and everything just sounds either preposterous or sexual coming from her.

Like you want to hear about the weather when there's sex in the offing? God, some of you people just aren't...*Canadian* are you?

Rating: NC-17 – swearing in two languages, explicit sexual content of the het variety, and a certain Québécoise singer who warrants a special DangerDanger rating all on her own.

Disclamations: Dear God: Please don't allow various large entertainment conglomerations such as the CW, Cirque du Soleil, and Team Céline to sue me for borrowing their media personas and making them have sex with each other. I'm going to hell, aren't I? God?

a/n: Mucho thanks to my amazing betas, jmm0001 and [lemmypie](#), who just make it all so much better than I could on my own. Special thanks to jmm, who obliquely led me back to the 'lucky bullet' that features much more prominently in Old Rebel Yeller (you can read that one in my memories page). As for the French: some of the French here is genuine textbook stuff, but the other stuff? Well, we call it *joual*, and it's what's spoken round about these parts.

The new, really really long chapter is here:

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By the time Sam recovered from the shock of coming face-to-face with a twenty-foot Céline, his brother had vanished. The main casino was big, vaulted up at least five levels, festively enlivened by sparkling lights and palm trees, long narrow windows revealing the single spire-like fountain and the city beyond. Sam realized he didn't even know what city he was looking at. Gatineau, maybe? Didn't that mean cake in French? They had rarely been so completely unprepared.

Amend that: *Sam* had rarely been so unprepared.

In those intervening years when he'd been at Stanford and Dean had been doing whatever he'd been doing, alone or with their father, Sam wondered if Dean had used a map, even once. He somehow doubted it; left on his own, Sam could well imagine Dean just following his nose, not paying much attention to where he was, other than to figure out coordinates and identify the thing he was there to kill. Sam was the map collector, the one who knew how to fold one properly, who would spread it across his knees, pointing out what lake they were passing, what mountain range, whether they'd just crossed a state line. Hell, a county line. Sam kept *track*.

Even now, he grabbed a floor plan of the casino from the rack where it nestled uncritically next to a brochure about gambling addictions: *Avez-vous un problème?* He flipped the map open and scanned it as he walked into the central gaming area, knowing that Dean would probably head for tables before slots, cards before roulette wheels, blackjack before poker. He'd watch first, before playing.

And he'd said he was hungry, they both were, which might – just might – take precedence over winning money. Funny, how Sam had no doubt that winning money would be involved.

Which brought up another point, and Sam knew exactly where Dean would be. He looked down at the floor plan, glanced up, found the Keno section, above which hung the mirror ball and the balcony where the band was just winding up a surprisingly spry version of *Takin' Care of Business*. Beside the Keno – which Sam considered something one rung up from bingo – was the *bureau de change*.

Unprepared: they had no Canadian money.

Dean was examining his new bills when Sam caught up with him. Dean's mouth quirked, a mix of chagrin and annoyance. "Man, the queen's looking pretty harsh." Glanced at Sam, but Sam couldn't tell if he was finished being mad. Sam knew that Dean had figured out what had brought them here. His stupid superpowers. Made Dean madder more quickly and more irrationally than almost anything Sam could think of. "Their rates are criminal."

"Bank always wins, Dean."

Dean slid his wallet into his back pocket and took out his keys, weighed them in his hand automatically and rubbed the misshapen fob for a moment before replacing them. The lucky bullet there was now completely understood, worrisome object that it was. Sam didn't like the concept of 'luck', didn't believe in it, certainly didn't trust it. Dean's absent touching of the bullet was an older, known ritual: Sam recognized the gesture from countless entrances into bars with pool tables in the back. Dean was out to make some money.

Dean cocked his head to one side, attention on the gaming floor. "We'll see about that."

The glint in his eyes was coming back and Sam knew to both be heartened and to be wary. *I'm sorry*, he thought apropos of nothing. *I didn't mean for this*. This not being the casino – shit, that was a *gift* – but the dreams and what he thought they probably meant. The fact that they seemed to be connected to the bus they'd followed and in flames and ancient beasts running on a dark plain. Sam had no idea how it tied together.

"Food first, please," Sam stated, glancing down at the floor plan before Dean plucked it from his fingers as though it was a used Kleenex and pointed to Bar 777, right in the center of the gaming area. Sam held the stare, practiced. "I mean real food, not fries and peanuts."

"It's all protein, Sam. Rounded out with a beer, it's all a body really needs."

Actually, they were able to get sandwiches, which were fine, though they paid a stupid amount of money for them. Coffee carts rolled around, dispensing free caffeine, which Sam opted for. Dean had a beer, ordered the only one on the menu Sam thought he could pronounce. The server, a tall slender woman with an arched brow that telegraphed no nonsense, glanced between them. Her

English was almost accentless, as far as Sam could tell, but she flipped between French and English with the bartender.

“Hey,” Sam asked her as she brought the plates of club sandwiches, “what’s the deal with the Inferno show? Is it on right now?”

She sighed, rolled her eyes and smiled tightly. She’d been all business before, but this seemed a bone of contention. “Oh yeah. It’s a big deal. Céline’s people have designed the whole show, she’s singing for the first week, then they get in some other singer. Completely sold out months ago for the entire week. Two shows a day. The Cirque people arrived a few days ago, but I think Céline just arrives today.” The bus, Sam thought. “Probably rehearsing now. First show’s tonight at eight.” Like she couldn’t end her shift fast enough to get the hell out of town.

“You don’t like Céline?” Dean asked, and Sam could see the effort he was making not to start laughing in the middle of it.

The server gave him a blank stare, the same temperature as tundra. The moment stretched out awkwardly. Then Dean gave her that honey-slow smile he had in his arsenal and Sam watched the arctic ice melt a little. “Guess not,” he murmured, sliding out the toothpick holding his sandwich triangles together and inserting it in his mouth.

“The Cirque’s great, don’t get me wrong,” the server continued, depositing a bowl of peanuts on their table with a swift hand. “But the Céline fans? They’re a little...*bizarre*.” Said that in French, which was understandable enough.

Dean ate his meal in under thirty seconds. Sam eyed him carefully, unsure what he meant to do next, given the previous conversation. Obviously, Dean had put together the bus, Sam’s stupid superpowers, and Inferno as a general starting point and wasn’t pleased about it. Sam could hardly blame him.

“Sold out for months,” Sam said, offering his brother a way out.

For a minute Dean looked like he might take it, twirling the toothpick between his fingertips. “We’ll need some money, then,” Dean finally returned, sizing up the tables behind the bar.

Dean’s theory (stated once on a particularly long road trip across the worst Nevada could offer) was that the longer you played, the more you’d lose. Consequently, he moved from table to table, never overstaying his welcome. At first, scoping things out, he lost about five hundred dollars at blackjack, a small fortune to them. Dean didn’t look worried at all and Sam remembered that they’d spent that one summer in Reno when Dean was almost twenty; he’d dated a series of dealers and bargirls. Although he always said he liked the track more than a card table, he wasn’t adverse and he wasn’t a rookie. So Dean circled back, bet more strategically, got out when his luck was still running hot.

This wasn’t like hustling pool. Hustling was theatre and psychology mixed with skill. As Dean slowly won back what he’d lost, then more, Sam was forced to admit that this might just be luck and good judgment. Self-restraint, of all things. After the next few games, Dean was up two hundred dollars. Sam hovered behind his brother as Dean bought chips, set them down, alternately tapped the table for more cards, or waved two fingers to indicate he’d hold.

Then Dean switched to ‘Poker Grand Prix’, which Sam understood to be the same as ‘let it ride’ poker. The dealer announced ‘*Rien ne va plus*’ and Dean trusted his luck. No more than five quick hands, a hundred dollars apiece, three won, two lost, then he nodded to the croupier and collected his chips.

Between tables, Dean grinned and handed Sam some of their winnings. “So, you getting any...” and circled his hand vaguely around his ears.

Sam stopped, which meant Dean did too. “What?”

Dean looked off to the high balcony where the band was playing again. Then back to Sam, grin only half mocking. “Any *impressions* about where to play next?”

He had to be kidding. He wasn’t. “You are such an asshole,” Sam shook his head. Then smiled, jerking a thumb to the Caribbean Stud Poker table. “That one.” But that was exactly what he’d said about the bus and it made Dean’s expression slide from sly to wary.

It shut him up, though.

Sam left Dean to win or lose as he might, lucky charm or not. He was getting bored. Wandering between the busy slot machines, he pushed in a quarter and was surprised and somewhat embarrassed when a gush of money came pouring out. *Damn*. Immediately, he was taken under the wing of a nice older lady who spoke no English whatsoever, and within an hour, had accumulated over seven hundred dollars and a lot of French swear words. On a quarter.

“The longer you play, the more you’ll lose.” Sam didn’t turn his head from the blinking fruit. “How much are you in for?” Dean continued, a smile in his voice. Indulgent.

Sam grinned. “Up seven hundred and twelve dollars, I think,” and pivoted on the stool to watch Dean blink uncertainly. “You?”

“Get up, Sam, and say goodbye to your new friend.”

Sam saw what was on Dean’s face: this freaked him out. A lucky bullet? No problem. Sam’s superpowers causing slot machines to put out? Something else. Dean was always his protector, and it was one thing for Sam to direct Dean as though he was a weapon, but quite another for Sam to do it himself.

If this was Dean’s reaction to Sam playing hinky with the slots, there was no way Sam was going to tell him about the dream of dying in flames, or of falling off a cliff with terrified animals.

An hour later, after a somewhat productive stint at the poker tables, Dean asked, “What the fuck do the letters mean?” They’d left the cards behind now, were leaning against a row of touch bet roulette machines hooked up via video camera to the tables across the floor. Sam glanced at the screen. How lazy did you have to be not to stand at the table as the wheel was spun?

“What?” Sam asked, sipping an ill-considered third coffee. No way he was sleeping tonight, not with this much caffeine in his system. Might not be a bad thing.

Dean flipped his chips in his hands, moved one through his fingers, back and forth. “Well, Fucking Observant Boy, didn’t you notice the face cards? The king – an R. The queen, a D. The jack, a V. Must be French, I guess. Shit, better keep your eyes peeled for other...anomalies.”

“You know,” Sam called after him, peeved. “Sarcasm is the refuge of the emotionally stunted.”

By the time they were up a thousand, Dean had switched to craps and Sam had found out what the letters meant. He was having a conversation with three students from the Université d’Ottawa, which he was told was just across the river, when Dean collected his chips and gestured with a jerk of his chin. The girls waved goodbye and he caught one of them staring admiringly at Dean’s departing figure and heard her say *chek moélédon*, and he had some idea what that meant, but he just smiled back and allowed himself to be led to another section of the casino, this one full of slot machines.

“*Roi, dame, and valet,*” Sam announced proudly, the seven hundred dollars burning a damn hole in his pocket. Four cups of coffee, maybe five or six o’clock and he was starting to feel good. As good as he could in a Québec casino, knowing next to no French and with dreams of flame and death plaguing him. Oh, and don’t forget Céline.

Dean stared at him as though he’d grown a second head. Didn’t care, Sam realized. Had even forgotten that he had wondered about the letters. The cards were a means to an end, and beyond that, Dean didn’t really care. *Avez-vous un problème?* Evidently not.

“I’m going to cash out,” Dean explained as though Sam was a mewling infant or a dense old granny. “And then we’re going to find a motel,” he waved a finger. “Not the Hilton,” as though Sam had suggested it. Despite the fact that the money was all scammed, Dean was notoriously stingy. A lifetime of not knowing exactly when and where the next meal was coming, Sam supposed.

“And, after that?” Narrowed eyes, not offering him a way out a second time. Shit, they had enough money to do this.

Dean, however, would make Sam work for it. “Don’t know. Might check out a few bars, grab a bite...”

Sam hitched his shoulder, tried to keep the pained smile from his face. “And after that?”

“Fuck, Sam, it’s been a long day,” not looking at him, heading towards the doors, past the tall palms and huge banner alarming as an Amber Alert. Stopped, raised both brows, looked as though he’d rather staple his mouth shut than suggest it.

“Dean.” Asking without a question mark. Begging to go see Céline. It was, on every level Sam could think of, pathetic. Change tactics. “Okay. Guess I’ll just have to take my winnings and buy my own way in. See ya.” And that, he knew, clinched it.

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Dean knew there was always a back door, especially through the kitchens, which could be negotiated at speed and, combined with a dazzling smile, that was usually enough. That and two hundred of Sam’s stupid dollars.

Worked in El Paso, in Bangor, in Dubuque, and it worked here. Wherever the fuck they were, Québec.

One of the dishwashers even scouted ahead for them, made sure they could safely enter the back staircase between the casino kitchen and the backstage area of the theatre. The kitchen staff was so happy to help, in fact, that they gave Sam a *Inferno* program brochure, pushed it into his hands in a flurry of French that neither of them understood. Dean raised his eyebrows at Sam, and they followed the white-clad dishwasher through a maze of passages, down stairs, then up again.

“Excuse me,” Sam stopped him. The smaller man looked as though he was from north Africa, was difficult to see in the gloomy corridor they’d just entered, filled with stacking chairs and the scent of tobacco.

“*Oui?*” the man asked, stopping.

“Any...strange things happened since the *Cirque* came?” Silence, and Dean had no idea if the man even understood what Sam was saying.

“*Chtedi*, la Céline, that one is strange her, *non?*”

“I guess,” Sam agreed, sounding sincere.

“You stay,” the man said, waving them down and heading down a dark hallway. While they waited, Sam moved into a lit area so he could better read the program. Dean studied the gloom of the corridor, unable to see where the man had gone, which always made him nervous.

Behind him, Sam gave a surprised grunt.

“What?” Dean demanded, but softly, not looking at him. He could just hear the sound of people, restless, a little music. They must be close to the theatre.

Sam sighed loudly, then read out: “In the beginning, man shared the earth with ancient powers. Losing his innocence through knowledge, man emerged from the flame ascendant, but flawed. *Inferno* recaptures the magic of the wild darkness within us all, the beast that rages within. It gives voice to primal urges and the power of love to open the doors of passion and fire, to elevate us to a greater plane. Welcome to the magic of *Inferno*.” Sam looked up. “Exclamation point.”

Dean glanced over his shoulder at Sam’s bemused face, then back at the corridor. “What a load of shit.”

No more time than that, for the dishwasher reappeared, this time holding two red lanyards with tags on them, which he slipped over their heads. Press passes, of all things. *My god, maybe my luck is still holding*. Sam had to bend down, looked like he was receiving an Olympic medal. “There,” the man said, grinning. “I like America,” he added hopefully.

Dean took the hint and gestured for Sam to give him another hundred bucks. Tickets were apparently going for four hundred apiece, so this was – literally – a steal. “Two new chairs, in front. Khaled shows you.”

*Right* in front, he meant.

Dean had always made a point of never sitting in front of anything. A dangerous, exposed spot, but he supposed that they had no choice and it was a fucking circus, wasn't it? What was the worst that could happen? Maybe Sam would get stepped on by an elephant.

The stage was large and circular, an apparatus of smooth steel arcing over it and the audience at a height of at least fifty feet at its apex. The audience was seated around the stage in close, raked rows. Dean and Sam were seated in hastily erected folding chairs, almost blocking one aisle in front of the stage. The man beside Dean gave them a disgruntled look. Maybe he thought he had the aisle, Dean thought.

Dean had only been to a circus once in his life, and that had been enough. The trapeze artists and the tumbling and even the bare-back rider – hell, *especially* the bare-back rider – had been good, but the animals had left him feeling trapped, claustrophobic. He'd been ten, maybe, invited as part of a class birthday party, the new kid, an unknown quantity, odd man out, minutely observed by children and adults alike. Uneasy in his own skin. And then the caged lions, pacing around, snapped at by the whip, looked as though they could easily have ripped anyone apart, hate shining in their eyes like new pennies.

Beside him, Sam said his name and Dean thought he might have been repeating it, because there was an edge to it. "What's the matter?" Sam asked.

"Nothing," Dean answered, but no more, because announcements came on, first in French, then in English, stating that the show was about to start, no flash photography.

It was like nothing either of them had ever seen in their lives and they'd seen a number of things that no one, anywhere, had any business seeing. It started with a clown, but he was a trickster more than a clown, dressed in a purple suit with a little flipped up flat top cut and red gloves. He had a cunning grin that hinted at mayhem and demanded you take him seriously. Through mime, he moved both across the stage and back in time. Once at his appointed spot on the stage, he was joined by small dancers in fantastic costumes who flipped easily as Sunday morning pancakes, soft and perfect.

The first act left them literally gape-jawed: a muscled acrobat in a large steel ring like a huge gerbil let loose with his wheel, rolling across the stage, dangerously close to the edge, lifting himself up and through the rungs, sliding, circling and rolling. He was followed by a quartet of tiny exquisite Chinese plate-spinners.

By the third act, Dean had forgotten completely about Céline, and Sam's dreams and the bus. He was mesmerized. Behind the stage, which also turned slowly or quickly, depending on the act, a live band set everything to an ethereal, wailing music that would have put his nerves on end at any other time. Not now.

The trickster came center stage again, a flower in his gloved hand, eyes sweeping the audience, came up to the stage's edge, smiled into the crowd, holding the flower out. Instinctively, Dean leaned back in his chair. The trouble with sitting in front was this, exactly.

Pretending he wasn't there did him no good. The trickster grinned, waved to him and Dean felt his heart fall to his stomach, bounce back up to his throat. His entire body buzzed electrically, and it was a sensation that made him feel like both running and throwing up at the same time. But the audience was clapping, was cheering, and the trickster gestured for him to stand and if Dean

could have looked at Sam he might have, but he felt all the blood rush from his head and he thought for one sickening moment he might pass out.

Nothing like audience participation to make you swear off theatre for life.

The flower wasn't real. It was made of silk and it was attached to a small clip-on monitor, the sort that they sometimes used in hospitals and with which Dean was entirely conversant. As he stood, the trickster, who came up to his chin, whispered, "*Pas de problème, monsieur*. You are the lucky one tonight. *C'est okay, n'est-ce pas? D'accord?*" He didn't wait for an answer. He detached the false flower from the clip, pushed the flower into Dean's hands, and snapped the clip securely onto Dean's ear.

Dean glanced quickly at Sam, stricken, and was appalled – *appalled* – to see Sam convulsing with laughter. In fact, Sam was laughing so hard tears were rolling down his cheeks. The rest of the audience was cheering and hooting. The trickster clapped Dean on the shoulder, jumped back onto the stage and lifted his arms: the lights dimmed a little, and the audience stilled.

The clip wasn't painful, but it was present, and Dean slowly sank to his chair, eyes on the smiling trickster, and as he watched, the clown who was so far from being a clown snapped his fingers and the theatre filled with a loud, rhythmic boom. It floated around them, concussive, percussive, and silent figures in red came out from behind the band, dragging their toes, slowly twirling every two beats.

Dean schooled his face to calm, though his heart was thudding like he'd been running uphill...

And realized.

Realized that the sound, the loud booming noise that was like drums but was not, the beat that the acrobats in red were starting to move in rhythm to *was his own heart*.

Sam wasn't laughing anymore. He smiled weakly, but even as Dean watched, he could see the levity in Sam's dark eyes replaced with concern, then real fear. Nothing ever happened to them by chance and this was public, exposed them in every sense of the word.

Dean felt a swooping sense of danger and knew his luck had run out, right here.

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At first, despite his sudden chill, Sam remained hopeful. This will be something to hold over him later, something to bring up when we've had a few beers. Remember that time when we were at the circus and they amplified your heartbeat so Céline could sing to it? Sam tried to think about how sweet that would be. It was almost impossible to think about it, though, when Dean's heartbeat was echoing around a huge theatre and ten figures in red were doing back flips to it. A little distracting, to say the least.

Then, one of the dancers skipped back to where the band was starting to play -- his brother's life rhythm as its pulse -- and pulled a long piece of fabric onto the stage. The enormous swath was attached to the overhead arc by a sliding connector, and the material was red and gold silk, striped and sinuous and it looked like nothing so much as it looked like a huge flame.

At the top of it, hidden in the folds at the connection twenty feet, then thirty feet, then all the way up to the full height of the theatre, was a small female figure. She might as well have been naked, for her bodysuit was flesh-colored and as she emerged from her entanglement with the fabric, Sam could see every etched muscle in her lithe body. She looped the fabric round her torso, bent backwards so one foot touched her forehead, a perfect circle, one toe pointing to the ground. Bent, folded, unfolded. Twisted back, looped fabric around, seemed to be playing in flames at the height of a vast ceiling, and the only thing touching her other than the flames was the sound of Dean's heart, which she moved to.

Sam listened as Dean's heartbeat sped up then, knew his own was doing the same because this was a young woman on the ceiling, surrounded by flames and it was an *affront*. This felt like someone, something, was throwing down a gauntlet. Sam had entered the theatre simply to investigate, to get the lay of the land, hadn't meant for things to get so dangerous so quickly, and not – definitely *not* – with Dean in the middle.

Sam then heard a new sound, aching familiar, which was a note held and held and held and he ripped his glance away from the aerialist to the stage, where a circular hole had dropped away and a figure in white was rising up, the lights on her, and on the girl high above the stage.

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Dean didn't know whether to run or stay put, but he wasn't going to leave Sam here alone, not with a woman on the ceiling, no matter that the flames weren't real.

Between the girl in the silk high above his head, and his own heartbeat booming deafeningly for everyone to hear, Dean didn't even notice when Céline appeared on stage. Didn't even notice how her song meshed with his pulse, scarcely was aware of anything, including the small hitch to Sam's breath as the note held for an insanely long time and the crowd went berserk.

*Breathe*, he cautioned himself. *Breathing is good*. Came back into awareness; he of all people could afford nothing less in this situation. *Take fucking stock, Winchester*, he counseled harshly. He was surprised that his heart sounded so steady – fast, but steady – given that he couldn't actually feel his extremities. Then the contortionist, about the size of a twelve year old boy -- as skinny as Sam had ever been, but with more muscles and a dainty Arabian mare length to her neck -- dropped.

Dropped suddenly and Dean realized that she was directly over him, had been slowly positioned there by whatever mechanism was operating the arc. And was now tumbling to earth, the note hanging in the air, a sudden burst of red silk blossoming around her twisting body like blood in water, or a sudden blast of flame, one he felt in the deepest recesses of his soul, but that he could scarcely remember on a cognizant level. On her blurred face, one known expression he'd seen over and over. Terror.

If he'd been listening to his heartbeat in that moment, he would have heard it skip, as the rest of the audience did, and a collective breath was taken like the suck of tide sliding back from a pebble beach.

And she stopped.

A pale face with short dark hair, fear dissolving into a sudden smile, maybe one yard from Dean's face, hanging in mid-air, foot and leg twisted in the silk, holding her like a mouse by the tail. The smile lingered a moment as the audience applauded the drop, and Dean's heartbeat filled the auditorium again, steady.

She flipped over, and he saw a cloud of rosin or chalk from her surprisingly small hands – small for such sudden, extreme work – grasping the fabric and going head over ass, back up the long fall of silk, right back to the top.

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Sam couldn't breathe properly until the song was over.

As soon as the last note sounded, his brother snatched the clip from his ear and jammed it into Sam's hand. Céline came forward, chatting into the microphone, sliding French words together like the cards out on the baccarat tables, turning up an English phrase every so often. Welcoming them. She sang a few more songs, but Sam wasn't paying any attention, was shooting worried looks at Dean, who was pale and shaking. When he bent to whisper in his ear, Dean shook his head vehemently – *I'm okay, back off*.

La Céline bowed to the audience and disappeared back down the hole from which she'd come.

Lights flurried across the stage and the trickster rode a small scooter out to the edge, jumped off and pointed amusingly at Dean, who looked like he was considering punching his lights out. Sam got to his feet, handed over the clip. The trickster smiled again, gestured to the flower still in Dean's slack grip, unnoticed. Sam, anxious to have this over with, grabbed it, and extended it back to the trickster, who took it, kissed Sam's hand and threw the flower back onto Dean's lap, bowing to him. *Oh, god, leave him alone*, Sam thought, angry.

For whatever reason, staging or Sam's glower, the trickster jumped back on the scooter, waved to the audience and wheeled back into the darkness and applause.

By the time the large Russian acrobats returned and pulled out the ropes for five aerialists to perform a Spanish web, Sam was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of that theatre. The Russians, however, appeared in shaggy furs, huge costumed heads rubbing back and forth against the ropes they began to rotate, eyes glowing red when the light caught them from the right angle. *Bison*, Sam thought, recognizing them in an elemental way. Above the Russian men, shimmying up the ropes with the ease of monkeys, were densely muscled aerialists dressed in pale ambers and taupe, make-up snatching imagery from Lascaux cave paintings and pueblo designs, a mish-mash of pseudo 'ethnic'.

This scared Sam shitless, all of it. Could they leave? Was that even possible?

The Spanish web was performed high above their heads, five rope aerialists rotated by five acrobats on the stage, using smaller ropes to attach hands and feet to the main ropes, twirling like spiders on speed. It was beautiful and daring, but Sam was so wrung out by what had happened that he wanted nothing more than to crawl into the Impala and get the hell as far away from here as possible. Had he been fucking crazy? What sane person would lead them into this? He'd wanted Dean for company, for moral support, not as a lure or a casualty. This was a demon's work, and though Sam was scared for his own life, in this moment he was more worried for Dean.

Sam knew more curses than prayers, and he had never been the praying sort for all the Latin he knew. It was a curse he felt like using now, because this wasn't *fair*. Wasn't fair on Dean, after all they'd been through. This was *his* stupid dream, *his* fucking quest, and he needed Dean to be safe. The demon, wherever it was, was after him, not Dean, of that he was completely certain.

The show ended in a blur. Sam scanned the Cirque players as they came out to take their final bows – the keychain-cute Chinese plate-spinners, the buffalo Russians, the trickster. The girl who'd almost dropped on top of them was wreathed in red silk, and was on the other side of the circle, angled away from them. The trickster, however, was right in front of him and Sam noticed how he wouldn't meet their eyes.

The lights came up, and they both sat there for a long while, allowing others to sidle past them in low murmurs of *excusez-moi*, and *pardon*. Sam studied Dean's profile, worried, waiting for him to say something.

Which eventually was, "I need a drink."

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He left Sam to investigate, to talk to the performers. Reporters, that was their cover. Normally, he would have wanted to check it out, but it was all he could do not to run out into the parking lot, jump into the car and drive at a hundred miles an hour along the freeway. Except he didn't have a clue where he was, and he wasn't about to abandon Sam, and he certainly wasn't going to make it very far without something to steady him.

The whole thing had unnerved him in a way that he found difficult to describe. He wasn't going to even try, which was part of the reason he needed a little bit of distance from Sam – just needed to get his thoughts in order.

A different server at Bar 777. He ordered a whiskey in loud American English, without even a pleasantry to break the ice. Sat for a long moment resting his forehead on his open palm. The silk flower and the program he'd wanted to throw in the trash, but Sam had stopped him, said either might come in useful. Using his head. Both items lay next to the whiskey, which Dean had rashly asked for neat, nothing between him and it. He glared at the flower, some kind of daisy-like thing.

Finished the whiskey in three gulps. Waited for Sam, willed the server to come back to the table. Sam was onto something here, something inherently evil, with this Inferno show. He didn't know exactly what it was yet, but even beyond the flames on the ceiling and the invasiveness of the heart monitor, he'd seen the look on Sam's face at the held note and the drop, and those fucking buffalo. Maybe now he'd tell him what he was dreaming about. And they were over a thousand dollars up, with a motel room paid for a week. Not altogether awful. At least this fucking evening was nearly done.

Or not.

"Allo? I can sit here?" Not so much a question, and Dean lifted his head. A small woman was climbing onto the tall chair at his cocktail table, dark hair streaked with deep red, unevenly cut in asymmetrical tufts that made her look like she taken a pair of kindergarten scissors to her own

head in a darkened movie theatre. Large brown eyes considered him over the table, her hands folded under her chin. “Okay. You’re easy.”

The server was back and his new companion smiled at her and Dean knew the smile. “La Maudite,” she said. “Deux.” With another smile.

Her hands were small, right enough, but callused and hard looking. A spray of freckles across her French nose, no makeup whatsoever, and slightly uneven teeth in a brilliant grin.

“Easy?” Dean asked, alert, maybe suspicious. Felt a pleasant stir. Maybe something else.

“*Bien sûr*,” she said, picking up the flower. “Easy to find you. And definitely La Maudite.” The server was back with two bottles and glasses, which she deposited succinctly before leaving them alone. Dean’s uninvited companion held up one bottle and showed him the label: a flying canoe under the auspices of a grinning winged devil, the word *Maudite* above. Her brows – severe and arched – quirked a little. “‘La Maudite’. It means, ‘damn fine’ I think. *Sur lie*, so use a glass.” She poured them both, and tapped her glass to his.

It was damn fine, everything, suddenly. She was dressed in black from neck to toe, a dancer’s stretch jersey, bright red slippers and a matching bracelet and Dean needed the beer right then, looking at her. “You know me?” she asked, maybe because he was staring.

He nodded. “You almost killed me.”

She laughed, a low chuckle in her throat. “I did not kill you.”

*You might*, he thought, but not without pleasure. “I’m Dean.”

She slid off the stool, flipped open the program to a page with a photograph of the red silk, and the flesh-colored costume, with her bent backwards, head touching her ass. Suddenly, beside him, she lifted one leg, bent it behind her head, smiled pure feline.

For the second time in the space of an hour, Dean was fairly sure he was going to pass out.

“*C’est moi*,” she explained unnecessarily, pointing to her name inscribed at the bottom of the photo. She hopped back up on the stool, sipped her beer again as Dean collected himself, tried to control the blood suddenly rushing around his body in unexpected ways.

“Beatrice...Vo?”

She laughed and he knew he’d mangled it hopelessly. Charmingly, he hoped. Because he was capable of those two things, more or less simultaneously: mangling and charm. Brought out his slow smile, matching hers.

“*Béatrice Viau*,” she said quietly, like a caress, mindful, utterly, of her own slow smile. “*Répétez après moi* : BAY-a-treece VEE-o.”

He repeated her name, just to watch what she did with it, felt like he was stroking a cat from head to tail with mere words.

“You ‘ungry?” she asked, tipping the last of her beer into her wide, laughing mouth.

He nodded, and followed her to the glass elevators on the far side of the Keno section, where they slid silently two stories above the gaming floor, the glitter of lights, the hectic rush of gambling and desperation and exultation. He didn't know where they were going, suspected it didn't involve food. He didn't care, was suddenly so in the moment that things like food, demons, brothers, didn't factor at all.

Almost as soon as they were in the elevator cubicle and the brass doors closed, Béatrice crushed herself to the glass wall and Dean stepped in behind her, close, and she reached back and pulled him against her. He dropped his head to her shoulder, eased aside the slender strap of her knit top with a single finger and rubbed his tongue and his teeth against her warm skin. She tasted of dust and leather and butter. He moved further up her neck, felt the muscles and sinew move against his lips as she turned into his arms.

The bell rang. They'd arrived, wherever they were.

Her hand was hard and sharp in his, but she seemed, thankfully, to know exactly where she was going. On this level, the restaurants were to the left, open to the huge gaming space, and the noise of the slots and the murmur of a thousand voices wasn't any louder than the thump of blood in Dean's ears.

*Weirder things have happened*, he thought, pulling her to a stop because he really didn't want to take another step without verifying that she had the same thing in mind he had. His hand, hard in its own way, slid down her back as he kissed her, guided her into him, felt every vertebra as he made progress to her ass. Her sudden intake of breath and he hoped that wherever they were going wasn't far.

A gaggle of older folks waited for the elevator, and Béatrice smiled at them, but not before Dean saw himself reflected in her dark eyes. Good, this was all good. His skin prickled in a familiar way, suddenly and sharply, more intensely than was usual.

Away from the restaurants – thank god, because Dean thought he'd have to fuck her on top of a table if she'd even *suggested* it – and down a darker passageway, narrow, but still open to the gaming floor below. Under a velvet rope with a small sign '*accès interdit*', and to the empty band stage, where hours before he'd heard *Pina Colada* and *Takin' Care of Business*. A word floated unbidden into his head: *bizarre*.

Maybe he said it out loud, because Béatrice licked her lips, tugged him to his knees and he realized the band shell had a barrier that prevented the musicians from haphazardly falling two stories onto the Keno players. A barrier that would – probably, if they didn't get up off their knees – prevent the entire casino from getting a really hot live sex show.

Because that's exactly what this was gearing up to be and Dean didn't know if he was going to last thirty seconds or half an hour, but he was going to see how long and how weird he could make it.

"You know," Béatrice whispered in his ear as she slipped one strong hand down the front of his jeans while the other grappled with the top most button, "I'm very flexible. All over." And laughed hot into his ear. Dean swallowed, backed off for a moment. He held up one hand.

Just a minute, that said, but he smiled. Both hands up now. *Stay where you are. Don't move.* She was on her knees, right near the drum kit. One false move and it would be noisy on top of embarrassing. Béatrice glanced over her shoulder as if contemplating it. Dean shook his head, still smiling at the tease. *Your shirt*, he mouthed, though he didn't have to be completely silent, given the hollow din of slot machines and distant music. It was better this way, somehow.

She took off her shirt in a slow steady motion, breasts small and high and slightly different from each other, reminding Dean of those almond tarts with white icing and a maraschino cherry in the center. Good. *Slower*, he grinned at her. All bone and muscle and sinew. He didn't have a type, he knew. Never had. All of them were great.

*You*, she mouthed back, an open hand and dimples. Fair enough, he supposed, peeling off his t-shirt. He watched her watch him, and that was okay too. *Slower*. Jeans, at her direction, saw her register his scars, including the most recent one on his thigh. She nodded approvingly and he saw the way one hand drifted down to her waist. Lower. Looked up from under a fringe of hair, pushed her hand under the waistband of her skirt. Found herself, closed her eyes for a long moment. His knees went to water. She opened her eyes, left her hand where it was, mouthed, *underwear*. Okay, however you want to play this, sweetheart. He was keeping track of where their clothes were, though. No need to be reckless.

And just about started laughing hysterically at the thought.

The laughter didn't last, because the space between them became so loaded and so unsupportable that Dean held out one hand, asking her to come closer. Shit, at this rate he wasn't going to last five minutes. Béatrice shuffled towards him on her knees, her hands, kneeled directly in front of him as he touched her, pulling down her dancer's leggings and skirt, a black thong underneath and Dean wondered which god he'd pleased to find himself here with her. Maybe the heartbeat thing had been a test, but he didn't want to think about that, because that might ruin the whole thing.

He'd been at this game, this old old game, long enough to know that there was no point in ruining anything right now. Plenty of time for that later.

He laid down beside her on the short industrial carpet, stroked her from breast to belly, slid his hand between her knees, all the while watching her face for the changes he loved to notice first time out: flush, shimmer of sweat, startle, eyes wide. Eyes shut. Mouth parted, lick of lips, pressed together.

Apart, together. Found what he was looking for, the same hand he'd tapped for more, waved for hold. He was holding and he was wanting more and he didn't exactly know what hand signal there was for that. Except what he was doing, and that seemed to suit Béatrice just fine. Her mouth grazed his neck, one of her rough hands pulling him down, French hot in his ear now, and his body did something crazy with that combination of breath and tongue and teeth. *Don't hold back*, she whispered, in English, her strong legs parting to allow -- *jesus, accès* -- their two hands together for a glancing moment before finding more useful work. Finding the fit.

Together and together again, and togethertogethertogether.

Skin sliding against skin, slick with everything that smelled suddenly of the sea at low tide, and she curved against him, all sharp angles. He turned, she on top now, hands to either side of his shoulders. She was weightless, a bird, but moved sinuously, every muscle defined and used. He

put one hand on her hip, let the other roam peripatetically up to her mouth, distracted by detours to breast and shoulder and collarbone and neck. Then pulled her down to him. Hell, Dean thought, this isn't going slowly *at all*.

Her breath hissed out against his shoulder and she bit him hard, but he didn't mind, knew why she did it, and found her neck, knew he'd leave a mark, but that was also part of whatever deal they were sealing right now. *Right now. Right --*

And everything blew apart, piñata bright, same sense of wonder and the unreasonable joy of release. To let go, an unnatural desire for him in almost every other arena, but here just going and going and going. Then lingering, then fading, then gone.

*Le petit mort*, he thought, immediately and out of nowhere. Nothing like orgasm to improve your French.

As he lay there, Béatrice resting on top of him, both breathing hard, he could see the huge mirror ball high in the ceiling above them, and wondered if his eyesight was good enough what he'd be able to see reflected there: people losing their reputations, hearts breaking, fortunes won, compacts aligned, friendships ruined. Two people knotted together for whatever reason, spent and not quite so scared as before.

Because he'd seen that in the instant of her fall: fear.

They dressed slowly, enjoying themselves, Béatrice running a finger over the spot where she'd bitten him so hard it had come up in a red welt. He caught her fingers and brought them to his lips, smelling them both there. Took them in his mouth, and ran his tongue over her rough calluses. As he drew his shirt over his head he glanced beyond the edge of the barrier, wondered what the Keno players would see if they ever managed to tear their eyes away from their obsession. A pair of furry heads, not much more.

He grinned, then spotted Sam hovering by Bar 777. Shit. He'd be worried. Actually started laughing.

"*Quoi?*" Béatrice asked, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"My brother, Sam," he said. "He's waiting for me."

"Ah," she breathed, resting her cheek against his back, right between his shoulder blades. "Introduce me, eh?" And meant to get to her feet. Dean, hand still in hers, dragged her down so that they were both sitting in with their backs to the barrier. He kissed her lightly on the lips, pushed a strand of hair from her eyes.

"Nah," he said softly. "Our secret, okay?" Sam would probably have a fit if he knew that Dean had just fucked one of the Cirque performers, would have nineteen different reasons as to why that was a Bad Idea. And besides, Dean thought with a thin shearing stab of malicious intent, he's not telling me everything, either, is he?

Béatrice's eyes glowed. "A secret, eh?" Ran one hand up the inside of his thigh. "I'm good at that." Then suspicion. "I'll see you again?" And that was definitely a question.

So he kissed her again, not softly, not the kind of kiss that you gave when you were saying goodbye. “You’ll be seeing me,” he said. Sam could wait.

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Additional note: Shit, are you guys still here? I just wanted to say that what happened to Dean with the clip on the ear – that actually happened to my utterly hapless brother-in-law, except it was at a dance performance of La La La Human Steps and was at Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto. He just about *died*. We still, of course, mock him relentlessly about it.

### Chapter Three - Buffalo Jump

Posted July 6th, 2006

Just before flying off to the soggy west coast, where I'll be darting about like a minnow in a pond -- Vic, Port Ren, Cow Bay, Van -- here's the latest Cirque blahdity blah blah. I'll be trying to write and post as I travel, depending on whether or not my parents have actually heard of the internet.

Note: All usual disclaimers apply. Just funnin' wit cha.

Grovellings: to the betas, jmm001 and [lemmypie](#), who make every sentence better.

Warnings: References to goings on in Scarecrow and Faith. Much bad language, internal monologues, irritations and misunderstandings, drinking, museum research, schoolgirls, contortionists, Céline Dion and her husband, and gratuitous het sex in unlikely locations. Brotherly angst by the bucketload, Written for the [spn\\_north](#) challenge.

STF: Following Sam's nightmares of girls burning on a ceiling, bison falling off cliffs, and a diva-belted high note, the brothers head north, to Québec, where they find a Cirque du Soleil production of sheer evilness, La Céline and her minions from hell, and a casino. Oh, and Dean finds a contortionist. After getting Céline Dion to sing to his heartbeat. While Dean's off getting laid, Sam's trying to do research...

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Sam had spoken first to an usher, then to a confused stagehand, and finally with the stage manager, who claimed that Sam's press credentials were unorthodox, but she'd see if anyone had time to talk with him. Sam called after her, hoping to stall.

Whether it was a language problem or not, the stage manager disappeared backstage, only to reappear moments later with a dainty figure in khaki and mauve, pointing Sam out as though he were a suspect in a police line-up.

*Shit*, Sam thought. He hadn't meant now, he wasn't *ready* now. Tomorrow was what he'd meant. His ducks weren't in a row, they weren't even on the pond. Sam's ducks were barely in the building.

The man that came over to Sam was almost unrecognizable without makeup: small, wiry, skin the color of breakfast coffee, the twinkle in his eye the only feature Sam recognized completely, even from his relative distance by the musicians gallery.

"What publication are you with?" The trickster glided across the open stage in a languorously liquid fast walk. A dancer, maybe. Lots of movement training, at the very least. Surprisingly deep voice for such a small man. Holding out a hand, not quite friendly.

"Sam Winchester," Sam said, shaking a desultory greeting. "Upstate New York Theatre Review."

"Oh?" Wasn't looking at Sam's face anymore, was looking at Sam's empty hands, not even a pad of paper or pen. Hair months past a cut that wasn't Dean with a Swiss Army knife, no jacket,

dingy old hi-tops. “Etienne Marcoux, your MC this evening. But you remember.” A joshing wink, all surface. “Did you want an interview right now?”

“Actually,” Sam back-pedaled furiously, “tomorrow would be fine.”

“Not a reporter’s usual response. What story are you working on?” Etienne raised both brows and Sam had the distinct impression that he was being toyed with. He didn’t like the feeling, never had. Happened often enough that he recognized it and had already decided how to play it: no aw-shucks kid this time, not with this asshole. Steel slid into his stance, pulled him upright from the slouch he tended to affect around shorter people. Meaning just about everyone.

Sam met and held Etienne’s stare, a barely-there smile whispering across his lips. “I’ve heard rumors about this show.”

“Rumors?” The trickster made a pretty good show of being bored. And ill-tempered. Okay, might not be an act. “Of what? La Céline always attracts rumors, and none of them are true.”

“Just that the show is...unlucky,” was the playground word Sam pulled from his vast Stanford vocabulary. *Smooth*. Still, theatre people were superstitious as all hell, weren’t they?

“Unlucky?” Etienne snorted, not even slightly alarmed. “Nonsense. Are you working to deadline?”

Sam shook his head. “My editor’s aiming for the end of the month.”

“I might be able to arrange something interesting for you.” His smile was particularly unsettling, like he had to work it around a mouthful of canary feathers. “Did you want to interview the whole cast?”

Sam’s brows twisted, and he tried for nonchalance, was so far off the mark he was surprised Etienne didn’t roll his eyes in derision. “Sure.”

The shrug was almost the same as an eye roll. “There are almost a hundred of us. I hope you have a lot of stamina.” There it was, plain: contempt. “Listen, the Chinese acrobats don’t speak a word of English. Do you speak Cantonese? No? The Lithuanian gymnasts can’t even look in a mirror without offering some sort of superstitious benediction, so if it’s idle theatre rumor you want, I’d talk with them.” He made an effort to look concerned for Sam’s journalistic integrity. “Oh, of course they don’t speak much English, either, but Béatrice can translate for you.”

“Béatrice?” Sam repeated, wishing for a pen. Or a blunt instrument, a bludgeon.

Etienne nodded, his eyes hard. “Yes, her mother is Lithuanian,” and he waved a hand vaguely in the air as though all Lithuanians were similarly primitive. “You remember her: the silk aerialist. The one that almost made your friend’s heart stop.” The trickster smiled widely. Sam ought to be scared, maybe. Or intimidated. But of all things, anger was uppermost.

This was a threat. He felt it in the marrow of his bones, shocking for all its obliqueness. Again, he felt how exposed Dean had been, and it was Sam’s fault for bringing him here, maybe, but if it was his fault, then it was also his responsibility. He could look out for his brother. He’d have to.

“How do I find her?” Sam asked.

No smiles now. “Oh you don’t,” nothing in his eyes at all but a chilling and encompassing understanding that went beyond anything Sam could presently comprehend. Dark, probably evil, but so veiled Sam couldn’t penetrate it. “She finds you.”

Their gaze held; Sam’s mouth worked back and forth, mastering his fury. “How do you choose your audience participants?” Voice cold, a retaining wall holding back floodwaters.

“Is this part of the interview?” Etienne asked quietly, sparkling dark eyes opaque as a circling shark’s.

“Just curious.”

The trickster shrugged, a dance of agile shoulder beneath knit silk. “I can usually tell which one will submit. The one that thinks he’s confident and daring and who is a little too sure of himself. The one that will amuse the audience, that will fit the program best.” He pulled his arms wide, but was walking backwards, away from Sam, back towards the curtain. “The one that will come to realize everything he thinks about himself is an illusion.”

The fury was almost suffocating. “What if he’d had a bad heart?”

The trickster did not alter his steps and his grin grew wider, if that was possible. “I’m not wrong about these things.” The threat was unstated and very, very real. “I’m not wrong about you, or about your friend. Or about his heart.” The trickster gestured smoothly with his hands, once again turning to topics best suited to journalists. “La Céline does not give interviews. But her manager, René -- her husband, yes? -- he said you looked as though you would write an interesting story.”

*Oh shit*, Sam thought, suddenly realizing how relatively easy it had all been: getting the press passes, getting to the front row, putting themselves in exactly the place where they’d be vulnerable. Where *Dean* would be vulnerable, just coming off that freaky possession, his heart still not fully faith-healed into trustworthy health, not as far as Sam was concerned.

Sam’s dreams didn’t lie though, they never did. He didn’t like them, but he trusted them. Thought: there is a demon around here. I bet it’s not this little fucker in front of me, but he’s close to it. Throw some holy water on this skinny little shit and I’ll bet he squirm. Whatever demon this is, it wants me dead, and it’s trying to play with me first. Using Dean to get to me. *Fuck you*, he thought. *Here I am. Leave Dean alone.*

Leave him alone. Where was Dean?

“That would be great,” he murmured, all surface courtesy, fighting sudden panic. “When?”

“Tomorrow for the Lithuanians,” Etienne shouted, because he was now off stage, a barely-discernable pale figure in the wings. “Go to Bistro 1847, on Maisonneuve. It’s where the Lithuanians go sometimes; I’ll see if Béatrice is interested in finding you, Sam Winchester. And we’ll see when René is free.”

Sam watched the curtains relax into their natural fall before leaving.

He rushed into the glassed corridor between the theatre and the casino, halfway to the Hilton tower, and saw streams of people coming into the casino, cars lined up in the covered entrance

area, a helicopter landing on the roof of the five-level parkade. He had no idea what day of the week it was, but this place was jumping. He checked his watch: it was almost eleven-thirty. He was exhausted. He'd left Dean a good hour ago. It felt like a lifetime.

What the hell would he tell him? They were working with nothing: no bodies, no unexplained phenomenon. Nothing but vague unsubstantiated threats from a circus clown. Threats against Dean. Sam suspected what the price of protecting his brother would be, had dreamt it, hadn't he? As if he could say any of this to Dean. No, Sam had nothing but his dreams, and the girl on the ceiling, the buffalo, the high clear note held and held.

Suddenly, Sam stopped cold, his hand on the door handle leading into the casino's main lobby. The girl on the ceiling surrounded by flame, and he couldn't see her face, knew that she wasn't Jess, but then...and then, like always, it *was* Jess, and it caught him in a spot that was sore and abused and woefully unguarded. A stabbing shaft of pain lanced through him, lightning bright, almost too fast and too intense to be actually painful. Almost. He clutched his head in both hands, unmindful if anyone was watching, because he couldn't maintain composure and sanity at the same time. Sanity won out.

At least it passed quickly, and in its wake, a hole. Because it was always Jess, no matter which demon.

He stood shaking for a good few minutes, trying to calm himself, surprised and alarmed that his dreams – not a dream, not this, stop with the soft words for a hard truth – that this *vision* would come here, in a public place. He had to pull himself together before finding Dean, because Dean would see through a tough-guy act if it was half-hearted. Deep breath. Two. Okay, then: no mention of Jess, no mention of visions. No mention of the trickster's threats. No mention of the price sure to be demanded.

Sam didn't like it, didn't like keeping things from Dean, but it was for his own good.

He went directly to Bar 777, and found the flower and the program abandoned on a tall table. Damn. Looked around. Dean hadn't been in a gambling mood. What if...what if someone, something had...taken him? Sam's spine turned to ice, and he gripped the back of the chair as though he was going to fall down. Looked down at the open page, at the photo it was opened to: the silk aerialist, bent backwards, balanced on two slender hands, face angled away from the camera, body ethereal and strong and somehow elemental.

Goddamn.

*"Bonsoir, m'sieur. Voudriez-vous quelque chose?"* The server was at his elbow, a bowl of ubiquitous peanuts, a friendly grin.

"Ah," Sam said, trying for anything in return. "Ah."

"Something to drink?" she switched, still smiling. "I think he's left," with a definite spark, gesturing to the program and flower.

"Left where?" Sam asked. "I was supposed to meet him here."

"The flower? It's for you?"

Sam didn't like the feeling of being mocked by her any more than by the trickster. "I don't think so."

She nodded. "He left with a girl," she explained. "I don't think she was impressed by the flower."

Oh, well, that explained *everything*. Goddamned Dean. "I'll have a beer. Heineken?" *Fuck Dean*, Sam's worry said, clearly, as though it was sitting across the table from him. Fuck Dean and his stupid libido and his stupid fucking downstairs...

A hand touched his shoulder, a swift weight luring Sam's head in the wrong direction, a moronic schoolyard fake out. "Hey," and Dean was on Sam's blind side, slight smile on his face, looked at the table momentarily as though surprised that his shit was still there, then back to Sam, saw something in his face. "What? Had to take a leak."

Sam examined Dean: a little flushed, eyes wide with delight or something close enough to be mistaken for it. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, a happy grin not far away, only kept at bay by Sam's seriousness.

"You were taking a leak?" Sam repeated, daring Dean to dig himself a nice big hole.

Dean obliged. "Yeah, bathrooms are a million miles over there." Waved a hand in three different directions at once. "Avez-vous un problème?" Laughed at his own joke, thought he was a fucking comedian.

Sam's beer appeared; he paid for it as Dean asked for something that Sam couldn't understand, asked for it without looking at the menu. Sam took a long pull from his bottle. Knew he was mad, ought to rein himself in, edit a little. Not a chance, not as jangled as he was. Said flat out, unnecessarily provocative: "That was a girl on the ceiling."

Watched as Dean grimaced, took a seat. A minor hit, if he was measuring such things. Dean's expression changed, became all big-brotherly in a way Sam found particularly grating, especially in light of the fact that he'd just been fencing with a demon's side kick while Dean was off...getting *laid*.

"It was a circus performance, Sam." Like that was going to calm him down. A pause, and Sam could see Dean sizing him up, trying to make a best-guess about Sam's emotional state. That bothered Sam almost more than anything else that had happened in the last 24 hours. "It's a circus, dude. You know, circus...clowns, acrobats. No elephants, though," and he smiled deeply at that, as though he was thinking of something funny. His beer arrived, a little devil on the label. Dean took a glass. *Used it*. Might as well have written "I'm acting weird" on his forehead with a magic marker.

Sam tried for calm, because if he blew it with Dean here, now, it was all going to go to hell: Dean would get all protective when it would likely just get him killed. "A girl on the ceiling." Repeated softly, actually thought it was going to be louder and firmer, but he thought of Jess in that split second and that's all it took.

Sam watched it register on Dean's face, saw the way his brother pursed his lips. Oooh, brainteaser, Dean. "You think a demon's around." Not even a question.

“Probably.” Fair enough. “We should be careful. I talked to some of the theatre people; they said that there’s nothing weird with the show, but...”

“But you and your quivering jelly mold of gray matter thinks otherwise.” Not looking at him again. Dean didn’t seem to want to believe it, took another long pull of his beer. “I don’t know, Sam. No bodies. Nothing strange. Well,” shrugged with a grin, “nothing stranger than you.”

Oh, nothing stranger than having a demonic clown clip a heart monitor to your ear so Céline fucking Dion can sing a fabric-of-the-universe-ripping-note while a girl burns on the ceiling? That, Dean? Another deep breath helped then. “How are you doing with the,” and gestured to Dean’s chest, to his *heart*, like it was something that they couldn’t remember the word for. “You know.”

Dean’s turn to get pissy. Shit, he was embarrassed and Sam had just jammed his finger into an open wound. “It’s fine, princess. How’s your fucking head?” Tapped his temple with one finger.

Nope, wasn’t going to touch that one, either. Back on the offensive. “Where the fuck were you? You just hung out here for an hour while I...” trailed into the realm of Shit I Can’t Tell Dean, which was fast becoming a big fucking country.

“While you talked with theatre people?” Dean offered, playing back Sam’s lame explanation.

“More interviews tomorrow with Lithuanian acrobats. Maybe that’ll turn up something.”

“What? You couldn’t get the cute Chinese plate spinners in on it?”

“They don’t speak English,” Sam retorted, realizing too late that Dean was setting little verbal traps and watching Sam blithely fall in. Dean was laughing, covering his evasiveness with offence, just like Sam.

“I thought I told you to wait here.” Why would Dean be secretive, at all, about banging a girl? Scoring with a complete stranger in under an hour in a foreign city was something that Dean would usually lord over Sam for days, would talk about it in such detail and so incessantly that Sam would start bleeding from his ears. The subterfuge was strange and unsettling and made Sam angrier than before, which was saying something.

“Told me?” Dean said, genuine surprise making him blink rapidly. “What the hell’s gotten into you Sammy?” Hated nickname used like a stick. Wasn’t even looking at Sam at the moment, was scanning the gaming floor, eyes jumpy, alert, awake. He ought to be comatose after the last day of hard driving, gambling and freaky-ass spotlight on his heart. Except for the one thing that always made Dean chipper, put a spring in his fucking step.

“That circus is off, Dean, it’s just all...wrong,” and though he tried to keep the worry out of his voice, he didn’t succeed, because Dean’s attention was suddenly all on him.

“There something you want to tell me, Francis?” Hard, a blank wall. No give. Giveless.

“That clown has your number.”

“That clown needs to meet me at the backstage door.” Happy just-fucked glow was a thing of the distant past; they were well into pissed off territory now. “I’ll give him my fucking number.”

“You’re not going to do that.” The reciprocal lack of give in his voice made Dean grow quiet, serious.

“I’m not?”

Careful, Sam told himself. Don’t tell him he can’t do something. You know what will happen. You’re not Dad. You’re the little brother, always and forever. Just shut up. So he sighed. “C’mon. It’s late and I’m bagged. Let’s get going. I could use a bed.”

Dean followed, slowly, suspicious, and Sam wasn’t sure if he’d averted the train named disaster, or pushed Dean right in front of it.

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Just before two. Then an hour later. And forty-five minutes after that. Dean heard the whimper, his eyes gritted open, heart thudding, anticipating the scream. Whimpers. Jess’s name, over and over. The word ‘no’. Then silence, and eventually, even breathing.

Shit. Dean didn’t exactly know what he’d been hoping for when he’d driven north, compelled by Sam’s certainty and his obstinate *will*. Sam had no idea what power he had, either as a stupid fucking psychic or as a brother. Drive north, Dean. For me. Just do it, please. Hell, Sam hadn’t even said *please* and Dean had still done it.

But it wasn’t doing any good, was it? The nightmares were increasing in frequency, if not intensity, and Sam looked as though a good night’s sleep was something he’d only read about in fairy tales.

Sometime shortly after five, Dean realized that he wasn’t getting back to sleep, not tonight. And he hated lounging in bed; he needed to be up, doing something. Let Sam sleep. God only knew he needed it.

He’d left enough apartments and motel rooms before dawn in necessary silence to be able to do it with the same precision and efficiency that those little girls had thrown plates to each other on the end of sticks. He only went as far as the parking lot, surveyed the rows of cars, eyes smarting. Got a coffee from a nearby 24-hour store, killed time by going through the Impala’s trunk and rearranging the contents of the hidden compartment. Sam, in a fit of boredom somewhere in Pennsylvania, had alphabetized the fake ids. Dean shuffled them like a deck of cards, because that kind of orderly shit just made you look weird.

At six, he checked in on Sam; still sleeping in exactly the same position as before. Better, a good sign, after last night. After that performance. Dean sighed, closed the door, didn’t want to think about his heart, how the monitor had made it sound louder than god. He’d finished his coffee too quickly and immediately wanted another. Walked to get another, still killing time.

Tried not to think about the girl on the ceiling, about how Sam always translated that into Jess. Girl on the ceiling: smiled. For once in his life, it wasn’t fire, it was silk. Béatrice. Usually he thought: Mom.

*Oh, that's fucking great, Winchester. Start thinking about Mom and Béatrice in the same sentence. You Oedipal shithead.*

Gave up, knew he needed to keep moving, keep doing something because he was going to drive himself crazy and he was going to drive Sam crazy and Sam was plenty crazy enough.

So he broke down and phoned, because it was something to do. And because he wanted to see her, and because Sam was one dumb bunny who was obviously as freaked out as freaked out got over that circus. Best if he took a look before Sammy freaked his little self into a knot.

Tie yourself into a knot. Made Dean think of one thing and one thing only, and his heart gave a little thud when she picked up, and it was louder than god.

--

The note goes on until it turns to color and Sam thinks his head might split in two. It is like a knife, both to his head and to other places, creates an opening, a place where things can go in and things can come out. A place where darkness lurks.

The color blazes to white, which is only right. And the white light becomes the sun and Sam is on his back in the grass, looking up at a tree. Its branches are leafless and he thinks it might be dead, but then he sees the buds and thinks: spring. Ribbons hang from the branches, move in the wind.

The smell of musk fills him and he thinks about dying, about burning away with the note and the heat. The note suffuses everything: light, and smell, and *being*. Suddenly, the white light is blocked, is blocked by something older and wilder and less known than the note or the flame or the ceiling. The heavy head of a red-eyed beast shadows the light and Sam knows that a price is being asked, and a price is about to be paid, and he's not ready.

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With a shredded gasp, clutching at oxygen, Sam lunged straight up in a bed demolished by thrashing, knew in the space of half a second that he was going to wake Dean with his noise and movement and that words had been said out loud: *I'm not ready!*

Screamed, maybe, because his throat was raw.

The small room, two beds only a foot apart, was silent, expectant in the wake of Sam's shouted declaration. Dean's bed was unmade, the saltline in front of the door unbroken. Bags slumped wearily by the banged up motel dresser, clothes strewn everywhere. If he didn't know any better, Sam would have said they'd been robbed in their sleep, their room ransacked. Just Dean in a typical hurry, though.

Funny how nothing changed, really. Just the same set of signifiers, aligned slightly differently. Musical note, opening something that shouldn't be opened. Girl in flames, on a ceiling, a demon-orchestrated death. A price to be paid: Sam's life. A bison. What the fuck was up with the bison? If he hadn't dreamt them before seeing the show, he'd have dismissed the beast as something his overworked mind had just come up with, separate from the vision. But he hadn't; the bison was part of it, the beast. Between him and the sun. Oh, and now a tree, one with ribbons. Great. That

didn't come from the circus, at least. But he hadn't dreamt of Dean, so that was good, that meant he was safe.

The writing desk with a burned out lamp was in shadow, but Sam could make out one sheet of paper there, a pen lying across it.

To an unpracticed eye, Dean's note read like this:

*Ms/ ju /or/ /eis /is /tosi-----Dsi/ vvirj. D.*

It was, perhaps, the most illegible thing Dean had ever left for his brother to find. Sam picked up the sheet of paper and held it at an angle, one eye closed. Normally, Dean's writing wasn't quite so bad. Only when he was going fast, when he was distracted. So, this morning, at around half past seven, according to the squiggle at the top of the torn motel stationery, Dean had been in a rush and not thinking. Not a great start to the day.

Sam translated: Meet you back here for lunch. Don't worry. D.

Why did he bother to sign it at all? Who the fuck else would it be? Housekeeping? Santa? The tooth fairy? The room hot and stuffy even this early in the day. He needed a coffee. He needed a lot of things. One of which was his brother.

Usual reasons for Dean sneaking out before Sam woke up: he was hungry, he was bored, he was looking to get laid. All three. Tried not to think of another one: was worried that Sam wasn't getting enough sleep. But if Dean was that worried, he'd be outside, tinkering with the Impala, breakfast waiting for Sam in a paper sack on the driver's seat.

Ever the optimist, Sam pulled on a pair of jeans and looked outside the motel door, directly into the parking lot. Last night, a full lot had required that Dean park the Impala some distance from their room, no doubt why Sam had missed its early departure, because the unmistakable car was gone.

He stood there, the baked asphalt burning the soles of his bare feet, wondering if the motel had a coffee machine in its decrepit lobby. Not likely. Sniffed the air, but only smelled heat and diesel. The motel was right on a main thoroughfare, a Couche-Tard and a McDonalds on the corner. A blue-striped bus lingered at the red light and Sam tried to peer around it, to see if Dean was sitting in a window seat, eating a plate of pancakes. Crêpes?

Then noticed the poster on the side of the bus.

A tree with ribbons, and a stylized bison with red eyes and Sam was pretty sure he was just going to have sit down on the hot pavement and rock back and forth like an inpatient at the asylum. Instead, and more usefully, he tried to scan the text, which was in French, actually much easier for him to understand than when in its spoken form. Closer to Spanish.

Trèsors de la Lithuanie. Got that, and the words '*musée canadien*' and then the bus was gone. He moved three steps before stopping himself from running after it. This was what the internet was made for.

It took him .09 seconds to google the keywords 'Lithuania', 'museum' and 'Canada' and come up with: Treasures of Lithuania, now on at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau,

Québec. Sam consulted the map in a much-mauled copy of the usual tourist propaganda he found sitting on top of the television. *Welcome to the Outaouais*, however the hell you pronounced that many vowels in a row. Ottawa area. Ontario and English just across the river, not a half mile away. Different world. Getting his bearings was like drinking water after a long run; it just felt good.

And the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the country's answer to the Smithsonian, was an easy walk from the motel, still on the Québec side of the river.

Okay. Time to reel in Dean from whatever plate of crêpes he'd found. He found his phone, dialed. Waited impatiently. Damn. Just voice mail. Yeah, I'll leave you message, asshole.

"I'm going to the Museum of Civilization. I'll meet you there at noon, in the cafeteria."

He was sweating by the time he got to the museum, walking along the breezy riverside path. High above the bluffs on the south bank of the river, the neo-gothic Parliament presided ominously over the land to the north. The museum wasn't difficult to find: directly across from Parliament in a sinuous twisting series of buildings with dull copper domes and buff colored sandstone, the museum looked as though aliens had been involved in the design. Organic and confusing and chaotic, a direct architectural counterpoint to the ordered, staid houses of law.

The building was illogical in the extreme and it took Sam a number of minutes to find the main entrance, but once inside, he easily located a floor plan printed in five different languages, and Sam – if he hadn't been so particularly worried – would have been content. Pleased. He loved museums. It was busy, though, thronging with crowds, dense packs of feral Japanese tourists and yapping strings of yellow-vested summer camp children hanging onto guide ropes as though they'd float away on the crowd if they let go. All sorts of languages ranged around him, rich and liquid as honey on a hot day.

After getting his entrance stamp, Sam made his way to the temporary exhibits on the main level, where the desk clerk had said the Treasures of Lithuania show was. He had to pay an extra ten dollars for that. Dean would *freak*.

He waited in another line to get into the exhibition itself; surrounded by French, he listened for anything that sounded like the more familiar Spanish, clutching for words and meaning with the same trepidation and excitement as the children in the lobby had their rope. No luck. Written text, he had a fighting chance, but this oral tumbling act? No way.

Once inside the exhibition space, the first thing Sam saw was the tree, hung with dark ribbons.

Stunned, he pushed his way through the crowd, eyes accepting the vision as true, mind seeking out an explanation for why the tree from his dreams was suddenly in the center of a traveling exhibition from the Lithuanian National Museum. Found an explanation in his usual comfort zone: ordered rows of text, silk-screened on the wall behind the tree.

Nothing he didn't already half-suspect: this was no ordinary tree, and these were no spring ribbons, tied like those around a Maypole, though they might be related. These ribbons were strands of human flesh, left in supplication and sacrifice to a god older than time, to the one authority that mattered.

The forest was the heart of all that was wild, the staging ground of any hunt, and the bison owned that real estate in the most essential way possible.

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Dean thought his situation was kinda funny in one of those ‘this only ever happens to me’ ways: stuck in Céline Dion’s costume wardrobe in the change area under the stage of the Cirque du Soleil’s production of *Inferno*, about ten feet away from where La Céline was arguing with her husband about something he couldn’t follow. He was completely naked and his ass was getting mauled into hamburger by some tenacious sequins. And he just didn’t *care*.

“Ow,” Dean moaned softly, trying to slide back a little, to see if the hard metal box he was perched on had any give whatsoever. None. Okay. How to play it then? He adjusted his weight so his bare shoulder blades pressed against the wall, lifting Béatrice’s light-boned body as he did so. Shifted just enough so he was no longer in contact with the spray of sequins, of the fucking, idiotic sequins, that were scraping a bloody *trench* across his ass.

The closet wasn’t big, even though it held a lot of shit. A lot of shit like sequined fucking dresses and high heeled shoes and steel hatboxes and god alone knew what else.

He balanced there for a moment, feet on the floor, arms busy with her, shoulders taking most of his weight, the sequined fabric swinging free from the hanger and landing on the floor of the closet. He was happily wondering how this was going to work when Béatrice compensated for his shift and leaned into him for a brief moment, smelled sharply of oysters and fresh bread, both of which combined to make Dean think of a bakery by the sea, but then that too slipped away and he tasted salt on his lips where they touched her. Man, it was hot in here.

Béa put both feet on the surface just below where his shoulder blades rested, her back against the facing wall, bent almost double, no weight on him whatsoever. Felt her exhalation of laughter, perhaps imagining his face, which she wouldn’t be able to see in the dusty blackness, thick with smells of them, and worn clothing and waxy grease.

She’d picked up on the fourth ring, invited him to meet her at the theatre, that she’d give him a backstage tour, the shorthand for which kept Dean stimulated to near-distraction on the drive over. The theatre had been empty at that early hour, everyone still sleeping, Béatrice had informed him, grinning, tour guide-like. She’d shown him the stage, and then the trap door under it, explained how Céline changed under there so she could pop up in a different outfit. Lifted a slender dark brow as she’d said it, grinning. Like one of those whack-a-moles, Dean had replied, laughing, but she didn’t understand the reference. Prettier in the light, Dean had thought.

Her tour of the understage had ended when agitated voices had surprised them: *Céline and that ‘orrible man*, she’d hissed, genuine fear crossing her dark eyes. Enough time to shrug. He wasn’t afraid of Céline Dion, but Béatrice sure was. Her husband more than her, she’d explained and pulled him into the cupboard, a confined space that had only hastened the inevitable.

So Céline and her husband talked – sometimes softly, but sometimes the voice that sank the really big ship rose threateningly. Theatrically. The man’s voice was quieter, but not soft. And Dean didn’t give a shit that one of the biggest divas in the known universe was having a hissy fit at her husband mere feet away, because Béa’s mouth was in the spot where his jaw curved into ear and she whispered, “Some contortionists can bend so they fit into small boxes.”

“You know,” as he discovered that this new position permitted him just enough angle for a little needed leverage, “I think you’re doing just fine in the bendy department.”

“Really?” but the one word was unsteady, a result of the achieved leverage and all that it entailed.

They kept quiet out of need, this time. The voices were a bit fainter, but still audible from the costume storage cupboard, the conversation quick and dense. Béa suddenly put fingers to his mouth and he supposed she might get in trouble for bringing him here, and he cared about that, about getting her in trouble. He *didn’t* care about what was happening beyond the cupboard, not anywhere. He was busy and it was *important*.

It felt important. Don’t think about it, don’t think – and swept his tongue down the length of her neck as she held still, like a pulled bowstring is still.

Above their heads, suddenly, a tattoo of quick beats, bare feet running staccato followed by a sailing leap of hollow noiselessness. Like holding a breath and Dean found he *was* holding a breath, but that might have more to do with Béa’s own ideas about angles and converging areas of thrust. The sudden thud of feet landing meant he could breathe again, had to. The Lithuanian gymnasts practicing, Dean thought.

Pushed her hair away in the dark, wished he could see her face. His own heart thudding in syncopated rhythm to the gymnasts overhead, to the rhythm their bodies were finding together but mostly just in rhythm with *her*, which felt perfect and right and true. Not often, this. Not for him.

Full out arguing now from the other side of the panel, in French. Oh, thank god he had no idea what they were saying, because then he’d have to *listen*, and that was the last thing he felt like doing when he was moving inside her and Béa’s silence was so tenuous, so hard won. That hit him mercilessly – she’s holding back and everything in him suddenly wanted her in her entirety, no holds barred. It aroused him almost more than anything else: the wide range of truly weird noises women made while fucking. And Béa holding back on that front was almost more than he could stand.

In fact, he couldn’t stand it, he felt his knees buckle, and Béa pressed herself to him, her long sinuous arms holding him up, feet sliding down suddenly, and neither cared about what the sequins were doing to them or what they were doing to the sequins, but they were on the floor now, tangled as dense brush, and Dean found both an angle and his motivation and so did she.

All of it without one sound, only his breath and hers and the relentless pounding of his heart, all of it rushing towards the leap like the staccato running footsteps above – dum dum dumdumdumdum -- and hollow endless release. Oblivion, like running full tilt at certain disaster, throwing yourself off a blinding, blessed cliff, thinking that’s it, *I’m dying*.

And, *not*. Just...not.

Being more alive than you could possibly measure with compass and slide rule and weights and electricity. Humming with life like a live wire, like a shell held to the ear, the rush of water under spring ice. His sweat-slicked head dropped to her shoulder, and she pulled him into a hard embrace.

It took Dean a long time to come back; he was undone in the same way as a theatre seamstress might cut apart a costume for alterations, seams gone, formless. Felt like he might have to gather his strewn parts, scattered haphazardly in the closet along with the feathered headdresses and platform boots. Oh god, he whispered, brushed the side of Béa's temple with his lips and wrapped his arms around her, holding her together, afraid both of them might fall apart.

Béa hadn't come with him, not this time. She was quiet in his arms, but alert, every muscle tense. Listening. *Fuck*. He touched her face with the back of his fingers and she took his hand in hers, but the gesture was absent. She lifted her fingers to his lips. *Hush*. She was listening and now that he was in a position to properly take it in, he noticed something else. She was shaking.

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His shivering wasn't helped by the fact that the museum's air conditioning was cranked beyond any reasonable human tolerance for temperature extremes. Jesus, did everyone in Canada like it cold, just on principle? Given how warm the day had been outside, he hadn't brought a button up shirt and now he wished he had, so he'd have something to disguise the gooseflesh on his arms and the shivering.

The exhibition covered thousands of years of Lithuanian pre-history and history, from the Sarmatian horse lords to annexation by Nazi Germany. The Lithuanian forests were fabled for their density and their wildness and their bison, had attracted hunters from Russian tsars to Hermann Göring. They had come to hunt elk and deer and lynx. But especially the timid, violent bison, no wild ox, nothing remotely domestic about it. Famed for the smoky taste of its meat, for the width between its horns, its shaggy fur and noble disposition.

Sam now sat in the museum's cafeteria, a large freshly brewed coffee steaming into the mechanically cooled air, a pen resting comfortably in his grip, other hand wrapped in his hair, sharing a long table with an assortment of tourists and schoolgirls. He examined the thumbnail sketches he'd made in his notebook: marginalia from medieval manuscripts, gold jewelry in the shape of bison heads, cauldrons beaten with elk patterns. The bison lived in the deepest recesses of the largest forest in Europe, and they had been hunted to near extinction by the end of the First World War, eaten by starving Russian and German troops, their natural habitat decimated by war and idiotic forestry management strategies.

But before, for millennia before, it had been different. A reclusive beast, the essence of everything terrible and unknown. He'd written phrases and single words, some underlined: 'living heart of the forest', 'gatekeeper', and 'forbidden'. Secret and powerful and venerated. Girls and young men given to the forest gods, their skins removed and hung from trees to permit hunting and forestry; to ask permission and to give recompense for trespass.

This was out of their league. The usual find evil ghost/spirit/creature, kill evil ghost/spirit/creature wasn't going to apply. This was old, this was myth. How the fuck do you kill a myth and a dream? Salt and a shotgun? Sam didn't even know if they were *supposed* to fight it.

The tree; that had been the worst. Sam had come back to it, sketched it, taken down the text word for word. A willing sacrifice to keep the beast at bay, to honor the ancient. What did that have to do with a demon, a presence of evil? What did it have to do with a trickster, he thought with a grimace. This bison thing is older than those things, more elemental. No rules, really. Just lay

down your life and we'll all be fine. Thought about his dream: running *with* them, and falling. Another kind of death.

Back to the dream; trust the dream. *Think*. The bison is between me and the demon's fire. Protecting? He wrote it down, circled it a few times as though that clarified things.

A willing sacrifice. He shook his head, not trusting those two words, too easily manipulated by others. What about those kids in the apple orchard with the Vanir? Yeah, that had been all about a 'willing' sacrifice. People doing the sacrificing usually liked to think the victim was willing. Hell of lot easier sleeping at night, thinking that.

Too simple, thinking the bison is my friend, Sam thought, looking out through the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows at the Parliament Buildings across the river, clear in the bright summer day, admired the straight lines, the consistency of the architect's vision. You don't make friends with something like that. It doesn't protect you. I betcha those prehistoric Lithuanian youths didn't much like being trampled to death or skinned alive. His attention lingered on the clock tower. Then noticed the time. Twelve thirty.

What? Dean couldn't find the largest museum in Canada? Tapped his pen against the drawing of the tree. Fished around in his canvas bag for his phone. Left another terse message, heart hammering, knowing that grudges once started were like chewing gum swallowed when you were ten. They lasted, deep down.

As he snapped the phone shut, he noticed that the schoolgirls were watching him. They were in uniform, in their mid-teens, too much makeup and attitude. Hell, it was late July; what was school doing in session? Summer school, maybe? *These are bad girls*, part of him thought, the part that had been in close proximity to Dean for far too long. At his attention, they burst into laughter and French. He heard *gar lédon*, and *chek moélédon* again, and thought the village idiot would be able to figure it out.

"Oh my god," one said, hand covering her mouth. "*Il me regarde*. I totally *veux demander son nom*. *De quoi, mademoiselle je-sais-tout?*" To her friends' inaudible shriek: "Like you don't?"

Dear god, Sam thought, slamming his book shut and gathering his things. He'd been *enjoying* this coffee, if not his own dark thoughts.

He slung his bag over his shoulder as he walked back into a huge open space lined with northwest coast native houses, gathered that the girls weren't far behind him if the giggles were any indication. He hoped that they had a chaperone with them. This was ridiculous.

The museum was all curves, presented no corners and no ready references: it was easy to become lost. Sam glimpsed an elevator sign, blessedly universal, thought about maybe ducking into the men's room – but no, then he'd be *trapped* – and got turned around in a circular space with some other exhibition three stories above and a floor carved with unknown symbols. Where the hell was he? Some museum dreamland: he was about to consult the floor plan again, but saw something from the corner of his eye that left him reeling.

In the darkened exhibition hall just beyond a set of arches to his left, a cliff rose at least twenty feet from the carved floor. At the top, precipitous as a spilled drink at the edge of a countertop, a number of buffalo clustered, wide eyed, startled, edging towards sudden death.

He took one step towards it, then another.

If the girls had followed him into this darkened, quiet, deathly cold area, he didn't know it. What he did know was that there was a cliff and there were dark beasts and falling. A shattering image obliterated his vision: the sensation of leaping into unknown darkness, of faith, of just letting go. Ragged breathing and he pressed his fingertips to his temples, not willing it away this time. He had a duty to understand this, needed to understand this. So much depended on it, not the least of which was his brother's life. His own life, if it came to that.

Steeled himself, taking it on, picking up the dropped sword, forcing himself into the bloodied arena like a gladiator. A willing sacrifice, in its truest sense was not prey and was not a victim and Sam had never thought of himself as either of those things. *Embraced it.*

The falling was deliberate, wasn't the result of terror or mayhem. Was acceptance of a role, was submission to a greater whole. Was the *way* of things. Sam understood all this in a heartbeat, even as the ground rushed up to meet him.

His head snapped up, breathing hard, head pounding with blood, every tiny nerve throbbing. He looked wildly around: this part of the museum was empty for the moment; no one had heard whatever noise he'd probably made. The noise that someone makes when it feels as though their head's being split in two. Then, like a blast of winter air coming through an open door, Sam was gifted with a clear head, almost *minty*, no pain whatsoever. Whatever the vision was, it was gone now and he adjusted the sit of his bag's strap, gave his hands something to do other than to nervously rake through his hair.

As an enthusiastic tour guide herded her group into the exhibition space, Sam sidled closer to the cliff's base. It took a second to understand that this was a diorama, a detailed exercise in fakery. The buffalo were real enough: really dead. Didn't matter if they fell off the cliff or not. It was weird just looking at them, because your heart yearned for them to take a step back, but they were already gone.

Sam remembered a social studies unit in elementary school: before the introduction of horses and guns, early native people on the American plains used cliffs to make large buffalo kills. Let this fact surface, then tested his knowledge against the exhibition label.

A recreation of Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo-Jump in southern Alberta. World heritage site, large photos of sweeping land, mottled with cloud shadows, high cliffs signaling the beginning of a more mountainous region. Not the dark forests of Lithuanian, but a wild magic place all the same. Home to Napi, the Blood and Peigan peoples, Blackfoot territory. Those that made restitution prior to the hunt, asking the buffalo to permit themselves to be hunted.

The buffalo is the one who does the choosing, Sam thought, gripping that fact like the hilt of a weapon, though he was unsure how to use it.

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a/n: Okay, what's on my bookshelf this time, you're wondering. Or not. I'm going to tell you anyway, so humour me, okay? So much of my understanding of cultural objects, history and myth comes from Simon Schama, who is a fine academic who bears a really uncanny resemblance to my husband, which make both of them sexier, quite frankly. The place of the bison in the cultural

psyche of Lithuanians is all from him (and indirectly, from Guy Gavriel Kay, but that's another story), though the Blackfoot stuff is from Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo-Jump, which is a truly amazing site that you should visit at least once in your lifetime. Utterly magical. Go to feel like a tiny, insignificant yet integral part of the universe.

If I ever want to see bilingualism in action, I listen to the uniformed schoolgirls having lunch in the Canadian Museum of Civilization's cafeteria. It's magical in a different way. But those girls? They scare me.

Happy reading...and if I neglect the flist while I have limited access to all things cyber-y, it's not because you folks aren't being interesting enough.

## Chapter Four - She Finds You

Posted July 19th, 2006

Disclaimer-nation: Officer Kripke, I'm down on my knees, 'cause no one wants a fella with a social disease. Wait. Wrong musical you say? Officer Kripke's in charge, I'm still deciding if I want to be a Jet or a Shark.

Here Be Monsters: Céline Dion, a circus clown, and a big-ass buffalo -- all the usual suspects. Swearing, oblique het-sexual content and, um, maybe one glancing example of car-porn. Fraternal misunderstandings abound, fasten your seatbelts for the Angstobahn.

Nominations for Sainthood: I don't believe there is a Saint [jmm0001](#) of Story Continuity, nor a Saint [lemmypie](#) of the Encouraging Word, so I'm calling the Pope right now just to clear things up.

Story Thus Far: Following Sam's dreams of bison and demons, the Winchester brothers drive to Québec, where Sam is confronted by his visions in the form of Céline Dion and a Cirque du Soleil casino extravaganza. Both brothers are keeping secrets from the other: Dean commences an affair with an ambivalently-intentioned cirque contortionist; Sam neglects to tell Dean that he's dreaming of his own death. While engaged in a sexual encounter in a preposterous location, Dean overhears a conversation between Céline and her evil husband; unfortunately, it's entirely in French. Meanwhile, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Sam tentatively embraces a vision of sacrifice while avoiding overly-stimulated private school girls.

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Still half in a dreamstate, Sam unlocked the motel door, mind entirely on bison and submission. Abstractedly, he noticed the saltline intact across the threshold, which meant things inside were safe. Dean wasn't one of those things, however, and just as Sam thought that, but before panic had time to surface, the phone inside his canvas book bag rang. He lifted the bag from across his shoulder and dropped it onto the unmade bed, rifled through it, and opened the phone with relief. "Dean?"

"I missed you at the museum," came his brother's voice, oddly phrased. Was he...*contrite*? "Sorry." Just might be. Contrition never boded well, though, it just veiled acts of bad behavior. Dean behaving badly didn't bear thinking about.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, not digging, not yet, enjoying the mild sensation of superiority that came with an apologetic Dean. "Should have known better, trying to get you to a museum, even though it was crawling with *Catholic schoolgirls*."

A pause; Dean had been expecting a lecture, probably. "Schoolgirls?"

"You know, in knee socks and kilts, speaking French. I think they were following me."

"You get lucky, Sammy? 'Cause French schoolgirls...damn, that's pretty...twisted. Especially for you."

Getting lucky was somewhat beside the point. They had differing opinions on luck. Sam thought about the bison again, and falling, and his naturally skeptical disposition towards notions of 'fate'

and 'luck'. He just wasn't *there* yet, but this was his brother's life on the line. Thought about what it would take to keep Dean safe, what it would *cost*. About Dean's kind of luck, which manifested itself all over the board. Shit, they really didn't have time for luck, couldn't depend on it even if they did. "Where have you been? Where are you?"

"At the casino."

Damn, okay. Stay calm. Dean at the casino by himself wasn't good. No wonder Sam had heard guilt. "You're just gambling, right? Not going anywhere near the Cirque? We're supposed to talk to the Lithuanians after the performance tonight," Sam tried to keep alarm from his voice, that and anything like reproach. "We should do this together, Dean."

Another pause, and Sam strained to hear what was going on in Dean's world. All casinos were noisy, slot machines and music and talk and the sudden exciting slide of coins to metal trays. Nothing like that, and Sam smiled slowly, realization dawning. Dean wasn't at the casino; he was with whatever girl he'd suddenly developed an interest in. Yeah, you *should* be guilty, asshole. Actually, this might work to Sam's advantage, because right now, he wanted a couple of hours to himself.

"Yeah, yeah," Dean responded testily. "I know. You're the reporter. Theatre critic." Laughed. Sam winced, but kept calm. "Are you still at the museum? Shit, a whole day at a museum, Sam? You are such a freak."

"I'm back at the motel, now. Thought I'd take a rest." Which was sort of the truth and was also a bit low. Dean was worried about him and Sam knew it, knew that catching up on his disrupted sleep was the one thing that would keep Dean at bay, at least for a couple of hours. That and the new piece of ass. An easy sell.

"Sure thing, enjoy the beauty sleep, princess. I'll swing by later," and hung up before Sam asked the kind of questions that Dean would have to out and out lie about. Locating himself falsely at the casino had been more than enough.

At least they hadn't had an argument, but Sam had learned when and how to have arguments with Dean. Not with their father, never had figured out how to avoid that, but Dean? Hell, yes. Knew how to distract, and bait and switch, cut and run, long, short and medium cons. Pretty much had Dean down pat. Sam didn't feel good about knowing how to manage Dean, was getting too old for it. Fun as a kid, moments of little-brother payback, but not now.

Not unless he had a purpose.

Dean would have a complete psychotic episode if he knew what Sam was going to do with the hour or two he'd just purchased. No way Sam was ready to tell him about this, because the dreams had become *visions* and Sam didn't need Dean to look at him any funnier than he already did. Or even differently. Sam grabbed the bedside alarm clock, studied the buttons. Set the alarm to go off in forty-five minutes. He was tired enough for sleep, and hadn't finished that coffee in the cafeteria, which might work in his favor.

He took off his shoes, shut the curtains so it was completely dark in the room, lay down on the bed and hoped for sleep. Hoped for dreams. Visions. Concentrated on that note hanging in the air the same way the girl had hung in the air, thought hard about the bison. Stopped wondering what the images meant, didn't go with them so much as went *after* them.

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Okay, four hundred dollars got you a hell of a hotel room. There *was* a difference.

Not that Dean was about to pay the difference, but being with one of the Cirque stars definitely had its perks and one of them was a free room in the Hilton between check out and check in if you knew how to sweet talk the staff. Béa's bag of tricks was bottomless, Dean was discovering.

He had a choice of three different shampoos, and there were terry robes (not that he wore one, but he saw them folded up on the countertop, bound by a silk cord) an assortment of good-quality small appliances at liberty to leave with any guest, an enormous marble bath separate from a shower with more jets than O'Hare. The bed was vast as a football field and felt like angels had died on it. Down pillows piled three deep, a flatscreen TV with a DVD player that would have fetched a couple of hundred dollars on the street, and towels so plush that a single one could have soaked up all the blood in a human body.

The chambermaid had said two hours, and they used them efficiently, right from the second the door had snicked shut behind them. The spacious room had more horizontal surfaces than Dean cared to count, and any of them would do, though 600 thread count sheets were more than okay by him. The chinchilla-soft carpet was in front of the unlit gas fireplace was also adequate, he found out, as was the living room's couch, twenty stories above the manmade lake, great view if he'd managed to actually look. And the shower, the shower was especially fine, if not technically a horizontal surface. They'd improvised.

They'd finally been able to make as much noise as they liked, but that hadn't satisfied Dean, not in the way he wanted. Noise wasn't the same as talk, and that had been sorely absent.

He decided to watch TV while Béa finished showering, examined the complex remote control that worked lights and television and DVD player, experimented with the combinations of buttons until the television went on. After a few minutes, the number of weird channels that he couldn't understand got on his nerves, only served to illustrate how far he was from home, wherever that was. Not here in this opulent room, surrounded by expense and luxury, fucking an eye-poppingly flexible woman with a strange accent who had gone quiet in a way that mattered to him profoundly.

He switched off the TV when he discovered a sports channel that momentarily cheered him, but then just nattered on about Les Kansas City Royals. No thank you. He lay spread eagled on the bed and glared at the ceiling a whole twelve feet above, eerily like being on the open ocean, adrift, and seeing strange stars.

Béa had refused to tell him what had scared her so much in the closet, what it was that she'd overheard. Although the afternoon's lazy stopover at the Hilton had been nice – hell, way more than *nice* – she was now distant, smiling apprehensively, eyes still spooked. Dean had seen plenty of *spooked* in his lifetime; he knew what it looked like. It looked like Béa, and he was disappointed with himself that he couldn't charm or cajole or gentle her from it.

Not for lack of trying. But with his every mention of the overheard argument, Béa had turned away, had done something that had been goddamn *distracting*. The wanting to talk thing was new to him, and it confused him. She confused him. This, he reminded himself, staring at the ocean-

sky-ceiling, is why you don't stick around. This is why you don't get involved. And if the whole circus thing hadn't touched on Sam and his dreams, Dean knew, he'd probably have been long gone, no matter how great the sex was.

She needed to go at three; her first show was at four. They parted in the room and after she was gone Dean ate all the shortbread cookies from the hospitality basket, followed up with a couple of perfect apples washed down with imported water cold from the fridge. Felt like an imposter. Not such an unusual feeling, unfortunately, but strong at the moment, here alone.

Without even a twinge of regret, he dressed and left the room, wandered through the hotel's lobby, stately bordering on bizarre, a combination of wood paneling and weird orange glass chandeliers, the arches framing a perfect view of the too-perfect lake, and Dean felt like he was watching someone else play Dean in the movie of his life. Like with the shapeshifter, but worse, somehow, because he was *inside* here, was present and watching and so out of his zone.

Which was? And he dismissed *that* voice with a grimace, went to the parking lot and sat in the Impala until he started to feel more...normal. Shook his head, thinking that. Normal. Fuck.

Running one hand over the Impala's steering wheel in the same way he'd run fingers down Béa's spine, feeling every bump, he tapped the wheel once as though he was saying hello and slid the car key in the ignition. Before turning the engine over, he glanced at the passenger side, noticed a book Sam had been reading slumped on the floor next to a crumpled coffee cup from the *Couche-Tard*, and a folded newspaper from some small upstate New York town they'd passed through a few days ago, the crossword mostly done.

His car, surprisingly, had been cleaner when Sam had been at Stanford. Cleaner and emptier in a way that Dean had come to despise, because it meant he was alone and only caring for the things that he'd put there, not responsible for anything or anyone else. Had hated that.

Dean checked his watch, wondered how long he should leave Sam to sleep. Thank god Sam was getting some rest, because those nightmares were a bitch. Sooner or later Sam would spill, but until then, things were tense and Dean hated that too, but not as much as the lack of tension when Sam had been away.

Sam had dreamt about Jess for days before it had happened, he'd finally confessed to Dean. The look on Sam's face when he'd said it was heartbreaking: *I'm a freak. I've become what we hunt, haven't I?* As though it changed *Sam*. As though it changed something between them.

Dean didn't care what kooky shit Sam's psychic-ass mind dreamed or didn't dream, he was still Sam and always would be. Soon as he got over that, sooner they'd be able to use whatever it was that Sam was channeling. But he had to be careful about the asking, because Sam was touchy about it, and Dean hated being careful about anything. *Sam's perfectly normal*. By Winchester standards, anyway. That's what Dean told himself, over and over.

He took his time getting back to the motel, drove for awhile, hoping for some comfort in the familiarity of the Impala. The car was fine, the car was *always* fine, but the territory was so strange, the traffic signals turned on their sides and shaped like diamonds and squares, the language confusing, the way people drove logic-defying, and not even having a map or a proper sense of what city he was in, or near, meant that the act of driving, which was usually so restful, so *easy*, was nerve-wracking and unpleasant.

Dean drove for an hour, just looking and driving and feeling unsettled, until he needed to see Sam worse than he needed to leave him alone.

Their motel was awful, he could see that now, one in a series of shabby places worn down with simply standing up to weather and indifference. Gunned the engine before killing it, warning Sam that he was back – Why? In case he had a French schoolgirl in there? – and slammed the door harder than he needed to. Wiped his face with one hand, studied the darkening sky. Too early for sunset. Storm moving in, maybe, smell of ozone and pavement.

Sam didn't look as though he'd had much of a rest. Before Dean had even knocked on the door, Sam had it open, and was leaning on the doorframe, was looking beyond Dean to the sky and then back with a haggard, weary grin.

“No good?” Dean said, coming in, peering into Sam's eyes before thumping him on the shoulder and making his way to the bathroom.

Before Dean had finished washing his hands, the rain slammed into the city, furious and dense. He grabbed a bottle of acetaminophen from his open shaving kit and passed it wordlessly to Sam, who dry-swallowed four without looking at Dean, handed the bottle back. Nothing to talk about. Dean left the opening and Sam went right by it.

In a fit of nostalgia that seemed to go with his growing sense of unease, Dean suggested cards. Using the minor arcana part of a tarot deck from the trunk, he showed a surprisingly willing Sam how to play casino style blackjack and baccarat and Caribbean stud poker. Sam tacitly allowed Dean his fraternal authority; both of them needed it and it was something to do and it required no deep conversation, only the cards and their shared silences punctuated by the occasional instruction from Dean, question from Sam.

Between hands, when the hammer of rain and wind made the silence familiar and calm, Sam told Dean where they were on the continent and Dean let it wash over him, happy to hear Sam's careful voice, the laughter when he described the girls, the wonders he'd seen at the museum, everything from clay pots to totem poles to bottles of Victorian cure-alls. Sam's pleasures were those comprehended with the head, not the heart, a puzzle like so much that was Sam, Dean straining to understand, to pick up the clues. Like they were kids.

Dean needed this, just needed to hear Sam's voice, and the only tension at the moment was the known one of waiting to go to work, which was okay. This tension he knew, this tension made him think of family, of being together, a certain weird calm in a sea of uncertainty.

The rain had passed and night had fallen and they walked to Bistro 1847 to find the Lithuanians in full vodka-fuelled frivolity. The acrobatic squad of Cirque performers occupied the restaurant's back section, steeped in a macabre mix of Slavic splendor and trilling laughter, several pitchers of beer on the huge table, strewn plates of a demolished dinner, a single near-empty bottle of Polish vodka resting in the center of the action like a last remaining soldier.

The Québécoise gymnasts were bright and cheerful as a cageful of antipodean parrots, bursting with excitable French chatter. The others shouted in a strange ungodly mix of Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian, the male gymnasts falling into two distinct categories: little and big. The big ones were super-size, beer-pulling draught horses. The little ones were sleek, mobile as otters. All were astonishingly drunk, considering the performance had only ended an hour ago.

Dean spotted Béa at the long mahogany bar, negotiating with a heavily tattooed woman, both vacillating between laughter and haranguing. She didn't notice them as they came from behind the velvet curtain that separated the front room from the back, kept on talking, gesturing with her hands in a way that made Dean hide a smile. He leaned both elbows on the bar beside her and she looked up with an energetic smile, eyes meeting his before darting behind him.

To Sam. And something slid into her gaze. Surprise, quickly followed by apprehension.

“Sam Winchester?” she said, raising her slender brows. “Etienne said you might come by.” Her tone changed slightly at that; Dean picked it up, surprised both by how easily she identified Sam and by how she said the name ‘Etienne’ like it was an unexpectedly discovered and many-legged insect.

Out the corner of his eye, he saw Sam's arm snake round to shake Béa's hand. She laughed, darted a glance to Dean. “Oh,” Dean heard Sam say, heard the slight pause, waited for Sam to lie, which is what that pause usually meant. “This is Dean. My, uh...”

“Boss,” Dean finished, and Béa's smile widened as she took his hand, gave it a firm shake. Dean smiled in return, because anything else was impossible. This, he realized, might actually be *fun*. Felt the unmistakable arousal that Béa's proximity stirred; why was it that illicit affairs were the best kind?

“Béatrice Viau,” she said and once again, Dean wanted to say her name to watch her hear it from his mouth. “I'm trying to get this *bitch*,” over her shoulder to the grinning bartender, “to give us another bottle of fucking vodka.”

“Ah, Béatrice, you remember what they did last time? Took me months to repair the bathroom!” Switched back to French, and an intense volley ensued, at the end of which Béa led them to the table with a new bottle of vodka.

They were welcomed like champions returning with a World Series trophy, introduced around and Dean sat next to Béa as Sam took an empty chair across the table, started talking to one of the huge Lithuanians, Tadeusz, who was big as an ox with a near-shaved head, blue eyes swimming with alcoholic hilarity.

Béa introduced Sam and Dean to some of the others, names as fleeting as confetti released from an open window. Dean was usually good about things like names, but he was at a disadvantage tonight between the free-flowing vodka and the fact that Béa had a hand on his leg under the fall of tablecloth, was running fingers up and down the inside of his thigh.

They told him about the circus, about how they'd come to this life. Tales of broken bones and hapless amateurs mixed with stories of high-level gymnastic competitions in countries with impossible names. Some, like Béa, came from circus families, which Dean realized was probably just one rung up on the scarred-for-life scale from his own nomadic childhood. All had been with the Cirque for a number of years.

Occasionally, Béa translated words for Sam on the other side of the table.

Dean watched Sam's face, tried to hear what snatches of conversation he could: Sam was intent and focused, had a small half-grin that Dean had come to associate with Sam Getting the Job

Done. Suddenly, he realized that Sam had a *plan*. All evening, playing cards, and Sam hadn't bothered to let him know about any plan, the little shit. What the *hell* was Sam doing?

Sam looked at Béa and asked, "What's 'bison' in Lithuanian?"

Under the table, Dean had his hand in Béa's, so he felt her fingers constrict. "*Zubir*," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"I saw the exhibition at the museum today. Looks like the *zubir* is an important part of the culture. And they're in your Cirque show."

*Might have mentioned that along with the totem poles and Victorian cure-alls, Sam.* Dean tried to catch Sam's eye, but his brother's attention was on the Lithuanian.

Tadeusz laughed, a big hearty, I-swallow-a-dozen-raw-eggs-for-breakfast laugh. "Sure. The *zubir* is our wild thing...yah? The," and he gestured to his chest, thumping hard, a one-handed Tarzan move. "Our..." and he looked to Béa with a question and a string of Lithuanian.

Béa let go of Dean's hand and leaned across the table. It was loud and she had to speak up to be heard. "Heart of the people. But separate, too. Two halves, together. It is what is not us, what is not human, not understood by humans. It's old. And..." she shrugged, but with frustration. "Unassailable? Is that the word?"

Tadeusz threw an arm around Sam's shoulders, pulled him close. "Un-ass-sail-boat." Laughed like a madman. Then dropped into a sudden worry, entirely typical of someone who'd had a lot to drink, quickly. "I don't like. The show. The *zubir*. Not right."

He disengaged from Sam to take the bottle of vodka. He poured for both, pushed an enormous glass into Sam's hand. Dean thought he'd like to see what condition Sam would be in if he finished it.

Watched with a little disappointment as Sam took a cautious sip, then put the brimming glass down, one more casualty on the tabletop battlefield.

"What do you know about human sacrifices and the *zubir*?" Sam was looking to Béa now, not Tadeusz. Then Sam smiled slightly, mouth tipping into dimples. Dean had seen countless people from cops to librarians melt at that smile. Wondered if it would work with Béa. Felt again like he was just watching the whole thing from outside himself, was too surprised by Sam to be angry. "The label at the museum," Sam explained.

Béa was still, both hands linked on the tablecloth, dark hair hanging in dark eyes, which were locked with Sam's. Dean didn't know what Sam was digging for, but he thought he might be able to distract Béa enough for her to give a straight answer. Help Sam out, even when he had no idea what he was up to. Time enough to chew him out later. *We should work together on this...fuck*, isn't that what Sam had said earlier today? Yeah, let's work together, Sam.

Disguising his intentions by putting his weight on one elbow, Dean slid the palm of his other hand under Béa's skirt, up the length of her slightly parted thighs. She squeezed her knees together, trapping him. Her thighs were like iron.

She shrugged again, not for lack of vocabulary this time. “My mother threatened me with that when I was little.” She laughed, but it wasn’t the laugh Dean knew. It fell under the same category of ‘spooked’ he’d seen in the hotel room. “I was a brat, and Lithuanian mothers are fucking strict. You mean the tree, yes? With the skin?” and spoke to Tadeusz and his friends in Lithuanian, who returned with more loud observations and a toast that finished the vodka bottle.

Dean thought the blood had probably stopped running to his fingers.

“What,” Sam asked, half-smile still on his face. “What did they...”

“Old tales. Folk tales, Sam,” she replied, relaxing her muscles and freeing Dean’s hand. He wiggled his fingers experimentally and Béa’s smile deepened. “And they want to get some poutine.”

That sparked a round of discussion in three different languages. Béa stood and excused herself, explaining that they were going to find a chip wagon and another bottle of vodka. Tadeusz shouted something at that, seeming to indicate one bottle wasn’t going to be enough. The Americans were welcome to join them.

Dean followed her out as the others took their time to get their coats and umbrellas, settle up the bill. As he moved through the velvet curtain to the front room, he stepped into a hard kiss, Béa’s arms around him, and he reciprocated. It was late and half the restaurant tables were empty, the only one paying attention was the headwaiter, who cleared his throat to pass by them.

Dean realized in an excruciating split second that she was as turned on as he was and that they weren’t going to be able to do anything about it, not without attracting a certain amount of attention.

“That’s your brother, yes?” she whispered, breathless, one arm hooked around his neck. Dean nodded. Béa pulled away from him a little, so she could look him in the eye, searching. “You’re worried about him.”

Dean tried to smile, but saw the spooked look again. This time, somehow, it was wrapped up in *Sam*. “I’m his big brother. Of course I worry about him,” he agreed, serious. He paused, looked at the door where streetlights glistened through the glass. He returned his attention to her. “I worry about you.” She could take that anyway she liked.

She pulled away and put on a smile as Tadeusz appeared through the curtain with two bottles, one in either hand, and announced that the chip wagon on Jean-Talon had the best poutine. One of the Spanish web gymnasts argued otherwise, and they staggered out into the wet streets, loud and looking for poutine. Whatever the hell that was.

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Poutine: hot French fries liberally covered with clumps of white melting cheese curds, smothered in silty brown gravy. Heart attack in a cardboard container. In rising appalled horror, Sam watched Dean make short work of the container’s contents, used his fingers as though he’d been raised in a monkey house. Sensing Sam’s disgust, maybe, Dean looked up, and by the light of the cloud-shrouded moon and sulfurous chip wagon light, Sam could see the expression in his face – transported pleasure.

“Give me that,” Sam said, reaching out, not curious. Protective. Shit, food like this could *kill* you. Reluctantly, Dean passed it over, the cardboard cup warm in Sam’s grip. Beside him, Tadeusz tipped the vodka bottle back, draining it. The Lithuanian was both very morose and very talkative. He was only intermittently understandable. The translator, Béatrice, sat on the bumper of a car parked on the street beside the primitively painted chip wagon, was going like Niagara Falls with the other Québécoises.

“S good,” Dean protested, sucking one finger. Sam shook the cup, hoping one less-coated fry might rise to the top of the slimy pile, but it was no good. He handed the cup back wordlessly. Dean grinned, and wandered off to Béatrice.

And because Sam had a lifetime of watching Dean around women, he noticed that, too.

Dean had just succeeded in becoming his biggest worry in a day full of worries and revelations. They had played cards together, all the while Sam yammering on about inanities, all the while trying to figure out how he was going to protect Dean when the last thing in the world that Dean ever wanted was protection. Especially when Sam was the one doing the protecting.

Sam had not gotten any rest earlier: he’d dreamed. The very first thing he’d dreamed about was the sound of his brother’s heartbeat, saw it on a monitor beside Dean in a hospital bed, feeble but present. Fading. Then only the sound, as it had been in the theatre. Followed immediately by the high note and the wash of white demon-flame, which had swallowed the heartbeat whole.

It was a threat, or a warning. and Sam didn’t care about the difference. Sam was the only thing that could stand between Dean and the flame, the demon. Sam willing to offer himself: it was what the demon wanted. Not necessarily a good thing, to be in agreement with a demon, but Sam could live with it, if it meant that Dean was safe.

This afternoon’s vision: heartbeat, note and flame, Sam between, then joined by the bison, running, surrounded by fire. Off a fucking cliff. Sam wondered if the Lithuanians had summoned their god – that wasn’t quite the right word, but it would have to do – to North America, and that the zubir was different from the demon at work here. Summoned to protect them from a demon? Summoned in response to an act of disrespect? The demon and the zubir were powers, but they weren’t aligned, not as far as he could figure out.

Thank god for the alarm clock pulling him back from the dream’s edge, because although Sam had pursued the vision, he hadn’t been in control once he’d found it. The whole thing had left him with a blinding headache and scared out of his mind. The zubir, however, engendered a different kind of fear than the demon; it was more elemental, a dark thread running wild underneath the demon’s work. A force of nature, about as evil as a hurricane, or an avalanche, or the sea.

He watched Dean smile at Béatrice and she smiled back, laughing about the empty cardboard cup and just from the way Dean angled his body towards her, the way he let his guard down, Sam knew what was what. Sam hadn’t time to work out the implications, only had time to feel the danger, as though a knife had just been pressed to his jugular. Actually, to *Dean’s* throat, though his brother might not be feeling the sharp edge.

Béatrice Viau, girl on fire. *Béatrice finds you.*

Time to go home, someone suggested, and the collective groan was met by the rallying cry of Tadeusz, who swung a bottle round the hot past-midnight air, sticky and cloying after the storm, pavement redistributing the day's heat. The Lithuanian lasted a block before stumbling into an ornamental bush, and Dean was closest at that moment, so he helped Tadeusz scramble to his feet, but was then caught in the bear's embrace as Tadeusz starting singing and guiding them to the apartment buildings the cirque performers called temporary home.

An immediate opportunity and Sam took it. He fell into the step with Béatrice, started a light conversation, and then slowed his walk incrementally, forcing her to lag behind with him as the rest sang and staggered ahead. He wouldn't have much time, but it was important that she know. She was connected to the demon, one way or another. Time to serve notice.

"You hurt him," Sam whispered suddenly, not even introducing the subject, voice low and unrecognizable. "And I will hunt you down. You'll never hurt anyone again, not ever."

Béatrice stopped, face pale in the inadequate light. Sam kept moving, but unhurriedly, and she followed. It was too dark to properly see her face and her accent disguised much. "What? What are you..."

Sam stared at her, tried to *see* her. Couldn't, not with any precision. "Don't. Whatever game you're playing, you and Etienne Marcoux, leave Dean out of it," barely kept the fear from his voice. "You deal with me."

They had been walking to the sound of a Lithuanian song, which Tadeusz was trying to dance to, but now Sam stopped, all of a sudden so angry he had to put his hands on his hips to give them something to do. Béatrice was looking away, and light caught the side of her face and Sam saw the shine of her eyes.

"I'm not...it's not like that." And turned to Sam. "Everyone does what Etienne says. And René. Or...or it gets bad." Her hand scrubbed her face, a hard complete gesture not lost on Sam: unused to sudden emotion. Or playing him. He was suddenly uncertain. "You must be careful. Be careful."

Sam cocked his head, wished he had more light.

She straightened, voice steady, almost steely. "But Dean? It's between us. Not your business."

And walked away, leaving Sam angry and confused, the sounds of Baltic folksongs ringing down the narrow streets, that and drunken shouting and French from an open window, yelling something perfectly understandable in any language.

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a/n: This and the next chapter were originally one ungodly long chapter, so the good news is that the next chapter will follow shortly, because it's already written.

I've been trapped in the unwired universe (yes, it still exists), so apologies for how long this has taken. Next chapter will be posted in the next few days, if I can find internet access. WIP, will be nine chapters.

## Chapter Five - Inside Out

Posted July 19th, 2006

All Usual Disclaimers Apply: not one red cent do I make for any of my efforts. Characters with names of real people are *not* real people, in the same way Jessica Holmes imitating Céline Dion is *not* Céline Dion. I'm fairly sure Madame Dion and her entourage aren't truly evil, aligned with dark forces, or responsible for global warming, the war in Iraq, Bird Influenza or any heinous crimes against humanity, multiple-platinum recording career notwithstanding. Hell, *someone's* buying those damn CDs. Blame them.

Warning! Danger! Unusual amounts of angst, ratcheted up to the breaking point. Much swearing. A whiff of sexual content. Bison. Céline Dion. WIP, will be 9 chapters. Written for the [spn\\_north](#) challenge.

Merci: à mes betas, [jmm0001](#) et [lemmypie](#). Elles sont mes belles goddesses. Toutes les fauts sont miennes.

STF: Following Sam's visions of bison and demons, the Winchester brothers drive to Québec, where Sam is confronted by his visions in the form of Céline Dion and a Cirque du Soleil casino extravaganza. Both brothers are keeping secrets from the other: Dean commences an affair with an ambivalently-intentioned cirque contortionist; Sam neglects to tell Dean that he's dreaming of his own death. Sam poses as a theatre critic and encounters a threatening circus clown and a Lithuanian folklore exhibition, both of which seem to be wrapped up in his demon vision, which also includes terrifying bison, a neutral primeval power revered by the Lithuanians in the circus. Alienated from Sam and his fears, and temperamentally unsuited to being protected by anyone, Dean is about to conduct his own investigation.

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What a goddamn awful sleep he'd had. Dean rubbed his eyes, which might as well have been pasted together with laundry detergent. Made it hard to see the road, and he got honked at, muttered a string of obscenities under his breath, including a French one. Sam shifted silently in the seat beside him, remote, distant and uncommunicative.

A hard sleep on both of them. Sam had woken screaming three times, but had jolted Dean awake countless other times with whimpers and whispers. Dean had finally tried sleeping in the car, which had only served to knock his back out. Sam looked like a steamroller had found him in the meantime, was hollow-eyed and gaunt, had picked at breakfast, all the centered happiness of spending yesterday in a fucking museum evaporated.

Dean took a deep breath, eased the Impala through an intersection, heading towards the casino where Sam had arranged an interview with Etienne Marcoux. Made a stupid, fucked-up arrangement when both of them felt like they'd been beaten in their sleep, dragged behind runaway horses.

Dean hadn't wanted to touch it, not any of it, but he was getting mad. *Not Sammy's fault*, he told himself, making a wide right turn at the lights, heading out of the diner's parking lot. *You think he wants this? You think he asked for it?*

“Sam,” Dean said, and it came out as a rasping croak. Always better to talk while driving, gave them something to look at, took the edge off conversations like this. “Sam, what’s going on?”

Sam grunted back, made Dean think of two frogs in a pond. “Just dreams, Dean. Just bad dreams.”

“Yeah. Just dreams.” Sarcastic as all hell. Don’t get mad at him. Not his fault. “What are the just dreams about?”

Heard Sam change position again, probably so he could get a really good shrug in. Dean didn’t want to see it, so he didn’t look. “You know. Same stuff.”

“Bison?” Dean prompted.

“Yeah.”

“That’s new.” Did he have to point out the obvious? “You forgot to mention the fucking buffalo at the museum. The Lithuanian tree of human skin. What, that just slip your mind?”

Another blare of horn as Dean changed lanes without signaling, cutting off a driver. Beside him, Sam fidgeted, reached for the radio dial, changed his mind, sat back. “Didn’t know if it was important. Looked like I was on to something, though, didn’t it?”

Oh, Christ. Yep, on to something. “Don’t change the subject,” he said roughly, considered pulling over for a coffee, just to get out of the hellish traffic.

Sam sighed, hard. Mad, maybe, at getting called on it. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Well, you’re worrying me, Sam.”

“Think we should mention it to Etienne?”

“Me being worried about you?” There were some days when Dean just wanted to slap Sam. “Don’t think he’d care. Let’s just see if we can figure out if Etienne’s possessed. If he is, we’ve got holy water in the back.”

Sam shifted in his seat, and Dean was pretty sure that Sam was sizing him up, and he hated that feeling. “You make him nervous, Dean. I think Etienne will tell me more if I talk to him alone.”

The light ahead turned amber and Dean slammed on the brakes unnecessarily abruptly, threw Sam forward a little on the slippery seats. “What the *fuck* are you talking about?” He was actually breathing hard with the effort of not shouting. “What if he is possessed by a demon? You’re going to take him out yourself? That’s your plan, bison-boy?”

“That’s my plan.” Sam sounded petulant and Dean could barely look at him.

“Well, it’s a pretty poor plan, Sammy. What? You’re suddenly the demon expert? That’s what you studied at college?” Aw, shit, hadn’t meant to say that.

Predictably, Sam clammed up. Literally, like one of those big cartoon clams on Scooby-Doo. Sam's mouth clamped shut, would take a crowbar to crack it open.

Dean dug at his eye with the heel of his hand. Tried again. "Listen, if it makes you feel better, you talk, I'll just be there, observing. I'll try to look like I'm taking notes or something." Left that image for Sam, just to cheer him up. Hazardled a glance to his right, saw the sudden smirk. Better. The things he said just to deflect that look of Sam's.

Sam took an audible breath, released it. "Sorry. I'm just worried by the way he knew to clip you with the heart monitor. It reminded me..."

Fuck, not this. "Yeah, well, *that* turned out -" Broke off. *Layla*. Knew from Sam's expression that he would have to say it out loud. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. The heart. It's fine, too. Every little thing about me absolutely fucking fine. If my back wasn't so screwed from sleeping in the car and you weren't acting like such a pissy little bitch, I'd be dancing. With a bottle of vodka." Had Sam grinning again. What a fucking effort.

*Just don't cut me out, Sam.*

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Of course, it didn't work out precisely as planned, mostly due to the fact that Tadeusz met them at the theatre door and said, "Hey, Mister Dean, we talk?" He looked no worse for wear considering the night they'd had, and how totally inebriated he'd been. Dean was surprised that the gymnast even remembered his name. Clapped Sam on the shoulder, staggering him. "Etienne waits for you, front row," he said to Sam.

Dean stared at Sam, who shrugged. God, normally this wouldn't be an issue. Normally, it was more efficient, each talking to different people. Not when one of the interviews was with a likely demon-possessed clown, though. Normal wasn't going to enter into it.

"I'll be careful," Sam said quietly. Sincerely.

Dean nodded, not liking it, but not willing to point out how not-normal the whole situation was. Sam went ahead into the theatre, to where Etienne Marcoux's small dapper head could be seen above the first row of seats, watching some of the smaller Lithuanians practice hopping onto each other's shoulders.

Tadeusz followed his stare. "That Sam? He is okay with that guy," the big man said. "Safe, yah?" Banged his chest with a freakin' fist. "Strong guy. Inside."

What kind of pussy was he that a hung-over barely intelligible strongman could figure out his concern? Dean put one hand into the pocket of his jeans, felt the lucky bullet on his keychain. Grimaced. Might need more than luck; Sam had saved his ass, last time. "Of course."

"Béatrice is in the green room," Tadeusz went on, and gestured with a hand. "Together, we talk. Things here? Maybe dangerous."

Slavic understatement of the fucking year.

He followed Tadeusz down a narrow hallway that connected lobby to backstage. It was dark, and dusty and he immediately sneezed, eyes watering with both inadequate sleep and stage grit. A dim light spilled from an open door some distance down the passageway and he moved towards it.

Béa was waiting for them, looking a little nervous, didn't get up, didn't meet Dean's eyes. Just uncrossed her legs and shifted along the couch a little, making space for Dean to sit. The room wasn't large, was covered in tour posters and mirrors, a single desk cluttered with make up and flowers.

He sat beside her but didn't touch her. Tadeusz leaned in the doorframe, crossed his arms, looking uncomfortable. It was hot in the little room, stuffy. The scent of the flowers was overpowering. Dean itched his nose. Waited.

"The bison in the show?" Tadeusz said, first. "Very bad idea. I don't like the very bad idea."

"Why?" Dean asked, attention divided between the two.

Tadeusz spread his hands, which were the size of porterhouse steaks. "You don't fuck with the zubir. Makes for disrespect, yes? And the singing..."

The fact that he objected to Céline Dion's singing was suddenly overwhelmingly hysterical. Dean bit down on a burble of laughter. "Yeah, the singing." They were both serious, so he cleared his throat. "What about the singing?"

Béatrice turned to him, and he could tell her muscles were tense in the same way they'd been in the closet, were vibrating. "Tadeusz thinks the singing is part of the..." Her mouth made a shape. Tadeusz said a word in Lithuanian and Béa shrugged. "The evil."

Uh-huh, Dean thought.

Tadeusz's head jerked around, hearing the sound of his name being called from the stage. "I go," he said. "You tell him." Firmly. With a nod to Dean, Tadeusz disappeared down the corridor, cat-light on his feet.

Béa watched him go, then turned her attention to Dean. "Etienne's very dangerous," she said, barely more than a whisper.

"Did he threaten you?"

She shook her head. "Girls. They're disappearing." She shrugged. "He doesn't need to threaten."

"Disappearing? How?" Dean watched her face, could see fear flit across it, wanted to *help*, to make it better, but he needed to know *what* first. "Was it the argument we heard yesterday?"

Her hands fluttered and Dean bit the inside of his mouth instead of reaching out, which was what he felt like doing. "I was hired to replace the last girl. Etienne said she quit, but I know her, eh? She wasn't a quitter. Tadeusz doesn't think so, either. They are superstitious, those guys. I think they called something up, to fight the bad luck."

Finally, he took her hand. Tears ran down her face to her chin, but she hadn't made a sound, no sob, no sniff. "I don't know Etienne. He's one of her people."

Dean raised his eyebrows, a silent question.

"Céline's. René's, I mean. Her, she's not so much. A big voice, yes? But no more than that. René, though. He's..." gestured with her free hand. To her eyes. "He is cold here. I see him watch us, and he's... 'ungry. You know?"

He knew. He'd seen more evil in more guises than almost anyone. Béa was observant, he already knew that. And she lived in a half-life of old world superstition where things were possible. Part of what he found attractive about her, he realized. Part of what she probably found attractive about him. Each recognized the strangeness of the other, the willingness to believe in darker things.

"Yesterday, La Céline, she is asking him what happened to the girls. She's mad about it, and thinks maybe he's lying to her. And he said she's crazy. Says she needs to keep quiet about it, might scare the rest of us off." The tears had stopped.

"You don't have to do this," he said abruptly. "There are other jobs."

He might as well have suggested amputation as an option.

"Quitting Cirque is like quitting the Olympic team. You work your whole life to get here. My mother? She worked Ringling Brothers," said that like it was a disease. "I don't want that," and she turned his hand over in both of hers, rubbed it like a charm, a magic lamp. "Contortionists don't have many work years in them. The Cirque has a school in Montréal, and if I do this well, it's a job for life. No moving around," and she looked at him and he forgot what he was going to say, how he was going to get her out of danger, just wanted to stay looking at her expression for as long as he could.

She wanted that, he could see, plainly. She wanted the no moving around. Like him, she'd grown up with uncertainty and now longed for something else. Pay your dues now, and rest will come. Roots will come.

"Your brother," was all she had to say to get his complete attention.

"What about..."

She shook her head minutely. "Yesterday, I didn't know that he's your brother – the reporter. But René? He said that Sam is important. Has..." She stopped, perhaps uncertain of the word in English. "That he is special, powerful. Etienne thinks he's going to be trouble. It sounds stupid," and she shook her head.

"Believe me, none of this sounds stupid," he gentled, bringing calm to his voice when he felt no sense of it *anywhere*. He stroked her hair, mostly to reassure himself, not her.

"Sam, he feels things, yes? Knows about this..." waved her hand to the Cirque poster for Inferno that was pinned above the couch. "He feels the evil here, and knows about the zubir. He knows about *you*." He must have made a face then, because she took a breath, tried to explain. "Sam sees

you, right through.” She smiled, but it was wrong, comprehensively *sad*, and it confused Dean worse than what she was saying, that smile. “Right to here.”

And laid one finger to his chest, pointed like a compass found north.

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Sam got precisely nowhere with Etienne, except in an established circle, felt like one of those animals tied to a wheel, powering a mill. Easily, as though he’d done it a hundred times, and maybe he had, Etienne described himself as Belgian-Norwegian and said that he’d been in Céline and René’s employ for several years, and that he choreographed all her stage shows. He’d worked with the Cirque management on *Inferno*, an interesting experience, he intimated, leaning closer to Sam.

Sam asked where he’d gotten the idea of using the zubir and Etienne shrugged as if everyone knew that story. What rock had Sam been living under that he didn’t know about zubir and Lithuanian myth? Old country folktales, re-interpreted for a new audience. Surely not a novel idea for a theatre critic?

Though he tried as hard as he could, Sam couldn’t determine *what* Etienne was. Demon-possessed human, shapeshifter, devil-worshipper, dark servant. Some other kind of evil.

The only break he caught was when Etienne told him that René was willing to talk, if Sam was able to be here tomorrow at ten. René was particular about the interviews he gave; he would talk to Sam. No photographers, no note-takers. Sam was made to understand this was an honor, and unusual. Sam didn’t know what kind of idiot Etienne had mistaken him for.

He’d agreed and was already coming up with an excuse that would allay Dean’s fears, even before Etienne had finished making the arrangements.

Then Dean came storming out from backstage, bristling in a way Sam hadn’t seen in some time, no hesitation to his walk, came right up to them, crossed his arms in front of his chest and said in a deep clear voice, “*Christo.*”

Etienne looked blankly at him. Blinked once. Smiled deeply, then laughed. Laughed for a long time. Dean’s expression didn’t move. Finally, Etienne stood and Sam stood with him, came shoulder to shoulder with his brother. “The artist, right?” Etienne’s voice was edged and melodic. “Who wraps big things up.” His smile faded. “That’s the best you have?”

Eyes touched Sam’s, cold as a reptile, as expressive. “Good day, Mr. Winchester. And...friend. Your story will be interesting, if nothing else.” Lingering glance at Dean, and Sam immediately reacted. He stepped in front of Dean, put himself between Etienne and his brother, wished Dean a million miles away. Didn’t care how much he pissed Dean off by doing it.

Chuckling, Etienne leapt to the stage, called out to where Tadeusz and the others were continuing their practice. He gestured with one hand. An acrobat fell clumsily from the big man’s shoulders and the two Lithuanians exchanged a look before the larger man shook his shoulders and nodded at the other to try again.

*Rattled*, Sam thought, and he grabbed Dean by the sleeve of his shirt, steering him out the door.

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“We phone Dad,” Sam said before they were even at the car.

“We don’t phone Dad,” Dean replied, unlocking the Impala and sliding in. Fuck, it was iron-melting hot inside, and he left the door open when he reached over to unlock Sam’s side, knew he wouldn’t be able to grip the steering wheel without leaving a layer of cooked skin behind. Sat for a minute, waiting for Sam to get in. Sam didn’t; he stood by the open door, a slight cross-breeze barely alleviating the furnace. Sweat rolled down the side of Dean’s face.

Phone Dad. Yeah, that would be just great. “One, he never shows up, so what’s the point?” *Two, we’d have to tell him about your wacky dreams and if you think I’m freaked out, just wait till Dad gets a whiff of this.* “Two, he’s not going to be crossing any borders to get here.”

Sam wasn’t listening. Dean knew this by the fact that he’d walked away. So Dean got out of the car, started shouting across the packed parking lot, which wasn’t exactly his style. “Three, we’ve got nothing.”

Sam turned. “Nothing?” Took two steps back towards the car, his eyes mere slits in the sun. “*Nothing?*” he repeated incredulously.

“Get in the car, Sam,” Dean ordered gruffly. He started the engine, snapped off the radio, which was playing some French commercial that he could tell was for McDonalds, though he couldn’t have said how. Sam perched, enervated and testy.

For once, Dean wasn’t going to avoid it.

“No bodies, no animal mutilations, hovering lights, power grid surges, no weirdness anywhere. Etienne’s a shithead, but he’s not a demon, and he’s not possessed. An evil little prick, but nothing to exorcise or send to hell, and I draw the line at wasting a guy just because he’s an asshole. So what do we have besides that, Sam? Just your dreams, which I am not explaining to Dad, not in a message and not when he can’t help.”

He took a breath, not liking the note of desperation his voice had suddenly veered into. And it wasn’t even precisely *true*, was it, because Béa had just told him that *girls had gone missing*. Had just told him that Sam *could see straight through him* and the thought of that made Dean queasy.

Sam had gone white, which wasn’t a good sign. Dean chose to ignore it, forced himself to clutch the fire-poker hot steering wheel, and backed out of the parking space. Unrolling the window didn’t do much good, but Sam did it anyway, stuck his arm out and took his time replying. Finally, so quietly Dean had to reach to hear above the engine, “So, you want to leave?”

“What?” Because that had never occurred to him.

“You know, leave. Drive away. Just ignore it, leave it behind. Find a new gig.” His tone was nuanced, almost sneaky. Laying traps. “Unless there’s something else here that’s holding your attention.”

Dean blinked hard, tried to concentrate on the road, which was snarled in a horrendous traffic jam. He's talking about leaving *together*. Please let him be talking about that. "Other than your fucking dreams waking me up every half hour? Other than that, Sam?" He kept his voice down; windows open and he didn't want to have a fight, but he was sick of side-stepping it, too.

"Yeah, other than that, Dean. You think I don't know where you've been? Who you've been with?"

Though the wheel was like a new form of torture, Dean held on, saw his knuckles go white. A great swooping nausea forced him to clamp his mouth shut. Sam *knew*.

And if Sam knew about Béa, what else could he see? What else, Dean thought, finally understanding that he was trapped in his own fucking car with his psychic brother, what else has Sam seen about me? About how Dad and I live our lives only to kill things? No fucking wonder he walked away from it. From us. Like Sam was pulling up a rock that was Dean's soul and looking at all the things that squirmed underneath it.

Tapped the steering wheel, tried to take some comfort from that, but felt cold, felt that sick cold way when you had a sudden fever.

Sam laughed and it was an awful sound. A car honked behind them and someone yelled something, cut around them to race down the verge. Another car followed. Heat shimmered from the hood and Dean wiped his face with one hand, found it slick with sweat, which he transferred to his jeaned knee.

"What's so funny?" he asked, for the sake of keeping it going. He didn't look at Sam, couldn't, pulled ahead in the lane, judged the light ahead, made an illegal left turn to get out of traffic. Felt momentary relief as air swept through the car.

"Nothing. Believe me, nothing is funny about this."

"Girls have been disappearing, Cirque performers." Dean blurted out.

"How?"

Dean shrugged, surprised at how even Sam's voice was. *Maybe he already knows this*. "I don't know. Just not showing up for work one morning, I guess."

"That's not what I meant," Sam said softly, a chilling tone. "How do you know? And why am I only hearing about this now?"

"It's what Tadeusz wanted to tell me," he coughed, raising his voice as the wind picked up. Sam rolled up his window a little.

It was fear doing the driving then, but Dean didn't want to admit it. Decided that the whole discussion was getting out of hand and that he was soon going to say something that he'd regret and Sam hung on to crap like a pit bull with a lamb chop. Decided that he should just shut it down before it got ugly.

Dean had just come to that conclusion when Sam said, apropos of nothing, "You're not so fucking tough, Dean."

Pulled into the motel before answering. Turned to Sam, fought to keep it calm-sounding. “I *am* so fucking tough, Sam.” Stared at him. “Don’t you forget it.”

Sam’s face twisted, his sigh turning on a disbelieving laugh. “You’re impossible. You weren’t so fucking tough when your heartbeat was all over that theatre. I heard it, I saw you, man! You’re only human, Dean. I don’t know where the demon is. All I know is that there *is* a demon. And Béatrice Viau just about made your heart stop beating when she fell, and now you’re...what?”

Dean had held up a hand, was shaking his head. “Girl on the ceiling, Sam? That’s you and your fucked-up mind, and it’s Jess. I get it, okay? It’s always about Jess. I should know, because you’ve woken me up enough times with it.” *Leave Béa out of your conspiracy theory, Sam.* Didn’t say it, but was starting to suspect that Sam would hear it anyway.

Hard as a physical blow, it occurred to Dean that one thing could change Sam in his eyes, could make Sam *different*. One thing only: if he could see inside Dean that way, would just beam his fucking psychic flashlight into the darkest places Dean had, which were considerable. That was...unthinkable and Dean had just thought it. He swallowed.

Everything he’d been telling himself about Sam and his dreams was a lie. It *did* make him different. It did.

Dean did not want to be having this conversation, not ever. Couldn’t they just keep going on the way they had been? Wasn’t that enough?

“It’s not enough, Dean,” Sam replied desperately, and Dean leaned away, squeezed his eyes shut, hid himself behind a hand. “The dreams aren’t enough to go on, I don’t know how to control them, I don’t know how to read them. They don’t replace how we’ve always worked a gig. So you gotta *tell* me if she’s said anything. How can we figure this out if you don’t tell me what you’re doing?”

Dean thought he might throw up. Instead, he nodded once, abrupt, hand dropping to the chrome door handle. “I tell you what you need to know, Sam. Some stuff, though? It’s private.” And that was a warning.

Sam didn’t seem to hear it. “Not when she’s dangerous, Dean. Not when she puts you in danger. Etienne said that Béatrice finds you, and that’s just what she did, isn’t it? You think Etienne fucking Marcoux has your best interests at heart? Think that you looked like you needed some company -”

Dean didn’t know what expression was on his face, but it stopped Sam cold, whatever it was. Sam’s eyes were bright; he was angry, and he was worried. He was also something else that Dean had never seen before. God, was Sam trying to *protect* him? Because that kind of shit didn’t hold water with him. That sort of shit just made him feel small, and Sam should know it.

They hadn’t had time to work it out yet, what kind of brothers they were going to be; Sam had grown up at Stanford, and Dean hadn’t been there to see it, hadn’t been allowed. There was no going back, not to the time when Dean was the big brother, the authority, the one who Sam had to listen to, no matter what. *What happens now?* Dean wanted to ask that, but was too furious.

For once, like he had been turned inside out, anger made him cold, not white hot. “Same goes for you, Sam. You tell me everything?” Held Sam’s stare and Sam was the first to look away. “Yeah. Thought so.”

Satisfied for the first time that day, Dean got out of the stifling hot car and slammed the door behind him.

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a/n: One could make a case that parallels exist between this story and ‘Scarecrow’ (minus Céline Dion, of course). However, I’d argue that both owe a nod to Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*, which I highly recommend. And don’t you worry, I’m going to cut these boys some slack soon, now that we’ve got all the nasty bits of exposition out of the way. Lots of sunshine and lollipops next chapter, I promise.

*\*looks behind back to check that fingers are indeed, crossed.\**

Still on vacation, heading off to the ‘Couve, as my BIL calls it (er, okay, sounds *way* better when he says it). Together with [jmm0001](#), we’re embarking on a rather ill-advised (except that no one’s advising us on it, so perhaps ‘ill-conceived’ might be a better description) mini-roadtrip of the Lower Mainland, endeavoring to locate SPN locations. Photo essay to follow. ‘Cause I just can’t get enough of this shit.

## Chapter Six - Lap of Luxury

Posted July 26th, 2006

Disclaimer AWAY!: Jeez, yeah, it's true. I own it all, all of them. I'm making freakin' Winchester action dolls and shower toys, gonna cash in any minute, I tell you. It's all amazingly funny until the lawyers show up.

Céline ALERT! Finally, you've all been waiting for it...yeah, she's in the building. I'm talking Céline, in all her freakish glory. Sam has a ridiculous encounter with her diva-ness, the demon is revealed and Lo! Let there be Action. It was all good. Gen, WIP, will be 9 chapters. Set before the season one-ending arc, but after Faith (spoilers for which are contained throughout the story).

Over and Above Thanks: They are *unbelievable*, my Sober Second Thought Betas. [jmm0001](#) is off caring for sick family in (take a deep breath) CALGARY, and she still finds time to kick my literary ass. [lemmypie](#)? Well, she's busy being an EXTRA on our favourite show, so I'm past caring about what she thinks (just kidding...she totally gets a free ride on this one).

STF: The Winchester brothers follow Sam's disturbing dreams of bison and demons to Québec, where they encounter a creepy Céline Dion (there's another kind?) and a Cirque du Soleil casino extravaganza. Both brothers are keeping secrets from the other: Dean is having an affair with a cirque contortionist; Sam neglects to tell Dean that he's dreaming of his own death. Dean is increasingly worried that Sam's powers will fundamentally alter his relationship with Sam. Sam's visions reveal that Dean is in danger if Sam doesn't sacrifice himself, and so he is protecting Dean, something that Dean vehemently rejects in a loaded confrontation. Drive on, James...

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Sam didn't know what time Dean had rolled in. One minute, he'd been watching crap TV from the bed, flipping through the five or six available channels before settling on a luridly colored Japanese monster movie. The next, he was waking up with the sun in his eyes, shoes still on, a family of dust bunnies well-established inside his mouth. That's what four beers on an empty stomach and a fight with his brother would do: create a mild hangover and dreamless sleep. The former was penance, the other, welcome.

On the next bed, Dean lay curled up in a ball under the faded orange and avocado coverlet, a thin pillow over his head, protection in only the vaguest sense of the word, bare arm dangling over the bed's edge, fingers grazing the floor. Indelible smell of bar about him.

At least two in the morning, Sam decided. According to the newspaper listings, the badly dubbed movie had ended at two, and he was pretty sure he hadn't stayed awake for the end of it. He didn't remember Dean coming in, which meant that his brother had been quiet, because Sam was a light sleeper. Dean hadn't been *that* drunk, then, if he could sneak into the motel room, switch off the TV, undress and get into bed without waking him.

Sam lurched to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, took a quick shower, and avoided assessing the hangover's impact on his general appearance in the cracked vanity mirror. When he came back into the room, Dean hadn't moved an inch. Dead to the world.

Sam sighed. Sure they had arguments, what brothers didn't? But Dean wasn't really made for it, not with him. Dean wouldn't think twice about getting into the middle of fight between Sam and their Dad, would jump in with all the ridiculous zest of a rodeo clown, but going head-to-head with Sam wasn't in his nature. And while evasion was a known ploy of Dean's, especially when it came to women that Dean took beyond a one-night stand, Dean lying about something as patently dangerous as Béatrice Viau was reckless. Dean was a lot of things, but reckless wasn't usually one of them.

They were completely out of synch, within themselves and with each other; with each misstep, they grew further apart. Trying to figure out a rhythm with Dean had taken months; at first, Sam had been just managing day by day, barely coping with the fact and manner of Jess's death. Then Sam had realized that Dean had fallen into taking care of him, just the same way he had when they were kids. Sam had bridled at that, and Dean had wordlessly backed off.

Without their father around, both of them nominally adults, and with the immediate grief easing, something new was emerging and Sam didn't quite know what it was, but he suspected it could become a friendship between equals. A surreal, wonderful prospect. They had quite a way to go for that, though. Sam didn't know if they'd be allowed to figure it out; time wasn't on their side, not with the looming cliff and the running buffalo.

*I should tell him about the dreams. He should know.* Sam collected the empty beer bottles from the coffee table and slid them into the cardboard box beside the tiny fridge. *He'll freak. If I tell him that the demon wants me, and it's threatening Dean to get to me?* Dean wouldn't stand for it. He'd march right in, get himself killed.

*And where would that leave me?* Couldn't even think about that, staring at Dean's shoulder, noticing faint scars crossing the summer tan, connecting freckles like one of those constellation maps he'd studied as a kid. *He'd throw himself in front of a train, take a bullet for me. I know that. How can I not do the same?*

Silently, he picked up his shoes, stepped over the saltline at the door, eased himself out into the early morning heat. He sat down on a white plastic chair on the covered concrete beside an old coffee tin masquerading as an ashtray. For a moment, he stared at the morning traffic beyond the parking lot, mind loose and wandering like a stray dog.

He was twenty-two years old and understood that he wasn't going to get any older than this. If the dreams were right. The current dreams. He'd once had less prophetic dreams, he recalled, ones that were made in the light of day. Plans, not dreams. Maybe dreams. What was it that Springsteen wrote? *Is a dream a lie if don't come true, or is it something worse?* All the plans he'd made for himself, that he'd dreamed of with Jess, none of them were going to come to pass.

This was what his life was, what it had come round to, come back to, an unbroken circle. A decrepit motel instead of a home financed with major credit card scams, the most dependable thing in their lives a car pushing forty. A seemingly endless series of unknown evils to banish. A brother fucked-up by a hard father and an innocence lost too soon, reared to fight and to kill and to sacrifice. Dean was too smart to waste time on reflection, because reflection meant hesitation and in Dean's life, hesitation often meant death. Sam knew all this, had seen it played out a hundred times, thought maybe he loved Dean more for his selfless headlong acts of pure faith.

Sam knew he was no less affected by this same upbringing, manifest differently. He'd also been reared to fight, but he thought that maybe because he didn't remember the fire that killed his

mother, didn't carry that around like an albatross, he was more able to question, to push. To feel anger at what their father had done, had taken from them. Anger always revealed loss; and loss, need. Sam *needed*. Needed home and justice and love.

Home he didn't think he could do much about, not anymore. But justice and love? Those he could serve. Thought that just as he saw a sports car, a convertible, pull into the motel's heat-shimmering blacktop, silent as a raptor circling in the sky. It worked its way over to where Sam sat watching, already knowing who was behind the wheel. Unsurprised, somehow. *Of course he knows how to find us*. He got up, padded barefoot as though across living coals to the passenger side, leaned over.

"Good morning," Etienne greeted him, a convention. "Coffee?" And handed Sam a cardboard cup of good quality coffee, strong, from islands in the Pacific. Sam thanked him, took a cautious sip. Etienne ran one slender hand across the top of his head, teeth white against his skin, eyes shuttered behind black reflective shades. "I hope you don't mind. I didn't know if you had a ride. It's almost nine o'clock. Don't you need your notebook?"

Almost friendly. Sam nodded, put his coffee down on the ground beside the chair, slipped on his shoes and disappeared back inside the room. Dean had moved his position, but was presently motionless.

*Let him sleep*. Sam picked up his bag, not checking the contents, and wrote a quick note, but legible, telling Dean that he'd gone out, that he'd phone him later. They'd have lunch. That he was sorry. Sam looked at that last sentence, didn't know if Dean would be alarmed or amused by it. Might roll his eyes, mutter 'pussy' under his breath. Hard to know.

Looked long and hard at the back of Dean's sleeping head, wanting nothing more than to rouse him, to tell him everything. But he'd written 'sorry' and that was the most important thing, and it would have to do. Carefully, he stepped over the saltline, hoped it would hold back evil. It looked pathetic in daylight, as though a drunken chef had trashed their room as they'd slept. One morning when they were kids, Dean had sprinkled some of the leftover saltline on homefries their Dad had brought back for breakfast. Such was their fucked-up childhood, that Sam could never think of seasoning without thinking of protection.

Holding his breath, he shut the door. Didn't look back as Etienne's powerful car slid from the parking lot and picked up speed on the highway.

They didn't exchange a single word on the way to the casino, and Sam was thankful for that. He didn't think he could bear small talk. The clown's demeanor was confusing: genial, helpful, mocking. Sam didn't know much about this René he was ostensibly going to interview, only that he was Dion's husband and manager, looked to be a lot older than the diva. Though Céline herself looked weirdly preserved, could be anywhere between thirty and ninety, he supposed.

Etienne had never made an appearance in Sam's dreams. Sam didn't know what that meant, because the clown sure as hell factored in this, was some kind of agent. As Etienne parked in a reserved spot, Sam undid his seatbelt and was about to get out, but Etienne made a noise, a cleared throat, and Sam turned. Saw himself distorted in the dark glasses.

"You're very trusting," Etienne observed.

“What? You were going to take me somewhere else? Murder me, leave my body to rot in a riverside park?” He’d seen his death, and it involved bison and demons, and Etienne was neither. Sam knew there would be a purpose to his death; not a bad end, as these things went.

Etienne laughed outright at that, but then his mouth pursed thoughtfully. Sam wished he could see his eyes, although he suspected it wouldn’t do him much good. “No. You just surprise me, that’s all. I’m difficult to surprise, so it’s always such a pleasure. I want you to stick around. And I wouldn’t like to make an enemy of your brother. He seems a bit...relentless.”

The clown got out the car without further comment, leaving Sam speechless.

By the time Sam caught up with him, Etienne was already inside the building and making his way through a throng of people who had gathered by the doors leading to the theatre box office. Etienne waited for Sam, asked him if he had his press credentials – he’d pushed his glasses on top of his head, so Sam saw the sparkle of mocking delight that accompanied that – and Sam reached into his bag, found the press tag he’d purchased their first night with his winnings from the slots.

They showed their ID to the security guard, who opened the door, keeping the Céline fans at bay. Sam realized what the presence of the fans meant: the singer must be at rehearsal, which only made sense, if her husband was there as well. Huh, he thought. This would all be more interesting if the celebrity was one he actually wanted to meet, but he was stymied as to who that might be, and immediately was distracted by Etienne opening the door to the theatre, guiding Sam in.

“That’s René there,” he said, pointing. “I’ll introduce you. You’ll have a half hour, maybe, if all goes well. Céline is rehearsing on stage at the moment. Don’t try to say a word to her.” It wasn’t a threat, seemed more like a friendly piece of technical information, as though he was advising Sam how to work a particularly complex microwave oven.

René was a tall man, imposing, with dark brows and a gleaming scalp fringed with hair the color of whalebone. His eyes were small, deep set, and Sam peered cautiously in the darkened theatre, his own vision sun-blinded, still. Etienne introduced Sam deferentially, then beat a quick path to the back of the theatre, all the while with that grin that Sam would have liked to kick out of him.

“Sam Winchester?” René said, mangling the pronunciation so much that Sam had difficulty immediately understanding what he was saying. On the stage, a strong single spotlight illuminated the stick-figure diva, who had her hair back in a high ponytail, wore a pink t-shirt and who was shouting something at René in French. He called back, eminently calm.

His voice made Sam’s skin crawl. He didn’t know what it was, but knew from years of hunting, even his years at Stanford where he had hunted other things like ‘a decent apartment’, ‘a part-time job’ and ‘good grades’, that he shouldn’t second-guess himself, that he should just trust his instincts. And that resonated with what the clown had said in the parking lot. Trusting. Luck had nothing to do with it. Sam trusted his instincts, not his luck.

His instincts were telling him he ought to run, not walk, away from this man.

“So, you wish to know about the Inferno?” René began, gesturing to the stage steps, slowly mounting them. Some vestigial impulse was triggered: Sam did not want to get on that stage. Across the stage, quite far from where Céline stood, Tadeusz and three other gymnasts, their broad hands chalked up, hauled ropes attached to the metal framework arcing over the theatre. They were dressed in gray and navy sweats, manifestly here to work, not to perform.

“Um, yeah,” Sam said, following with all the enthusiasm of a sentenced man ascending the gallows. Céline, only a few yards away from Sam, comprehensively ignored him and spoke rapidly to René, who responded again, calling ‘encore’ to the band behind the stage, not an accolade, but a command. The musicians were in darkness, and Sam couldn’t tell how many there were. One of the gymnasts, a tiny woman who barely came up to Sam’s bellybutton, ran up the rope Tadeusz held, climbed maybe fifty feet in under five seconds. Sam watched, terrified and mesmerized.

Sam walked slowly across the stage, past the singer, not wanting to meet her eyes. She was elsewhere occupied in any case, shouting at the musicians, her hands chopping the air, absolutely impossible for Sam to figure out what she was talking about, except that it was upsetting her, whatever it was. René took a spot on the far side of the stage, closer to the gymnasts, waved Sam over.

“You see,” he continued, pointing at the girl high above them, “the aerialists have to be very brave. It’s a tall ceiling, yes? The big guys down here,” and he nodded at Tadeusz, who was concentrating on sweeping the rope in ever faster circles, “they control the speed, they use small pressure and see how they make them go. The little ones at the top? They are *everything*.”

Sam looked at him, and saw black desire in the darkened eyes, staring up at the swinging girl. He swallowed, looked back up to the girl, watched her hook her foot into a smaller strap, let go of the rope, start twirling independently of the rope in Tadeusz’s capable hands.

The music started up, and Céline Dion, not twenty feet away from Sam, sang into the dusty chalk-filled air, no microphone, nothing to distort or filter her voice. The hair on the back of Sam’s neck stood straight up and he thought he knew where this might be heading. Desperately, he cast about the room, searching for backup. Which wasn’t there. He’d avoided backup, hadn’t he? Only Etienne, slumped elegantly in a far seat, examining Sam with veiled interest.

René shouted at Céline, something that sounded like ‘ploo four’ but must mean ‘louder, stronger’. Sam looked quickly at her, then at the girl on the ceiling. His heart sounded as loud to him as Dean’s had. René laid a hand on Sam’s shoulder and he tore his attention from the girl to stare at the manager.

He wasn’t smiling, his face was a blank. His eyes were completely black, like oily pools of viscous tar, waving with heat straight from hell. Sam drew away, took several steps backwards, then Céline’s voice climbed with the speed and the inherent danger of the girl going up the rope and Sam knew where the note was rising to, and looked up with the note, to meet the note and the top, and saw the girl spinning like a top.

The secondary strap came way with a snap. For a moment, the girl still spun, but she was lose from anything that held her safe and she caught the light as though she was a bird lit by a noon-day sun. And then, directly above where Sam stood transfixed, she began her long fall to the ground, cut away from the living. Beyond the high held note Sam heard Tadeusz’s quick terrified gasp, but all these things seemed desperately far away because the note was a meat cleaver taken to Sam’s head.

He watched the girl fall; he was also falling. The note tore a hole in Sam’s world, felt like it was tearing a hole inside his brain. A chasm opening up, fiery and evil, and the note went on and on and on. The hole became bigger, reaching for him, a black vortex. The note and the girl and the

pain inside his head all met at the same time, there on the stage, and Sam might as well have been hit by lightning for all that he was able to stop any of it.

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*Whatever you want, Sammy. Go ahead, don't tell me where you're going. A little privacy works both ways,* Dean thought, crumpling the note and throwing it in the bathroom's garbage, knowing full well that in about ten minutes he was going to fish it out again, rub it flat on the table, stare at the words 'I'm sorry' one more time. Fold it into a small wad and keep it in his wallet until it fell apart.

That's how many times Sam had said those words in his life. Sam was *never* sorry. Sam was sure, was adamant. Was sincere and was unbending. It was why Sam and their father arguing was something close to a medieval bloodletting.

The apology made Dean nervous.

He thought about phoning Sam, just to see where he was, but he was hungover, needed a coffee and breakfast. He'd watched the end of the Godzilla vs. Mothra movie last night, then the movie that was on after it. He was beat, in every sense of the word. So what if Sam could read his mind? What was there worth reading, really? Lying to himself again, getting good at it, because it was the principle of the thing. Some places were *his*, not Sam's.

Got the note out of the garbage. Went to get some coffee.

Returned to the motel room, sat there, miserable. Fuck it. He should make himself useful, at least figure out what Tadeusz and Béa had been talking about. Work it like usual. It was a fairly credible excuse, as these things went.

Got Béa on the second ring, sleep-fuddled, just waking. Dean invited her round; no point in secrecy now. Sam knew everything anyway, though Dean felt mild regret as he hung up. Secret affairs didn't come around often – hell, since when had he had anyone around to keep anything secret *from*? – and they never lasted.

Sam was right, though, much as Dean didn't like to admit it, and would never, in fact, actually admit it to Sam: getting involved with Béa was dangerous. Getting involved with *anyone* was dangerous; how many times had he said that? Still. Béa was no demon, nothing evil about her. Just caught in the middle. A scared, flexible girl that needed some comfort and a good -- shit. *Work it like usual*, he told himself again, knowing that he was lying again. Nothing usual about this.

She appeared at the motel's door in forty minutes time, a bag of warm sesame bagels in one hand, two coffees balanced in the other. Dean had the laptop open and running, had pieced together a history of the Cirque, found a web site about human contortion that triggered his gag reflex, and read more than he cared to about buffalo lore.

"Too early for poutine," Béa said with a sly smile, probably expecting a warmer greeting than the one he gave her.

“Breakfast of champions,” he mumbled, taking the bag and setting it on the table between them. Béa followed him in, sat with both feet tucked under her, removed the lid of her coffee, which was creamy and sweet. Creamy and sweet was not how Dean normally had his, but he wasn’t completely tactless. He drank it, tried to think of it as dessert, not coffee.

Béatrice considered him over the brim of her cup; her eyes were the color of bitter chocolate, liquid and warm. Not spooked, not now. Because she was here with him, Dean realized with a stab of guilty pleasure. *She thinks I’ll make it okay.* Nothing else was needed to motivate him, nothing but someone’s trust. He smiled in return, got up and bent over her, thanked her properly for the coffee and the bagels.

“Where is your brother?” she asked after a moment, after he’d sat back down at the computer. He concentrated on the screen.

“Went out,” he murmured, taking a swallow of the coffee. “He’s pissed off at me.”

She was quiet, so quiet that he’d found the search screen he’d been looking for and was about to ask her another question, but got snared in her stare. Surprised at her concerned expression, he opened a hand questioningly.

“You had an argument?” she responded.

“Yeah, no big deal,” Dean said, suddenly prickly and putting up walls. Not her business. Same way as she wasn’t Sam’s business. Maybe if he said it enough times, he might come to believe it. In fact, if he didn’t say it at all, that was even better. Change the subject. “So, who were the other girls who went missing?”

“You guys aren’t reporters, are you?” Béa asked, quiet, a little resigned.

Dean shook his head, unsure how he was going to answer the next question, which inevitably would be, ‘What the hell are you, then?’ He’d done this often enough to recognize the pattern.

Béa only nodded to herself, her mouth quirked. Dean couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but felt her curiosity slip away. Maybe she didn’t care what they were, only that they were here to help. Or thought that she’d been taken in by a lying huckster -- how far from the truth was that, really? Or maybe she knew what kind of things he and Sam hunted, had recognized them from the start. Maybe she hadn’t found him that first night, so much as had been *sent*. He opened his mouth to ask, but she took the moment from him, protecting herself, hiding. Went back to his original question.

Three girls, she said, all of them known to her, fellow performers, friends: one during the initial rehearsals, one during the audition process for local talent, and one just last month, the one that Béa had replaced. “I was working one of the Cirque’s Las Vegas shows,” she explained. “And the Cirque main branch in Montréal gave me a call.” She shrugged, graceful, her one shoulder bare as the strap of her tank top fell to her upper arm. She adjusted it, raked fingers through her haphazard hair, mussing it further. It looked as though she hadn’t combed it in days. “Good opportunity. Close to home. You ever been to Vegas?”

He nodded. Yeah, he’d been there. A poltergeist, if he remembered correctly. His father and a vengeful spirit that haunted a parkade, of all things. Dean had been thrown from the parking garage rooftop and required three stitches to his elbow, which had gone through the chain link

fence that had softened his landing. Fucking stupid poltergeists, no reasoning with them. As for Vegas, might as well have been Grand Rapids, or Dayton, or Des Moines; not even one game of craps, only Dad with a needle and thread, and his Marine Corps first aid method for snapping a dislocated shoulder back into its socket. Didn't make postcards for that, even if Dean had had anyone to send one to.

"Not much to do if you're not gambling," he said instead.

"Sure," she extended her leg, crept her foot over his chair, rested it on his thigh. Took a quick sip of coffee. It was warm outside and in; he'd left the door open, no air conditioning. Different from the last rented room they'd been in. He dropped one hand to her bare foot, tried not to think of the Hilton. Here, at least, he felt more like himself. She licked her lips, might have been nerves. Looked away before asking, "You think those three are just playing blackjack somewhere?"

Something young in her voice: she wanted him to tell her that, yes, they were probably just cutting loose in Vegas, or Montréal, or New York. Were alive somewhere. He ignored her foot for the moment, typed their information into the search engine he'd accessed with a purloined code, asked her if she knew anything else about them – tattoos, marks, height, hair color, birth dates.

Located one of them dead more or less immediately, burned body found in an abandoned car on the American side of the Québec-Vermont border. Burned body, not a burned car. The sort of weird that would usually interest him. Looked at a series of Vermont state police photos of the crime scene, judged them too gory, hid them beneath another window before turning the computer to Béa, who withdrew her foot, looked at the screen, eyes scanning back and forth, reading what she didn't really want to know or believe. Dean watched her face, saw hope fade, the dark eyes grow glossy, a line appear between her sculpted brows. One hand, fingers callused, imbedded with chalk, lifted to her mouth.

These had been her friends.

He reached out across the table, took her other hand, and she inhaled a shaky breath, nodded her head. "Tadeusz was right," she whispered. "I don't think I believed him. I thought he was a superstitious Lithuanian peasant." She wasn't the sort that cried. He already knew that, was glad of it now. Crying, he had limited patience for. This, though. Pain. He knew what to do. Wait.

Was waiting still, when her phone rang. She got up, adjusted her clothes, and went to where she'd dropped her bag by the door with her sandals. She spoke quickly in Lithuanian, exhaled, looked at Dean and such was the expression on her face that he froze.

"There's been an accident," she said, eyes frightened, "at the theatre. One girl is dead. Your brother is hurt," and all the blood in Dean's body felt like it was either rushing to or from his head; he couldn't really tell which. "We should come, Tadeusz says." But Dean was already up, grabbing his keys from the table, halfway out the door.

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First of all, what the fuck was an angel doing in hell? Because the amount of pain he was in, this sure wasn't heaven. But the light? Strong and not scary. Maybe it was...God. And the glowing,

angelic face with the big eyes staring unblinking at him, musical murmuring that he couldn't understand at all.

*Holy shit, I've been abducted by aliens.*

Softness under his head, which hurt as though he'd been struck by a two-by-four. He almost starting laughing, because the last time he'd been hit by a piece of lumber, it'd been the world's dumbest rawhead and Dean had...jesus, what had Dean done?

Didn't matter. The alien was singing. Kinda nice, stroking his face, took a cloth – what kind of fluffy white cloth did they have in this screwy-ass space ship...oh, it was a t-shirt, that's fine -- and pressed it to the side of his face.

Goddamn, that *hurt*, and Sam tried to sit up, because he didn't want an alien singing to him while doing a crappy job of mopping up his blood with a sweaty t-shirt. A hand to his chest made him still: René, so close, eyes not all demon-y black, but an expression of avarice on his face that chilled Sam to the bone.

Oh, that's why it's so soft – his head was resting in Céline Dion's lap. *This is nice*, he thought. *I mean, weird. Dean is so gonna laugh his ass off about this. Just don't sing that note again, lady, and everything'll be okay. Mmm, would be just great if someone would tell me –*

“Can you ‘ear me?” the alien-Dion said, eyebrows so far above its overly large eyes that Sam wondered how that was actually possible. The question wasn't for him, was it? He thought about that, and then Céline rapid-fired something in French and René, man, that dude *jumped*. Didn't look pleased. *Haha, screw you demon. Céline Dion's got your number, man.*

“*Mon dieu,*” she whispered, all big eyes and nose, especially this close. “Please be all right. You are all right.”

Oh, okay, sure. *If you say so.* Wasn't able to respond, but she wasn't actually expecting him to say anything, was she?

The diva stroked his forehead, lifted the balled up t-shirt experimentally from the side of his face. It came away red and she looked alarmed, pushed it back down again. Sam rolled his eyes to the left, away from the blinding light above, which wasn't god or the mothership, he realized, but the spotlight high above the stage.

Beside him, only a few feet away, was the girl. The aerialist that had fallen. Her back was arched strangely, mostly because one arm was caught at a sickening angle behind her body, trapped beneath her insignificant weight. Not so insignificant, Sam realized, not for her, and not for me. Not when she fell fifty feet *on top of me*.

Her face was turned to him and her eyes were open, terrified and unseeing, rivulets of blood running from nose and mouth and ear. René leaned over her and Sam felt an arctic cold front sweep through him, ice water in his veins.

Suddenly had to turn quickly, which didn't do his head any good, and threw up all over the stage. Céline gave a half-scream and his human pillow removed itself so quickly Sam slumped against the boards, breath wheezing through his lungs as though they'd been squeezed in a juicer. He

hacked and would have thrown up more, possibly, except all at once he realized that something was horribly *wrong* with him.

If his head hurt, it was nothing to what he now felt in his shoulder, a wicked hot pain true and undeniable as mallet to the chest. Sam's vision turned an unreasonable red and he must have cried out, because another person, a man, middle aged, speaking French at a rate Sam had hitherto not thought possible, came beside him on his knees, hands searching out the hurt. *Finding it.*

Sam tried to slap the man away, but his left arm wasn't obeying him, and his right was firmly in this man's grasp. After a second of this, the man said, "I'm a doctor. Can you 'ear me?"

*God, I think I just barfed on Céline Dion, Sam wanted to say. And that husband of hers is possessed by a demon, okay?*

Behind him, hovering like a wasp at a picnic, was Etienne. His expression puzzled Sam, because it wasn't triumphant, or amused, or anything like Sam had come to expect. It was almost sad, a little disappointed, maybe.

*Is this all there is to it? Sam thought, all there is to dying? Just walk across the stage and let someone fall on you? With effort, Sam stared at Etienne, willed him forward. The doctor turned to let the clown come closer, got to his feet to converse with Céline and René. Sam had no idea what they were talking about. Fastidiously avoiding the puddle of puke to Sam's right, Etienne leaned in, attention flickering briefly to the arguing diva, demon and doctor.*

"That was dramatic," Etienne whispered. "But not very smart."

Sam reached up with his right hand, barely understood how he could do such a thing when he was in this much pain, and grabbed a handful of Etienne's silk-woven shirt. Pulled him down close. Hissed through his teeth, "We're even. You leave him out of it."

Etienne's eyebrows shot up. Now he looked amused. Looked fucking delighted. "Your brother? Out of my hands. He's his own worst enemy." He disengaged Sam's fist from his shirt, then patted Sam on the chest in a way that would be interpreted as reassuring in any other context. "Make your deal with someone who's threatening him, Sam Winchester. I only set things in motion and watch what happens. Oh," and looked up as the doctor came back into Sam's line of vision. "I think you're about to be transported. Could be a little uncomfortable." Shrugged, looked apologetic, made room for the doctor to settle in at Sam's side.

Sam wished he understood what Etienne had just told him, but the agony of whatever it was the falling aerialist had broken in him was becoming unmanageable and he didn't even feel the pinprick that knocked him out, was only able to stare at Etienne beseechingly as the trickster waved goodbye.

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Etienne was leaning on the cinderblock wall next to the backstage door, smoking a cigarette, a bottle of expensive water dangling from one hand. He observed Dean illegally park the Impala in the loading bay without any discernable alarm, although it was very apparent that Dean's mood was less than amicable, since the car had practically roared into the lot at a speed exceeding the

highway limit, the tires screeching to a sudden violent stop. Dean was out the car before Etienne had a chance to either duck back in the door, or wave him over.

“Where is he?” Dean shouted, rushing up the poured concrete steps two at a time, had every intention of beating it out of the little shit if –

“Gone,” Etienne sighed, took a drink of water, eyes serious for once.

Dean pulled up short, uncertain. “What do you mean, gone?”

Obligingly, Etienne opened the metal door. “See for yourself. Gone, no longer in the building.” Looked Dean up and down. “Don’t you want to know what happened to the girl?” Glanced behind him to where Dean could hear Béa getting more slowly out of the car. The clown’s expression changed slightly, but Dean couldn’t tell what Etienne thought about the contortionist’s presence. Interested, maybe. Curious.

Dean had one hand on his hip, the other grasped the iron hand rail and if he let go of either, it was only going to be to punch this jerk in the face. Still, as Béa came closer, came right up behind him, he altered his stance, put her protectively behind him. She didn’t trust Etienne, and neither did he. “Where is Sam?” Dean rasped, voice beyond threatening.

Not easily intimidated, I’ll give him that, Dean thought as Etienne sighed. “Madame Dion is taking care of him. She feels very responsible when accidents happen in her shows, you know.”

“Where,” Dean began again, this time knowing that he’d have to follow through, that there was only one way arrogant little guys like this one would –

“The girl is dead. A fall like that usually kills someone. You should be thankful it wasn’t your brother.”

Felt, rather than heard or saw, Béa at his shoulder, wished she’d stayed in the car, because everything, *everyone*, who came under Etienne’s beady scrutiny was a target. “I’m not the one who should be thankful,” he warned, eyes locked with the trickster’s.

Etienne withheld a smile; Dean knew it, and it was almost as bad as him actually smiling. “Céline has a private wing at the Château Montebello, complete with medical staff. She wanted Sam to have the best medical care possible. Do you know how long he’d have to wait in a Canadian emergency room?” Gestured with his fingers, eyes slightly widened.

“Get out of my way,” Dean growled, and pushed his way past Etienne, used a shoulder to knock him to one side of the door. He wasn’t about to trust this fucker’s information, and he wasn’t going to ask for directions. He tried to take Béa’s hand, to get her out of the way, but she turned her wrist, stood on her own.

“If you’re looking for Tadeusz, he went out to Montebello with the rest of the Cirque performers.” Etienne’s voice carried in the empty gloom of the backstage. Dean slowly turned, realizing that Etienne was talking to Béa now. Something hard and sharp jumped in his chest. Worry.

“Why?” Béa asked, keeping it in English.

Etienne shrugged. “Who knows the mind of the diva? She wants everyone to gather at Montebello, have a...wake? Is that what you call it?” Chuckled like he was amused. “She wanted to know where you were, of course. We all did.”

The stage area was empty, no sign of anyone. Swept clean, not even police. Shit. Some pull, if a performer can die in a fall and every witness is relocated before the cops can show up. Including his brother.

Etienne had his phone out, was dialing, but still talking, nothing in his posture or tone changed. “Let me see if I can reach the...Allo?” All French for a moment, then he looked at Dean, who had come back to the open door. Etienne held out the phone to him, apparently solicitous. “The staff doctor at Montebello. English okay.”

Dean snatched the phone from his hand and was told, in excellent English, that Sam was resting comfortably, but had required five stitches to his brow and a relocation of his left shoulder. Bruised and bloodied, but not profoundly damaged. He’ll want to see you when the sedative wears off. Funny, Dean thought as he snapped the phone shut and handed it back to Etienne without a thank you or any other words, how a dislocated shoulder hurt worse than a lot of more serious injuries, but was treated almost nonchalantly. Thought of Vegas again, and how the elbow injury had been nothing next to that horrific pop of relocation. He had actually passed out, which didn’t happen all that often, and certainly not in front of their father.

He felt almost faint with relief now. He put a hand out to the doorjamb, tried not to let any of it show on his face. Even so, Béa took a step toward him, but Etienne angled a shoulder between them, spoke quickly to her in French and Dean watched her face pale. The dead girl, he thought. Another friend, likely. He straightened, wanting to be as far from here as possible. As far from *him*.

Grabbing Béa’s arm, he returned to the Impala, not looking behind to see what Etienne was doing – laughing, cursing, making faces – and got into the car, started it, barely waited for Béa to sit before throwing it in reverse.

“You know the way?” he demanded. He didn’t care if she wanted to go. He didn’t care if it was dangerous for her, or for him. It was dangerous for Sam, and that was all that mattered.

“Château Montebello?” Face a blank mask, a statue’s lovely and remote stare, she turned to him. “Of course. It’s a long drive.” A beat, one moment, a spasm of concern flashed on her face, repressed. He’d reacted badly to concern last time, every time, Dean knew. She learned fast. Didn’t ask, which meant he could say it.

“Sam’s going to be okay,” he announced hoarsely, and she told him to turn left, like they were negotiating more than an unknown highway, were making some kind of tacit deal. You tell me; I tell you. Take this route. *What the hell is going on?* Left at the lights. *Did you find me on purpose? Are you being threatened?* If only he opened his mouth, he might get some answers, but he was too worried. About Sam, about her. *Whose side are you on, Béatrice Viau?*

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This was very nice, as nice as that place where he and Jess had celebrated their first anniversary, that had cost an entire week’s pay for one night, that place up in the mountains with the broad

beamed rafters and the river stone fireplace. Sighed, ran his right hand over the down duvet before reaching up to touch a line of stitches above his left eyebrow.

His gaze wandered past the bed, to his right, past the coverlet, past his own hand and he saw *her*, sitting in a rocking chair not three feet from him, eyes closed, headphones on, bare foot swinging back and forth to a melody he couldn't hear. Fireplace so big three santas could have come down it at once, same river rock, yellow cedar mantelpiece decorated with a hundred white candles. Sunlight streaming in French doors, mullions wrought iron, outside pine trees, glimpse of river.

It suddenly occurred to Sam that he was naked under the duvet, had no idea where his clothes were and had no idea where *he* was. Sat up suddenly, discovered that was a very bad idea, cried out from the pain in his bound shoulder, and from the sudden pain in his head.

With a small scream, Céline's large eyes flashed open, dropping the iPod in her hand to the floor as she bounced to her feet, the chair slapping back against the artfully sculpted plaster wall. Sam stared at her in shock, fell back onto the pillows, sunk into them like they were quicksand, not feathers.

"You are awake!" Céline cried, a happy smile transforming her face, lighting the room as though it generated a thousand watts. "You are alive!"

Sam cleared his throat, utterly devastated, no language in him at all. His breath came in little tiny gasps.

"Oh my god, I am making you sick!" She searched somewhere on the floor, but the bed was so high and the singer so tiny she might as well have fallen through the floor. Finally, she reemerged with a small telephone in her hand. "I will call the doctor!" she announced breathlessly, veering between a stunning smile and a pouting frown. "René will be so pleased. He was very worried about you, Monsieur Win-ches-ter." Punched in a few numbers, "Allo?" Tons of French.

Sam wondered if he buried himself in the bounty of pillows, if he just started digging, what country he might come to on the other side.

She dropped the phone on the ground, hovered over him, on tiptoes. "You feel bad, yes? I will get you some drugs!"

And pattered out of the room into an ensuite bathroom. He heard her rattling about what he presumed was a medicine cabinet, took the opportunity to lever himself with his good right hand into a sitting position, forced himself to stay there, though the room turned an amazing shade of orange for one full minute while he concentrated just on drawing breath. He tried to swing his legs over the side, thought his clothes must be around here someplace, when he noticed the bruises.

Down the left side of his torso, big purple and blue blotches, both knees, left thigh. *Oh my god, I look like I've been hit by a truck.*

Céline came back into the room, several bottles clutched in her freakishly large hands, looked up, stood amazed at Sam for a moment, both realizing between one second and the next that he was naked, before she turned with a yelp and Sam flipped the cover back over himself.

“Excuse me,” he said, and it came out about an octave higher than his normal speaking voice. “Sorry,” he continued as she turned around slowly, gamely smiling again, klieg light bright. “Please, where am I? And can I use your phone?”

*Dean is going to kill me.*

Céline Dion came to the bedside, dropped a pile of bottles there, everything from aspirin to Demerol. “I have a suite and rooms here at Château Montebello.” Smiled again, gestured to the room as though she was presenting it as a prize on the Price is Right. “A *veryfine* old hotel here on the river. Is *veryvery* beautiful, *non?*”

Sam swallowed. “Um, yeah, it’s um, beautiful.”

“I ‘ave a doctor ‘ere. *Veryvery* good doctor. ‘e fix your arm. *Epaulette*. Your shoulder, it is injured.” She shook her massive head, like a horse too long in a stall. “That poor girl. I cancelled the performance tonight and tomorrow. The show, she does not always go on, *n’est-ce pas?* We will ‘ave a party. No show!”

And she stood up, determined to make the best of what was obviously a bad situation. Sam’s eyes tracked her movement, but it was painful. Maybe the Tylenol 3s would help. “Water?” he asked.

“Oh, you poor boy! I am an *idiote!*” Came back with water. The size of the diamond on her finger made Sam feel queasy because he’d never seen something that size outside of a Bugs Bunny cartoon, but he picked up the bottle and handed it to her. The diamond flashed as she opened it for him, shook out two pills, which he swallowed gratefully, the water almost more so.

“Now,” she said, jumping up again and reaching for something on top of a high chest of drawers. His phone. “I will make your phone call. Your boss, ‘is name? Must be *veryvery* worried by now. I will talk to ‘im, tell ‘im what has happened.”

Oh, this was not going to work. She flipped open the phone, seemed very conversant with how to use it, scrolled down numbers on his speed dial function.

“Dean,” Sam squeaked, didn’t even know he’d actually said it until her face lit up and she smiled again.

“‘ere ‘e is!” She looked to Sam, eyes wide with concern. “Don’t be worry. I will explain every-- Oh?” She turned half away, nodding with pleasure, smiling at Sam, one hand held out to him, placating. “‘Allo? Is this M’sieur Dean, Sam Win-ches-ter’s boss?” A moment and she straightened, her voice going to a place that Sam could only describe as *on stage*, “I am...Céline Dion!”

Sam was holding his breath and it made him feel dizzy, so he tried to think about breathing, but his heart was thudding massively in his chest, making it hard to concentrate. He watched the diva listen intently, her brows drawn together.

“I do not understand you!” she announced loudly, as though volume helped with comprehension. “*Répétez s’il vous plait!*” Sam silently begged Dean not to repeat whatever it was he’d just said. Another pause, and then – amazingly – she started talking to his brother in French. Long, beautiful strings of French, then listened, then nodded, then more French.

It took him about thirty seconds of this to figure it out, and he didn't know if he was more angry, or fearful. Probably an equal mix of both. He tried to sit up again in the bed, held his right hand out, not giving a shit that this was Céline fucking Dion, because he knew who she was talking to, and it wasn't Dean.

Finally, still smiling that meaningless smile, the diva handed the phone over, but not before saying in a dramatic stage whisper, hand covering the phone, "I think your boss is maybe screwing the contortionist."

*Oh, brilliant subterfuge, Dean. The world's wackiest diva just had you pegged in under a minute.* Sam held the phone awkwardly to his ear, head pounding, wishing he'd had four or five Tylenol 3s.

"Dean?" he barked, recognizing the way he said it. Like their father when Dean had made a rare mistake. *Fuck, tone it down, man.*

Lucky this time, though, because the response was "'Allo? Sam?" And Sam could just imagine Dean grabbing the phone from Béatrice Viau's hand, because almost immediately his brother's voice flooded the line, "Sam? Sammy, is that you?"

Oh, god, he sounded so worried, so *thrashed*, that Sam felt all the anger leach out of him. He swallowed what had just leapt up his throat before whispering, "Yeah, I'm okay. Where are you?" and was distressed at how young he sounded with that question. Had just gone from Angry Dad to Kid Brother in two seconds flat.

"Jesus Christ, Sammy, I'm on some highway halfway to Montebello. Who the hell was that on the phone? Sounded like she was on crack or something. Is this place a fucking drug house?"

And despite everything, Sam started to laugh. He thought he might have a hard time stopping.

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Off to Vancouver on the 1:00 ferry. I hear they have hi-speed internet access there, so feel free to leave me a note.

ETA: just got off the phone with [lemmypie](#), who is filming a scene at a fairground...in Maple Ridge. Maple Ridge. Sigh. Middle of nowhere, stripmall central.

## Chapter Seven - I Choose You

Posted August 5th, 2006

Sundry details: Generally gen-fic, OFC (and she's, like, a *contortionist*. Cool, eh?), adult-ish themes (read as: sex) and language, characters get banged up, much angst (but this chapter, heart-breaking resolution!). Oh, and hell, you'd best beware, cause that Céline Dion? She's some twisted. WIP, will be 9 chapters. Set before the season one-ending arc. Written for the [spn\\_north](#) challenge.

Tip o' the hat: It's summer, and the betas ([jmm001](#) and [lemmypie](#)) definitely have way better things to do than read this piffle...and yet they continue to aid and abet. They keep me honest, which is the biggest trick of all.

Disclaimer #1: Dear CW/Mr. Kripke: Please forgive me for tearing, folding and otherwise mutilating your characters.

Disclaimer #2: Dear Ms. Dion: Please forgive me for depicting your husband as a demon. I'm sure he's great in the kitchen.

STF: The Winchester brothers follow Sam's disturbing dreams of bison and demons to Québec, where they encounter Céline Dion performing at a Cirque du Soleil casino extravaganza. Dean begins an affair with an ambiguously intentioned Cirque contortionist; Sam's visions reveal that Dean is in danger if Sam doesn't sacrifice himself to a mythological buffalo. Dean is targeted for special attention by the non-demonic, but definitely suspicious, Etienne Marcoux, the Cirque clown. Isolated from a touchy Dean, Sam discovers that Céline Dion's highest note opens an evil gateway, a talent that her manager and demon-possessed husband, René, is exploiting. Just as Sam discovers this, a Cirque contortionist falls on top of him, injuring him badly. He wakes up in Château Montebello, a luxury hotel some distance from the casino, Céline Dion hovering over him.

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Sam snapped the phone shut, held it in his hand. Without any clothes, this was his lifeline to the world, and he wasn't about to hand it back to Céline Dion, who bounced on the balls of her feet, jittery as a caged marmoset angling for a bag of peanuts.

He had an hour, max.

An hour before all hell was going to break loose, delivered in the untimely form of his brother, who had sounded as though he'd cheerfully rip Château Montebello apart beam by hand-hewn beam if his brother wasn't delivered to him intact and unbruised *this very instant*. Sam knew this mood of Dean's, this directed and contained fury, subtle as a Scud missile. Sam didn't particularly like to think what Dean might do to him for being such an idiot in the first place.

He had one or two distracting bits of information for Dean, not the least of which was the fact that René was possessed by a demon, and *that* was something they could work with. Sam glanced at the diva, who stared back expectantly, unblinking as a sphinx.

“Is Mr. Dean coming to our party?” As though that was the most important thing going on.

Sam narrowed his stare. “When was the last time you prayed?” he side-stepped, mostly because he could not imagine Dean at Céline Dion’s party, not in any way that didn’t result in arrest. He didn’t think she’d be fazed by non-sequiteurs.

He was rewarded with a dazzling smile. How the hell did those teeth get so white? And so...monumental?

“I go to church *almosteveryday*.” Then her brow scrunched up. She’d confused herself. “When I am in Montréal. ‘ere?” Gestured again, more game show drama. This beautiful room at the Château Montebello could be yours...if the price is right! “But ‘ere? I go to the little chapel. I ‘ave a priest wit me at *alltimes*.” She bent over Sam, took his hand in both of hers and pressed it to her breast. “You wish a priest? Oh my god, you are dying! I will get a priest for you! *C’est mon plaisir!*”

With that declaration, she flapped out the room into the hallway beyond. A moment later, through the closed door, Sam heard, “Good morning, Mr. Armstrong! And you ‘ave my little Pitou! *Bonjour Pitou, opelaie!*” Little yapping barks. “Mummy will take you for a walk. A hot day, *il fait chaud, n’est-ce pas? Même à l’ombre.*”

So much for the priest. Still, good to know she had one and used one. If Céline Dion was possessed by a demon, Sam would eat his cell phone. No way anything was getting a foothold on that one. Immediately, he flung the covers aside, not considering the fact that he’d just had his hand against Céline Dion’s breast because that was pretty much beyond his painkiller-addled faculties, and got to his feet. He swayed a little, reached out his free hand to steady himself against the dresser.

Taking a deep breath, he willed away the phantom bayou-big mosquitoes swarming around his head and found his clothes in a drawer, cleaned and pressed – *Dean is going to die laughing, right after he kills me*. No sign of blood on the clothes. That was good. An absence of blood; one less thing to set Dean off.

Sam had some difficulty dressing one-handed, but managed. When he was done, he lay back down on the bed, head both pounding and swimming. He glanced at his watch. Forty-five minutes, maybe less, because Dean would be driving fast, which was yet another thing Sam didn’t want to think about. Driving fast with Béatrice in the car.

Not much he could do about that now. Now, or yet.

Scrubbed his face with the good hand, wincing with the pain of stitches and bruises. He couldn’t sleep, was jumpy. The drugs hadn’t kicked in and the thought of René and his demon-blackened eyes came back to him with force. A demon, another demon. When had there ever been so many of the suckers to deal with?

A savage slicing pain sheared through his head, not connected to the bruising or to the stitches, white hot, a fire poker jabbed through his temple. Drawing a breath to scream, he rolled in a ball, fingers of his right hand twisting in his hair, an instinctual desire to keep himself in this reality.

*The buffalo – the zubir – stands over him, huffing slightly, eyes rolling red. Saliva drips white from its mouth and snout as it swings its head back and forth. Lowers its head, close enough to*

*touch, if Sam reaches out. He'd sooner reach out to touch living flame, the business end of a blowtorch.*

The breath he'd taken he now released, not in a scream, but in a series of pants, the kind animals made when they are injured. He saw the room, the beams, and tried to keep focus on them, because he couldn't control this, didn't want this.

*A shrill hum vibrates through the air, and Sam thinks it is the slash of insect noise, but it is the note, high, almost too high to hear. On the hill, far away, a roiling mass of sooty black, malevolent, red contained within. A movement, all movement, but this one purposeful, and Sam sees wolves crest the hill behind René-demon, large ones, eyes glowing yellow.*

In the expensive hotel room, Sam clawed at his head, wondering that he wasn't pulling out his hair in clumps. The noise he made was recognizable: a whimper.

*He can't breathe, but has to because now he must run. Has to run with the zubir, who is leading his herd away from the wolves. Towards the cliff. Run.*

No, Sam thought, just as the white light enveloped him, drowning the pain, soothing everything. No, you're stronger than this. And didn't know if he was talking to the zubir, or to himself.

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"Sam!" Pounding that might break down the door, *could* break down the door. Would, if Sam didn't respond this second.

"Shit, Dean, I'm here!" Sam called from the bed, where he lay propped up on a Himalayan pile of pillows, a cold cloth on his forehead. He'd gotten that after he'd recovered from the vision, seen what a mess the left side of his face was, thought that Dean wasn't likely to notice blood splattered clothing in any case, since his face looked like the meat counter at a grocery store.

The door, carved oak, heavy as a field artillery piece, creaked ominously. It was not a variety easily forced, and Dean might well fracture his shoulder. Goddamn, it was like arguing with a Pamplona bull. But that brought up images of running wild with beasts, which was too fresh, too raw. Too real and imminent.

"Dean, I'm coming!" he shouted again, then muttered, "Take a fucking pill." He got to his feet, opened the door, and released Dean into the room with a lion tamer's fabricated calm.

Dean had the good sense to come alone. Sam leaned against the door once he'd shut it, and Dean looked him up and down, eyes resting on Sam's left arm, bound professionally across his chest, a line of neat dark stitches dividing his brow. Dean's mouth worked, pursed a little, like he was sucking a hard candy.

"What happened?" The question wasn't the first thing that had crossed his mind, obviously, but Sam was thankful for the attempt at civility after the furious drive and the door pounding.

"Could we...?" Sam murmured, taking a few steps to the sunny sitting area, which overlooked the lawns and the river. Though he looked as though he'd rather be doing just about anything

else, Dean sat, worried the ring on his right hand with the fingers of his left, not looking at Sam, waiting. He'd asked a question, after all.

And he deserved an answer, Sam reckoned. He did.

"I've been having dreams," Sam started. And once started, he didn't stop. Sam told Dean about the zubir running over the cliff's edge, but also about himself running with them. Looked up when he said that, but Dean's attention was still on his ring, though a line had formed between his hooded eyes. "The dreams always end that way, with me going over the cliff. With the buffalo. With that big buffalo. Can't tell yet, but I don't know if I'm supposed to save him, or if he's going to save me. Or if he's going to kill me. All I know is that I'm going to have to get myself in front of him and..." chose his word with caution, knowing what it might ignite. "...submit. I don't have a choice."

"The zubir," Dean said, but quietly, seriously, almost to himself. "So, your dreams? You think they're coming true?"

Sam didn't miss the slight quality of fear in Dean's voice, folded into the question softly, like their dad used to slip whiskey into his morning coffee.

At least Dean would meet his eyes. Asking. Sam nodded. "Yeah, but that's not all."

Not by a long shot. He told Dean about the diva's high debilitating note, the one that might have caused the acrobat to fall, that certainly had caused Sam's head to reverberate with the unleashing of some dark power. Demon-possessed René and the threat he'd made, how Céline was too scattered to be possessed herself, was probably just a tool in the hands of the demon. What Etienne had said about just setting things in motion, before Sam had blacked out next to the dead acrobat.

In the end, the only thing Sam didn't say, couldn't say, was that Dean was in danger if Sam didn't do what he must. What good would that accomplish, other than driving Dean to rash acts?

Sometime in all that, Dean got to his feet, paced the small space between window and fireplace, finally turned to Sam when the words had dried up like water on summer pavement. "We're going."

"What?" Sam's brows met. "We can't go. Didn't you just hear what I said? We're dealing with a demon."

Dean didn't move, only looked at Sam as though he was a determined child in the candy aisle. "Yeah, I know. A demon that's threatening *you*, a buffalo that's going to kill *you*, and a fucking singer who can blast a note that only *you* can hear. Sounds as though *you* need to be as far away from here as possible." He shrugged. "We can put some distance behind us, do the research, got lots of demon-lore literature in the back of the car, and I can come back to do whatever's necessary. But you?" And he shook his head, much in the same way their father always had.

Sam took a deep breath, but didn't react as he once had to that head-shake, which Dean was obliviously borrowing from their father. He nodded back, and could see that Dean was surprised, that it took the advantage from him.

Because Sam knew that if he went along now, he at least had the opportunity of talking Dean out of it later; if they argued this minute, Sam would lose. Dean was focused, and Sam injured. Odds were against Sam right this minute. He scanned the room a last time, somewhat reluctant to leave it, Dean waiting for him in the hallway.

“Anybody you gotta say goodbye to? That freak on the phone, maybe?” Dean asked, clipped and sullen, for all he’d won the contest. Worried, and hiding it behind sarcasm.

“Nope.” Sam stood tall beside Dean, forced him to look up. “You?” Meant something else, of course. Meant Béa, though Dean had yet to even mention her name.

Watched as his brother shrugged, could read the sadness and determination in the set of his shoulders. “I’m good,” and Sam knew from Dean’s bluff resignation that he’d done this a million times, left without saying goodbye. Left without acknowledging that something important had slipped away, or been stolen. The only difference this time was that Sam was here to witness it.

They stared at each other, and Sam wouldn’t prod further, because he knew this was as close as Dean was going to come to saying it: *I choose you*.

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When they had first arrived, even as Béa had been enveloped in the arms of her fellow Cirque performers, Dean had turned away, been more preoccupied with finding his brother than figuring out what demon was killing acrobats. His ranking system was pretty straightforward, easy to remember most days. Exterminating demons came somewhere below family in peril, though higher than exorcising poltergeists or even killing werewolves or shapechangers. Offing demons topped the evil list, more or less. None of them came close to protecting Sam, or their father.

He’d never told their father that, had already visualized the argument that would result. He wasn’t stupid, not when it came to John Winchester.

But Dean hadn’t figured out where Béa stood in the mix and now he wasn’t going to have time to work it out. Some regret about that. He would *admit* to regret, but nothing more. The place beyond regret was a foreign country and Dean didn’t want to get a passport. Still, he answered Sam’s searching question – and fuck it if Sam didn’t always come up with the searching question – with a practiced insouciance, and knew he was fooling precisely no one, not even himself. Still, Sam was wise enough to let it go, followed him meekly to the car, even though Dean knew that his little brother was only working out how he’d convince Dean to go back.

Dean was not coming back, not this century. Sam dreaming of his own death? Dreaming that he’d have to sacrifice himself? Okay, Sam had used the word ‘submit’ but when submission resulted in death, that was the classic definition of ‘sacrifice’ in Dean’s massive book of shitty ideas. And Dean wasn’t about to let Sam sacrifice himself, not for anything. If he could, Dean would come back and clean things up, but Sam wasn’t going to get anywhere near this.

The twinned notions of *leaving* and *not coming back* seemed so goddamn clear for nearly fifteen whole minutes, the amount of time it took them to get in the Impala, find their way out the parking lot, wind through the wooded drive that connected with the main road. All the time it took Sam to see the sign across the road from Château Montebello, the one for Parc Oméga.

Dean hadn't seen the sign on the way in, had been too concerned, too worked up about the phone call and about Sam. It seemed ludicrous now that he'd somehow missed the huge advertisement for the game park, the enormous wooden sign that was more of a sculpture than a wayfinder. Green paint and yellow cedar, emblazoned with the head of an antlered elk and a biggest fucking visual representation of a buffalo Dean had ever seen.

Dean slammed on the brakes, scattering loose gravel on the roadside. Both brothers stared without speaking for a good minute, all the while the Impala rumbling, yearning for the open road almost as much as Dean was. Sinking heart, though, right through to the seat cushion. Damn. He almost didn't want to turn to Sam, because he knew what he'd see. Dean had thought he'd won this one, and he was wrong.

Sam: slight smile turning dimples into weapons sharp as knives, dark eyes not precisely dancing, not yet, because this was serious and Sam wouldn't want to piss him off, not on purpose. But raised brows, the *we've got no choice, Dean* look, the *how can you turn tail and run from this* look. The *let's go kick some demon ass* look, which was so eerily similar to Sam's *let's go to the library* look that Dean had always had trouble figuring out the difference.

It cost sixteen dollars to get in. Each. *Drive through the front gates, here's the map of the twelve hundred square acre park, only get out on the designated safe trails, and tune into the English language radio station for an audio tour. Gates close at 5:30, so you have a few hours.*

*Thanks very fucking much,* Dean thought, forking over what seemed like an extraordinary amount of money to look at animals.

"Do you want a bag of carrots?" the clerk at the entrance booth asked. "Only five dollars."

"No," Dean returned scathingly, jammed his change into his wallet and spun it onto the dashboard.

"Yes!" Sam said at the same time, looked at Dean meaningfully.

*Fuck, I wish I was the psychic, because I don't get where you're going with this at all, Sammy.*

Sam at least knew enough to pay for the carrots himself, that Dean wasn't going to pay that kind of money for fucking root vegetables. They drove slowly in behind a family van from New Hampshire, the kids' hands out the windows, brandishing carrots, war-bound savages.

It was a hot day, and Dean rolled down his window all the way, even though the booth clerk had advised against it. Sam shot him a look; hell, they had enough arms in the back to make the buffalo slaughter in *Dances with Wolves* look like a PETA rally. *Lighten up, Sammy. It's hot, you've brought me to a game park, and I'm keeping my window rolled down. I hunt really bad shit, I'm not going to be intimidated by a bunch of deer.*

At first, it was boar, not deer. Lots and lots of boar, surrounding the van in front. Dean shifted uncomfortably, wondering if game park etiquette precluded leaning on the horn. Man, they're pigs, people. Not unicorns.

"Don't," Sam cautioned, and Dean saw a thread of sweat roll down the side of Sam's bruised face.

“You reading my mind again?” Dean muttered, not knowing if he meant it. It just came out.

Sam chuckled softly. “I don’t need to read your crummy mind, dude. You’re like an open book. Besides,” and he looked over, eyes now dancing in a the way that only dark eyes could, “I can’t read minds.” A little pause, enough to know that Sam was talking about more than honking the horn. “You know that, right?”

Dean took a breath, didn’t know what to say, stared at the big mama pig ahead who was putting her hooves against the outside of the van, scratching it all to hell. If those little fuckers put so much as a hairy snout on his car, he’d open up with more than a salt gun. Shrugged. “If you could read minds, you’d be wearing a turban and hunched over a crystal ball at every county fair from here to Oregon. We’d make a killing.”

Sam laughed out loud and something shifted sideways in Dean. Something known and familiar locked into place, though Dean would have had trouble naming what it was, if he’d been inclined to name it, which he wasn’t. Whatever it was, it felt good and easy and it had to do with how he’d always been with Sam and how Sam had always been with him. Slightly different configuration, a cut bond re-tied, but secure and *tight*.

The van ahead moved slowly forward, the childish shrieks faint in the still, close air, and the pigs turned en masse to look expectantly at the Impala. Dean gunned it, didn’t care if he took out a few of them. Sam made a noise low in his throat, but didn’t say anything. After all, they were here for bigger game.

First, though, they had to dutifully tail after the mini-van through the wolf pens, the bear enclosure, up several dusty hills through packs of hungry fallow deer and elk.

The elk – *wapiti*, Sam corrected, studying the circuit map the booth clerk had given them – were big, and they were surprisingly ravenous, considering they’d been hand-fed bunny food for hours on end. The mini-van removed itself to a rest stop, and the Impala rumbled noisily through a sunny maple-shaded glade. Dean braked as an elk wandered lazily across the road, stopped and looked at them.

*A Wild Animal Kingdom ambush*, Dean thought, recognizing the maneuver.

Sam was studying the piece of paper in his hand. Entirely typical – there could be monsters converging on the car and as long as Sam had a map to consult, no way would he look up.

Sam also had the carrots on his lap. A honey-liquid smile spread across Dean’s face, and he slowly, silently, rolled up his window, ignoring the ten or so elk that had wandered over to the car.

“Looks like the buffalo pasture is just down the next hill.” Sam said, gesturing absently to the map as Dean arranged his features to one of tepid interest. Over Sam’s shoulder, a huge antlered head was nosing in through the window, saliva dripping from its mouth and worse from its flaring nostrils.

*C’mon Sam, please show me some inborn innate reflex to clear and fucking present danger.*

The antlers prevented the elk from actually getting into the car through Sam’s window, but it was the drip of saliva on Sam’s good shoulder that finally alerted him to the fact that a huge ungulate

was jonesing for the carrots on his lap. Sam startled badly, enough to make Dean bark with laughter. Sam ripped a carrot from the bag and the elk took it, withdrew with all the steady grace of a huge puppet. Exit stage right. More where he came from, though. A *cervidae* mob scene.

Sam rolled up his window as though harpies were attacking. Dean's amusement faded quickly as twenty or more of the elk surrounded the car, licking the windows like Mother Nature's squeegee kids. "No more carrots!" Dean shouted at Sam, using the same logic he had with panhandlers and buskers, though his death stare was less effective on elk than it was on guitar-players mauling *House of the Rising Sun* on a street corner.

He revved the engine, hoping to encourage the elk to move on their own accord, knowing that hitting an animal that size would make a big fucking mess of the Impala. *I can wash the car*, he said under his breath. *All this fucking elk snot will wash off*. The elk wandered away, not really unduly alarmed by the ominous growl of a V-8 engine as wielded by a demon-hunter, all sense of what was dangerous worn away by vapid human kindness. *Wild* and *kind* did not easily co-exist, Dean thought as the elk dropped a piece of the carrot to the ground and an intrepid boar piglet scooped it up.

They crested the hill, and the forest opened onto a long narrow meadow that ended naturally at a steep cliff, which dropped precipitously away to some region beyond Dean's sight. In the center of the open field, a bare-limbed tree grasped the dirt, no longer living, dead branches fingering a new relationship with sky. A few cars stopped further down the road, surrounded by more elk. Further away, nestled between hill and forest, as though they were observing the scene below, were more than thirty buffalo, dark blotches like cloud-shadows against the sun-bleached grass. Dean idled the car, just looking, hearing Sam's breath hitch beside him and not wanting to look.

First of all, they were big. And the biggest one of all was *huge*, more than two thousand pounds, head as big as a boulder. Finally, Dean turned to Sam. He was ashen and Dean fought the urge to say 'fuck it' and drive out of Parc Oméga as fast as the Impala would take them, keep going to the border, drive through that without stopping as well.

He couldn't. They were in this together, and he wasn't the boss of Sam, and Sam was right to see this through. He watched as Sam visibly swallowed, and some color returned to his face. Saw the little nod Sam gave, as though he'd just lectured himself on the very same thing.

"Down there," Sam said instead, pointing with a finger to a gently sloping shoulder of the road next to the blasted tree, where Dean could park the car in the tall grass. They rolled to a stop, Dean's better than 20/20 vision picking out the signs in both English and French, warning of the cliff and reminding people not to get out of their cars, no matter how appealing the idea of running with fucking buffalo was.

The sun was merciless and they rolled down the windows an inch or two. Dean ran a hand across his face, felt the cold sweat there. Almost immediately, the buffalo started to move, came closer, ignoring the other cars parked several hundred yards away. Nothing cute or fuzzy about these things, Dean thought.

The largest of them, the male, with huge horns curved like talons, brushed against the Impala, rocking it as though it was made of paper. Dean swallowed, glanced at his window, where the beast was pressed against it, one eye catching him, red-rimmed and somehow judgmental. He was holding his breath, he realized, letting it out slowly. Like the T-Rex in *Jurassic Park*, the buffalo filled the window, coldly figuring out who was who. Dean couldn't take his eyes from it,

knowing that it somehow was more than a buffalo, manifestly more than that, and that it *knew* him.

The only possible sound that could have taken Dean's attention from the buffalo at the window was the one he now heard: Sam opening his door.

Dean reached across, grabbed a handful of Sam's plaid shirt as though he was pulling him from a wreck, which in a way he was. "Don't you fucking do it," he hissed, staring at the dark eyes, the bruised cheekbone. Alarmed at the resignation he saw there.

With his good hand, Sam pried off Dean's fingers and Dean could have sworn that for one minute Sam was holding his hand for more reason than to simply dislodge him. Trying to *tell* him something, words Dean didn't want to hear.

"It's okay," Sam said. Not 'I'll be okay', or 'Don't worry.' Words more fatalistic than that. Sam's calm determination stunned Dean and he knew he ought to say something, do something to stop him. They had no plan; they were planless. Or he was, anyway.

The buffalo was leaning against Dean's door, all the weight of it and Dean could sooner move a house than get that door open. And it was now cold, goddamn it, and Dean knew this kind of unnatural cold on a summer's day, made the hair on his bare arms lift in vestigial response. Not ghost-cold, though. Colder than that, more immediate, and bigger, somehow. As Dean glanced at the buffalo eye not two inches from his own, Sam escaped out his open door, sliding from his brother's concerned grasp like a bar of soap in a bathtub.

Through the windshield, Dean watched as Sam came around the front of the car, his unbound arm splayed wide – *what, like the buffalo thinks you have a gun, Sammy?* – and stood silently, waiting. Beside Dean, the big buffalo moved slightly, and a groan shuddered the car. He didn't need a monitor to hear his own heart. Calculating the distance between himself and Sam's open door, factoring in the stick and the console, he knew he couldn't reach Sam before the buffalo did. He slowly reached under the seat. *Never keep all your weapons in one place*, he heard his father's words in his head as though John was sitting in the passenger seat.

Drew out the Glock, slid the safety off.

Would it make a dent in the buffalo? In something so big it made Sam look like a lanky kindergartener? Dean felt sick, knew that a shot through the window would be worthless. And Sam just *stood* there.

The buffalo moved from the door, took a step to Sam – who had come all the way around the front of the Impala, was no more than six feet from the fucking thing. Dean shivered; the cold coming off the thing was incredible. The buffalo snorted, loud enough that Dean jumped. Only a half-second, and he pulled the chrome handle up, shoved open the door with his shoulder and brought the handgun to bear.

Sam met his eyes. Very, very slightly, shook his head once. Sam was calm, returned his stare to the zubir. Was trying to understand, because that's what Sam did. Dean cocked the gun, because that's what he did.

Then the cold faded. Something elemental whisked away. The circumstances weren't right. Something more was needed to make the transaction, whatever fucked-up exchange this was

going to be. Lack of demon, or of high note sung by a diva, Dean had no idea. Dean could see the puzzled look on his brother's face, the one he wore when he didn't know what was expected of him.

On the other hand, it might not be a god staring down Sam in a sacrificial glade anymore, but it was an enormous wild animal, and Dean brought the gun up, wondered where the best place to shoot would be. He was saved from making the decision. With a final snort, a dip of the head, the large buffalo, no longer the *zubir*, moved slowly away, drawing the herd with him.

Dean could breathe again, slumped onto the Impala's seat, rested the gun against his thigh, let off the hammer, slid the safety back on. Held onto it until Sam got back into the car.

Sam was drenched in sweat, was that shaky green color that most people turned before they passed out. "This is the place for it, Dean. Something's missing. I don't think he was ready. Or maybe I wasn't." He didn't seem certain, or determined, or poised. He was young, and scared.

Dean discovered that he didn't have spit in him, was completely dry.

"Demon's part of this, Sam," he said finally. "Said so yourself."

Sam nodded, unhappy to be proven right, perhaps. "Céline Dion said that the room was mine for as long as I needed it."

Dean leaned his forehead against the steering wheel, closed his eyes, the rush of adrenaline started to morph into dyspeptic relief. He bent from the waist, placed the gun under Sam's seat without a word, made sure Sam saw him do it. With the return motion, he shifted the Impala into drive. "Let's figure out René first. Do our homework. We'll narrow it down." Pulled out gently, eyes tracking the progress of the buffalo as they disappeared into the woods. "And we'll settle up with the *zubir* later."

Used 'we'. Hoped Sam noticed.

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Since Dean wasn't a doctor, Sam didn't consider it going against doctor's orders, no matter how strenuously Dean made his argument. A party wouldn't kill Sam. A party might make him feel better. A party would certainly give them opportunity to scope out René in a public place, because they sure as hell weren't making much progress with the traditional research methods.

Dean had ordered a massive meal and charged it to the room. He'd done it with unmitigated glee, ordered things he'd probably never even heard of just to pad the bill. Sam had happily eaten most of it, several moldering books open on the room's mahogany dining table, trying to find the vector between demons and aural-operated apertures and bison. It apparently didn't exist.

His Latin was a bit rusty, however, and it took him about three read-throughs and a lucky break (an errant crumb of greasy foie gras had dropped onto the exact passage he needed) to make a connection he ought to have made about two hours past. In celebration, he swallowed a couple of aspirin with a glass of what might have been champagne. It cost over a hundred Canadian dollars a bottle, whatever it was. Cleared his throat, drawing Dean's attention from slowly ripping leaves off a steamed artichoke.

Dean tossed the leaves into a growing pile, wiped his fingers on the linen napkin that muffled the champagne bottle like a scarf on a cold day. “What? You find something?”

“Yeah,” Sam pointed to a passage in the woodblock-cut, leather bound book that he’d purchased at a garage sale several years back. He was surprised that it was still in the trunk, in fact, considering it was in Latin and didn’t have any of the usual gruesome pictures of demonic torture that Dean had loved as a kid. “Forgot that the root for ‘work’ – you know, *opera*, *operor*, *opes* – is slightly different from ‘opening’, which is sometimes *os*.”

Dean’s face tried to be accommodating, as though forgetting something like that was normal. As though *remembering* that kind of thing was typical. Sam disguised a smile. Dean, disgusted perhaps, returned to his dissection of the artichoke.

“So, if a demon has access to a certain pitch, to a specific tonal vibration, the demon can open up, can tear open communication with dark powers, with a more powerful dark...power...”

“A really, really dark power, all powerful, like?” Dean had come to the fuzzy artichoke heart, science-fiction weird, something that would kill an away-team member on a Star Trek episode. His expression pondered the age-old question: why did people put this stuff in their mouths? It was the same expression Sam witnessed whenever he suggested sushi. “Powerful dark powers, more powerful than other dark powers?”

“Shut up. I mean that the demon might use a specific note...”

“...like the one Céline Dion let loose earlier today...”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, the demon could use that to open communication with a higher dark...power.”

“Are we talking Satan, Sam? Like big Devil, Dark Lord, all that?” Dean had out the hunting blade Sam had seen him use to eviscerate several unimaginable monsters and with which he sometimes trimmed his fingernails. He picked off the fluffy choke, turned the heart over in his fingers, brow furrowed.

“I thought you didn’t believe in God or the Devil, Dean,” Sam questioned softly.

“Guy’s gotta keep his bases covered.” Offered the mutilated heart to Sam, who shook his head slightly, then tossed it onto the pile of leaves, cleaned his knife on the tablecloth. Sighed, glanced at Sam as he did so. “So, our demon’s got hold of René, who uses Céline Dion’s four octave range to open up the gates of hell. Have I got that right, Sam? Because if that’s the case, I’m selling it to the *Inquirer*. Fuck this demon-hunting business.”

Sam turned the book around, even though he knew Dean’s Latin was abysmal. He tapped the passage. “See? Demon uses the note, along with a blood sacrifice. Each time the gate is opened, the demon receives more power. Each time, the kind of sacrifice becomes more explicit, more demanding.”

He had Dean’s attention. “Starts out with chickens, ends up with beautiful girls? Okay, but how does the buffalo fit? Is it higher up on the sacrifice scale than circus acrobats?” Glared at Sam, green eyes arctic bright. “Than psychic geekboys?”

Sam didn't have an answer to that. He knew where he could get one, though. "The party. René will be there. Let's ask him."

Maybe too direct, because Dean slammed the knife down. They'd already had this argument. "You're like a dog with a bone, Sam. Doctor said you should rest up. I'll go." Looked at the book. No pictures to help. "Any exorcisms for this kind of demon, Sam?"

Back to square one. "The doctor didn't tell me to rest," Sam said, not rising to the proffered bait. "You told me to rest. You're officially my boss, not my doctor, Mr. Dean." He got to his feet, fighting for fleeting dignity. His shoulder was sore, and his head worse, but the painkillers took the edge off and he wanted this to be over. "And the exorcism? Yeah, there's one." Gestured to his forehead, hoped it didn't look too stupid, considering how banged up he was. "It's all up here."

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"You 'ave come!" Céline announced, raising one arm, turning the hand and drawing it down in a perfect simulation of welcome. The sort of welcome you might get if you happened to have wandered onto a Broadway production of *All That Jazz*.

In some ways, the entire room was like a stage set: immaculately lit with candles and tiny halogen lights, large mirrors reflecting dancing flame, the mood somber and restrained, despite the occasional loud outburst emanating from their hostess. The room was just the right size to accommodate fifty people, some standing, others seated on white leather chairs and sofas scattered artfully on the white shag carpet. Red lilies bristled in crystal vases, lances after a bloody tournament. Large French doors were open to the night, where a private deck offered views of forest and river. A white piano the size of a Cadillac sat unused; music played softly on an expensive stereo, inconsequentially, the aural equivalent of eggshell white wall paint.

Dean spotted a tray full of raw oysters on the buffet table, some kind of roasted bird with the feathers reinserted up its ass, a platter of gleaming smoked salmon the color of blood. *Jesus, glad I ate before I got here.* The artichoke had been bad enough.

He craned his neck to get a good look at the crowd; nowhere did he see any sign of René. Where was the asshole? Usually, he wasn't far from his golden-egg producing goose. And the goose was very close to Dean at the moment. *Veryvery* close.

Céline Dion came up to his shoulder, maybe, though she seemed bigger, seemed huge, her head ungainly the same way that the buffalo's head was, strangely stuck onto her body as though there'd been a mix up at the factory.

"You are Mr. Dean?" She waved him down towards her, and kissed him on both cheeks, her lips brushing past his cheek, a perfectly-executed air kiss. The *bis*, Béa had informed him at some point. The diva's perfume was sweet, clung to him. She was dressed for performance, as though a spotlight might suddenly find her, had on a sequined blue outfit that Dean recognized, that he'd cursed for inflicting pain. Behind her glittering blue shoulder, Sam cast pale glances, bruises livid against his white skin. *Young, he always looks so young when he's hurt.*

As usual, Dean was forgetting to be mad at Sam. Damn it, he couldn't stay mad for more than three minutes. "Uh, yeah," he agreed, going with it, understanding that the diva wasn't actually listening to him.

"Oh, Béatrice! *Il arrive!*" Céline called and Dean used her brief inattention to disappear between two of the larger Lithuanians, who milled about with glasses of clear vodka, generating dark stares and muttered imprecations. They were as out of place as he was, Dean noted with satisfaction.

But Dean had business, didn't want the distraction, had hoped that Béa might not be here, though that was an empty hope. He caught sight of Sam, now talking with Tadeusz, Béa at the Lithuanian's side, seemingly hiding from Céline. Still no sign of René. In evading both Béa and the diva, Dean stepped onto the dark balcony, night now fully embracing this part of the world, the river glittering in the distance, air clear and pine-scented, making Dean think: car.

Though a salivating elk could sneak up on Sam unawares, Dean prided himself on being more alert. He leaned casually on the railing, peered into the darkness, heard the faint noise of conversation. The music faded, then he heard someone start playing the piano. Heard more than that. So he didn't turn when he said, "I was wondering when you'd show up."

And Etienne's soft chuckle sounded more amused than evil, though it was probably both.

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René played the piano. Not just any run-of-the-mill piano, of course, but a white baby grand with two overflowing vases of some kind of tropical flower Sam didn't recognize, but that looked expensive. Not the sort sold at supermarkets.

The manager-demon been waiting for Sam to come over, obviously, sent away an attentive couple who'd been listening to his innocuous tinklings as soon as Sam stopped by the open box. Sam studied how the felt hammers rose and fell, marveling at humankind's ingenuity even as every fiber of his being vibrated like the strings. Struck nerves. He recognized it, similar to how he'd felt in front of the buffalo today. But not quite the same, because he'd felt a connection to the zubir, and there was no connection here, none whatsoever.

The demon looked up, eyes normal, if a little opaque.

"You came," he murmured, voice low, sound of fresh grave. Unsurprised.

"Leave him alone," Sam said. It was all he had to say, in fact.

"I don't think you understand," the demon continued, light, dinner table conversation, might as well be talking about the latest reality-show singers, or the comparative bubble size of San Pellegrino and Perrier. "You were thinking of leaving today." Not a question. Sam swallowed, knew he had a twitch when he got angry, felt it now.

"I didn't."

"You won't. I'll prove to you why." And the demon looked up briefly, the fingers tracing patterns across the keys that weren't quite music, weren't quite noise, but something in between.

“I don’t need any proof.”

“Oh, I think you do,” and the eyes swirled black, and Sam took a step back, breath coming hard, oxygen turned suddenly to mustard gas. “I think you need to know what you’re dealing with.” Looked back down to the piano. “Meet me by the tree after the party.”

No need to say which tree. There was only one, blasted and lonely in the middle of the dark plain that ended with the cliff. In the forests of ancient Lithuania and Germany and Scandinavia, such a tree would have been hung with strips of youthful flesh to summon and appease the zubir. *What was missing*. Sam had seen the site of his dreams today, the buffalo plain in Parc Oméga, but did not know the moment of reckoning, not until now. Tonight, it was going to be tonight, and he wasn’t ready.

Sam shook his head. Despite his best intentions, despite all the threats, he found that he didn’t want to do this alone, after all. Which meant he had to stall. “I’m not stupid. No way.”

But the demon just smiled. “I think you will. Once you understand what you could lose.” The tune he was playing changed into a minor key, and what had been innocuous now became sinister. “He’s so predictable, your brother. So easy to find.” And in the space of time it took René to glance at the piano keys, the eyes had returned to normal and the music paused. “Now, what can I play for you?”

And suddenly Sam realized he had no idea where Dean was.

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“Why are you still here?” Etienne asked, coming up to lean against the railing with Dean, though he put his back to it, tipped his expensively coiffed head to look at the stars. “I thought you’d be long gone.”

A good question, Dean thought, not looking at the clown. “Job’s not done,” Dean answered after a long moment of silence. “Why are you still here?”

Another laugh, genuinely amused. “*La même chose*,” Etienne answered with a flash of teeth. “Same here. Can’t quite seem to leave the party.”

“You work for him?” Dean chanced.

Etienne shrugged, as Dean suspected he would. “I don’t work for anybody.” And this was a game: one question, one answer. A bizarre round of truth or dare. Again.

“Do you and that brother of yours have a plan?” Etienne wondered aloud, all smiles. Dean felt like punching him.

Instead, he cocked his head to one side, grim smile in response, teeth gritted behind lips. “Kinda,” he admitted.

“It’s dangerous, you know. You should have a plan. What do you Americans call it? An exit strategy.”

Dean's turn. "And Béa? Who does she work for?" It wasn't really important, not in any way that counted. He could have asked so many other things.

This time, Etienne didn't laugh. He turned to Dean, was hardly a physical threat, was slight, wiry. All sinew and bone and nerve. His eyesight slowly adjusting to the dark, Dean could make out Etienne's quick lick of his lips. "I told your brother. You're your own worst enemy. Can't see what's in front of you." Sighed sadly, and it infuriated Dean.

His hands balled into fists and Etienne laughed again, a long peal. "Can't think it through, can't argue with it, can't get to the bottom of it. Might as well hit it. Good evening, Dean Winchester." Waited for Dean to take a swing and because the clown wanted it, Dean denied him.

Denied Etienne out of spite, which wasn't really Dean's style, but he'd make allowances for this fucker. Etienne patted him once on the shoulder, slowly made for the party room. Stopped at the doorway and looked back, interest kindling in his eyes. Dean crushed his anger, pushed it down like one of those springing practical joke snakes in a can. *Figure it out, Winchester. He wants you to get mad.*

After Etienne left, Dean stood on the balcony for another few minutes, not wanting to be part of the warmth inside, the weirdness inside. Every once in awhile, he'd hear a bray of diva-laughter and cringed.

Let it come to him: They were entertaining. He and Sam *amused* Etienne, which was his point, was his whole fucking reason for being.

By the time Sam found him outside, frantic with boyish worry – *where were you, dude?* – Dean had worked it out. There was only one thing Etienne could be, and Dean didn't quite know how to handle it, because this was god territory, and like the zubir, it was a little beyond the garden-variety poltergeist.

Sam had his buffalo. Dean? Well, Dean had a Trickster.

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When they were kids, Sam often stayed up too late watching monster movies, and so Dean got pretty good at putting him to bed. Sam was so tired, so done in, that it was almost effortless. Tonight, one little remonstrance, 'but I'm not tired' and two more painkillers dry-swallowed, and Dean could have practically pointed his forefinger against Sam's chest and pushed him into bed.

Dean pulled open the hide-a-bed, considered it balefully as Sam shifted restlessly on the big bed, his one good arm flung wide. Dean was feeling many things, but none of them could he identify as *tired*. Sore. Worried. So alert he was almost alarmed. It was hot in the room because he hated the cool ersatz air of the a/c and had turned it off and opened a window. Wanted more of the pine smell, realized it reminded him of their father's car, now his car, which was weird and didn't bear thinking about too long or too hard.

Wanted a night swim. He'd clocked too many years traveling alone, and impromptu swims were one way to alleviate the boredom and the heat. Gave him something to do that wasn't killing or

preparing to kill, or cleaning up from a kill. Stolen swims were clean, and he sometimes needed that.

An unknown river at night, though, that was just stupid, was asking for trouble, and he didn't plan on dying that way, a headline in a small-town paper, 'Tourist drowns in local current'. Or whatever the French translation of it would be. This place had a pool, he could see it from their window, a later addition to the old hotel, enclosed on three sides since the weather around here would only allow outside swimming for about two months of the year. It was past midnight so he brought a piece of plastic and a paperclip, his make-do keys to anywhere.

The pool was huge, and the lights from under the bluegreen water lit the otherwise darkened poolroom, illuminating a pile of towels, a diving board, a sitting area with wrought iron furniture, a wet bar and a massage table. He found the light switch, killed the pool lights so it was completely dark, the only illumination coming from through the windows. He put one shoe in the door, didn't want to get locked in if he was in a hurry. The one solid wall was faced with rough timber, signifying this was a hunting lodge, something that he found perversely funny. A hunting lodge with four stars and an Olympic sized pool.

As he pulled his t-shirt over his head, Dean glanced through one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, could see their room three stories above. A hollow silence permeated the space, only the sound of lapping water and Dean stripped down to skin, didn't bother to keep the grin at bay. Fear of getting caught added pleasure to it, of course.

He'd done about twenty laps when something in the sound quality changed, altered, and even though his ears were full of water, he was almost waiting for this, he realized. Had been on alert for a reason. Shook drops from his hair, treading water in the deep end, turned to where a slight figure sat by the poolside, feet trailing in the shallows.

He took a deep breath, dove under swam up to the edge, emerged by her feet, but did not touch, only rested his elbows on the tiled surface. It was too dark to see her face, but he thought that might be a good thing.

"Do you always find me?" he asked.

Béa sighed. Nodded. Reached out a hand to rest on his head. A convulsive spasm of need coursed through him, like being hit by lightning. *Shit.*

"You okay?" He hadn't asked earlier, when he'd dropped her off with the other performers. She'd lost a friend today. He'd almost left without saying goodbye, though she wouldn't know that. She probably didn't know that. Actually, he'd likely had it written all over him, transparent fool that he was.

Again, she nodded. "That first night?" she said, voice small, but not needing to be big, not in this cavernous space, all reflective surfaces that amplified sound, amplified so many things. She put both her hands between her knees, only wearing a thin white cotton summer dress that was getting wet at the hem. Dean didn't move for fear of stopping her words. "That first night, after my drop. Etienne said," took a breath, "he said, after I came off-stage, that I should look for you. Look for the one with the flower."

There, she'd said it. Even though it was shallow enough to stand, Dean let his body float, didn't want to feel gravity. Still waited, because it was better than asking questions.

“He didn’t say what to do. Just to find you.” She might have been crying; her voice was thick. “It was the only thing he said, but I was scared. He scares me.”

No wonder, Dean thought, thinking of Etienne’s opaque machinations, his whims and needs.

He cleared his throat. “And then I called you.” Damage done, hook in the fish. She had needed to do nothing else. Etienne had required her to do nothing else, had perhaps depended on Dean’s own bad judgment to do the rest. Etienne had set things in motion and could take the comfy chair in the front row.

Still, there were things outside Etienne’s influence, things that had causal relationships to the Trickster’s original act, but no evil of their own. Béa had been sent. Once, and once only. Was the rest – the cupboard under the stage, the Hilton hotel room – fruit from the poisoned tree? Etienne’s reach was not that long. Dean wasn’t a puppet, had his own ideas about who he fucked and didn’t.

“*Je suis désolée. Pardonne-moi, je t’en prie.*” Eyes on him, voice soft. She might not know what her speaking in French did to him. Actually, she probably did. He didn’t care.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. Glanced up at her. Refrained from pulling her into the water. She had to want to come. And pushed off from the edge, flipped like a dolphin, dove down.

When he surfaced, she was nowhere to be seen, only a puddle of white cotton poolside. Then a dark shape, tiny and nimble, glanced against him, sending every hair on his body to pleasant alert. Chaos. She caused chaos.

And he didn’t mind, not one bit.

Captured one fleeting foot, a hand easily going around one ankle, then her arm, and then she was there, was just so present, and he was close enough to the pool’s edge that he could grasp the lip with the tips of his fingers and pull her to the wall, trap her there. She laughed, and then he did and that felt good. Finally, it felt good.

Her eyes, dark as Sam’s, darker, were dancing and he could see her expression was relieved, even as she brought one leg around him at an impossible angle, fit into him like a puzzle piece. Saw all this.

Realized it was too dark to be seeing this, or should be, and then lifted his eyes to the window beyond her shoulder to see the fire that engulfed the third floor of the hotel.

Flames licked from several windows, billowed out like curtains in the breeze. A sound caught in his throat and she turned too.

“That’s my room,” she whispered, horrified. “*Ma chambre. Mon dieu, les autres!*”

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a/n: Yep, it’s really called Parc Oméga, and it’s really pretty much across the street from Chateau Montebello. Last time I was there, the buffalo came right up to the car and looked in, just like

here. And I'm still washing the spit off. Damn wapiti. Many thanks to my SIL, for providing me with the Québécois terms for 'upsadaisy' and the 'little cute dog' nickname.

## Chapter Eight - Leap of Faith

Posted August 19th, 2006

Assorted obligatory comments, ratings and warnings: I think the Amber Alert for hetsex can be turned off for this chapter, but watch out for Céline Dion and Sam mutilation. Oh, and the whole thing is awash with obscenities. WIP, this is the second-to-last chapter, so the tension mounts, and the convoluted plot either implodes or expands or clarifies, depending on how drunk you are when you read it (definitely not how drunk I was when I wrote it). I make no profit from this, only reap the vague pleasure of playing with other people's toys while they're not looking.

Who to blame: As usual, the ever-amazing [lemmypie](#) and [jmm0001](#) have accompanied me through this thrashing about with the Winchester boys: Lemmy tells me what's funny, and JM asks every awkward and difficult question known to humankind. They are gifts from above. Hugs to you both.

STF: Following his disturbing dreams of a demon and a buffalo-god, Sam drags Dean and the Impala across the border into Québec, where they encounter Céline Dion performing at a Cirque du Soleil casino extravaganza. Dean has lots of sex with Béatrice, a contortionist; Sam's increasingly violent visions reveal that he must sacrifice himself to the mythological buffalo. Dean is targeted by Etienne, the Cirque clown who also happens to be an ancient Trickster demi-god. Sam discovers that Céline Dion's highest note – combined with ever-escalating blood sacrifices – opens an evil gateway to hell, a talent that her manager and demon-possessed husband, René, is exploiting. After getting clobbered by a falling acrobat, Sam is rushed to Château Montebello, a 4-star hotel on the banks of the Ottawa River, where the Céline camp has temporary headquarters. Dean joins him, and they discover the nearby Parc Oméga, a wild game park with buffalo and the sacrificial tree from Sam's dream. Unbeknownst to Dean, Sam gets an ultimatum from the demon: meet me at the tree, or I'll kill your brother. Sam ignores this warning, wanting to tackle the demon with his brother's help. That night, Dean meets Béatrice at the swimming pool and understands that the Trickster has used them both; as he figures this out, he spots a fire on Sam's floor.

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He hadn't meant to fall asleep, mostly because he knew Dean wasn't going to stay put. But Sam was too banged up and had stupidly combined painkillers with booze – although that might have been more Dean's design than his own. Despite a demon making threats against his brother, Sam hadn't been able to keep his eyes open.

In any case, he'd had no intention of meeting Réne at the tree – exorcisms were tricky under the best of circumstances, let alone when you were one-handed. No way was he doing it alone, not when his more experienced brother was around. There was no reason. And demons were big fat liars anyway; it could wait till morning, after he'd had a good sleep.

Dean's overactive libido had apparently been counting on that.

A fire alarm combined with the sudden spray of the hotel's sprinkler system jolted Sam awake with more immediacy than the coming of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Disoriented, Sam shook his head, which was an awful idea in light of his earlier encounter with the falling

acrobat. Scanned the room: leftovers wilting on the table, sofa bed extended but not used, the duffle bag open, everything getting wet.

From the sprinklers. Which were on because...Sam needed to make a leap here that his battered brain balked at...because of a *fire*. Where was Dean? Right, nighttime, alone, when a contortionist crooked her finger at him? He knew where Dean was. Down the hall, doing things with a double-jointed circus freak that defied Sam's imagination.

Sam, still fully clothed, ran for the door barefoot. Felt the door first: cool to the touch. The corridor was starting to fill with smoke and he heard screaming from down the hall. He didn't think; he ran, bent over, both because his body was stiff and sore but also because the smoke wasn't quite so bad lower down. Door at the end, cries behind it.

Door hot. Hot, and locked.

He banged on it with his free hand, shouted, "Open the door!"

The doorknob jiggled, and he heard scared sobbing behind it, French words undecipherable. Finally, it opened and a slight girl, delicate as dandelion fluff, fell into Sam's arms, coughing furiously.

Beyond her, the room burst with flames, knocking them both to the ground.

"Chantal!" The girl, bird-light on Sam's chest, turned, face streaked with tears and char, hair smoldering. She was fair and freckled. "Chantal!" she cried again, and tried to get up, tried to get back into the room.

You'd need a flame-retardant suit and oxygen mask to get in there now.

Sam thought to shut the door, prevent the fire from spreading, but something inside the blazing room *moved*. Not a girl, bigger than that. Wreathed in smoke, glowing as ember glowed, brighter than the fire, which was plenty bright. Moving in a way that no human moved. Human-like though, as though the movements were learned, had been studied.

The smoke eddied and fled and René was suddenly there, eyes black, no expression on the wooden face. The demon lifted his hand and Sam stiffened, ready for – what? What was he ready for? A slow smile crept across the demon's face as it turned its wrist. Looked at its watch. *Time*. Sam gasped, and more smoke entered his cramped lungs, applied the principles of *torque* and *pressure* in a graphic physics lesson.

As Sam's coughing fit subsided, he peered through streaming eyes, but he couldn't see René anywhere, either in the burning room or in the corridor.

With effort, Sam stood, dragging the girl with him, looked around for help. More people crowded the hallway now, running, garbled shouts in French and Lithuanian and Ukrainian, and the Chinese girls darted between them all, dazed as rabbits on a night highway. None of them were Dean, and Sam had to clamp down on the thudding fear rattling his chest like an old pinball machine.

The door across the way opened and the huge Lithuanian bodybuilder, Tadeusz, filled the hallway. Face flushed, half-naked, he stepped towards Sam, a small red-head tucked under one protective arm.

“Chantal?” the girl Sam was supporting queried incredulously. “Tadeusz?” Like she couldn’t believe it.

“*Béatrice? Où est Béatrice?*” The red-head shouted at her, and Sam realized these were Béatrice’s roommates.

Sam, holding her elbow tight, pissed off that his left shoulder and arm were still bandaged to his body, started back at the end of the hall, to the room where he’d seen the demon. “Is Béatrice Viau in there?”

The girl shook her head. “*À la piscine. She goes to the swimming.*”

Tadeusz took the blonde from Sam’s pained grasp, picked her up as though she were a bag of groceries.

“Come on!” Tadeusz shouted, and Sam followed, hacking.

Sam smelled singed hair, and creosote and ozone as he stumbled down the corridor, down three flights of stairs, the hotel staff already taking control, trying to determine which guests required rescuing, or burial.

The lawn floodlights were on and hotel staff directed people to a mustering station under a covered picnic area some distance from the main building. The floodlights were superfluous; the entire lawn was lit by the fire, which licked out the windows maliciously, not just one window, but several, working its way from room to room as though it was searching for something. Or someone.

Sam knew where the fire had started though, knew why. Béatrice’s room, because Sam hadn’t come to the tree at the appointed time. A lesson. *See what I can do? So predictable, your brother, so easy to find.* Maybe the demon knew that Dean hadn’t been there, or maybe not. The message was the same.

The lawn was thick with smoke and confusion. *Oh, fuck, where was Dean? Demons lie,* Sam told himself. *They lie, and that demon isn’t coming for Dean.* A bluff, that’s all it was. Felt the fear, deep deep down where it was impossible to acknowledge, instead gripped anger like a weapon, like the hilt of a heavy machete, looked for something to slash apart.

Far away, the sound of sirens ripped the night, then closer, a flutter of lights through the trees, red and blue. First response fire fighters, close local volunteers, guys who managed pet stores and dished out poutine during the day, who became heroes in times of emergency. Further away: the professionals from the larger cities around the tiny hamlet of Montebello. Relief was here and more was coming.

Just not for Sam, who couldn’t see Dean anywhere. Anger mounting steadily, he tagged behind Tadeusz and the girls to the first aid area, immediately recognizable because of the provisions: Dion’s doctor, an oxygen tank, and a first aid kit that could have easily treated the wounded of a besieged Balkan city.

Beside the doctor, a mask over her hyperventilating face, was the diva herself, clutching a furry purse under her arm. A dog, Sam realized, as a tail wagged excitedly and for no reason at all. Sam nodded to Céline, who snatched at his hand, pulled the mask from her face.

Alien eyes in the equine head, wide with a case of upper-case alarm, which in this instance was somewhat called for. “Do you know where René is? ‘ave you seen ‘im?” And she was so concerned, her eyes so full of tears and fear, that Sam wanted to slap her, wanted to shake her like a can of spray paint, because he thought maybe she *knew*. Knew that this was René’s doing, was part of the same puzzle as the disappearing girls.

The things people knew and wouldn’t admit to themselves, Sam thought, disengaging her hand and shaking his head, trying to put the machete away before he used it. “Sorry. Have you,” cleared his throat, which hurt like a *bitch*, “Have you seen my boss?”

“No. Is ‘e wit René?”

*I hope fucking not*, Sam thought. Céline was near frantic, and the doctor moved in with a bottle of pills, and the singer barely nodded, scarcely noticed as she dumped a handful into her palm, chewed them like Chiclets. Held them out to Sam, who shook his head.

The dog yapped a little, squirming in her arms, and Céline shot to her feet, her expression crumpling as René pushed past Sam, ignoring him completely, wrapped Céline in his embrace, the dog growling Rottweiler-big. René – the demon, though cloaked now – led her away, murmuring French in her ear, and Sam heard sobs of relief amidst the canine growls.

Then René looked back, over his wife’s shoulder, and smiled.

Dizziness swept over Sam, threatened to topple him. Bastard, he thought, found himself walking quickly towards the demon, not caring that there were hundreds of people on the lawn now, not caring that a demon could wreak havoc on a crowd like this, because *Sam Winchester didn’t know where his brother was*.

As he came closer to René, Sam swallowed a lump in his throat that might have been terror, embraced the sudden white-hot anger, just jumped into it like it was a deep pool.

Stopped dead in his tracks. The pool. *Fuck Dean and fuck his insatiable --*

Céline’s dog struggled in her arms and jumped, its attention diverted by sudden and rapid movement on the far side of the lawn. Sam followed the little white streak’s trajectory, momentarily distracted by its velocity. It scrambled across the lawn, because dogs like that always took on dangerous moving things; they were genetically engineered to win Darwin Awards.

Then relief, as it were, was at hand, because it was Dean sprinting across the grass, bare-chested, shoeless, clutching a t-shirt in one hand, not coming towards the mustering area, not that, but going for the outside staircase door. He looked as though he’d willingly take out any volunteer firefighter clumsy or stupid enough to get in his way.

The fire light was on Dean, and Sam knew what his brother was going to do, was going to head right into an inferno without giving it a second thought, because he saw the look on Dean’s face

then and hoped like hell it wasn't the very same one he had on his own face, but thought, yeah, it probably was. Rage rammed down the throat of desolate, numbing fear.

Sam drew breath, but his lungs had been scorched and it hurt, or maybe that was just the bruised ribs. No time to wonder which, for there was a disaster to avert: Sam wouldn't put it past his brother to run into a burning building for him.

Let's face it, there was precedent.

Thought that and all the anger just slipped away, was replaced by a love so fierce it burned hot in its own way. *Hurt* in its own way.

Sam found his smoke-mutilated voice and he shouted his brother's name. It came out a croak, thrashed as a metal band at the end of a long tour, but it was enough and Dean – who had been going fast, had been going so incredibly fast – pulled up like a designated runner stealing second, almost slid to his knees, and then back up again, pivoted direction flawlessly, the little dog yapping at his heels. Dean closed the distance quickly, hair wet, sheeted with water, smelling of chlorine. Came right up to Sam, just stared at him. The whole thing repeated itself on Dean's face like instant replay from the reverse angle: terror, desolation, fear, anger, rage, love. Then, quick, a flash of relief.

“You okay?” Rough around the edges, a little winded.

Sam nodded. One moment, held. Dean finally looked away, pulled his t-shirt over his head, streaking it with dark water.

Then Sam shifted his gaze to Béatrice, also wet, who'd come up behind Dean, eyes searching. “Did they get out?” she whispered, but to Sam. “Annie and Chantal?”

Sam saw it: a gnawing grief borne of knowing that somehow the fire and the earlier deaths were connected to her, and not knowing why, or how to stop any of it. It was possible, Sam thought, that she was innocent. What did Sam know about her anyway? When had he taken the opportunity to do anything but castigate Dean for his poor judgment in this without finding out the first thing about Béatrice Viau?

“Over there,” Sam returned quietly, gesturing with his nose to the first aid station. He turned to Dean. “I think we need to talk.” Paused, looked carefully at Béatrice.

“Etienne sent her the first night,” Dean stated, almost a challenge. “That was the only time.” Following Sam's line of thought.

*Shit, who can read minds, anyway, Dean?* Sam grimaced, half a smile. “Okay,” he accepted, gently.

“He's playing us. Etienne.” Dean looked at Béatrice as he said this, ran a hand over his hair, rearranging it badly. “All of us. Finds this funny.” Because he'd turned his head, Sam could now see the set of Dean's expression, knew what it meant. For Dean. And because of that, ultimately, for himself.

Sam had an appointment with both a demon and a god, and if Dean was determined to go after Etienne, then he wouldn't immediately know what Sam was doing. The fire was a warning,

nothing more. The demon had proved his point all right: he'd kill Dean next time, and Sam wasn't going to give him the opportunity. Etienne was the perfect distraction for Dean right now.

“What is he? Ghost? Spirit?” Sam asked, though neither of those felt quite right.

Béatrice was still there, looked hard and able and beyond surprise. “Yeah, because he's not human, whatever he is.” She crossed her arms, waited for Dean's response. But she was a half-Lithuanian circus performer who could touch the back of her head to her ass while dangling fifty feet in the air to the songs of Céline Dion – Sam thought not much would freak her out.

Dean shifted his stance. “Trickster.” And smiled. It was terrifying. “Big ol' Trickster, Sammy. Should have known it earlier, but they're rare.” Shook his head. “Pays to believe in myths, I guess.”

A Trickster was great news, on some level. Loki, Whiskey Jack, Monkey – almost every culture had them, demi-gods devoted to chaos and mayhem. A traditional Trickster was only harmful in what it set in motion, would never murder anyone in their sleep. Or beat their brains out against a wall when they got lippy. “What'd we do to attract the attention of that?” Sam asked.

Dean's shoulders lifted and he shivered. “Who knows? You can't kill them. Might be able to outsmart it.”

Any other night, this would have been an attraction too potent for Sam's clever mind to resist, a harmful entity that required logic and creativity to dislodge, not sheer force. Sam knew it. Dean knew it.

Sam had a little acting job to do now and when Dean's life was hanging in the balance, he didn't give a shit who he had to lie to, even Dean himself.

“Okay, how do we find Etienne?” he asked carefully and enthusiastically, glanced at Béatrice, whose attention was all on Dean. She hugged her arms to herself, hands tucked under armpits. It was a warm night, but not if you were wet to the bone and wearing the thinnest of cotton shifts.

Dean shook his head. “I find him. It's me he's fucking with, not you.”

Sam simulated upset, scowled a little.

He wasn't the only one looking unhappy, though. Béatrice took one step to Dean, stopped. Despite her not being much bigger than your average grade seven student, the look she leveled at Dean was lethal. “He's screwed with me, too, made *un chârdegarde*. A lot of shit. *Antéka*. Anyway. I want some fucking answers from that bastard.”

Sam might have laughed at the expression on his brother's face. *Didn't count on this, did you, Dean?* The problem with consorting with spitfires is that you sometimes got burned.

Dean opened his mouth, and Sam predicted what would follow: Too dangerous for you. Don't want you in the middle of this. Better let me handle it.

Instead, “Okay.”

Sam's breath came out like a shot, not entirely acting now. “What? She gets to go and I don't?”

Dean didn't quite smile and Sam reckoned that his brother thought that this was payback time. It was, but not quite how Dean was imagining it. "She's right. Béa's lost friends. That was the demon, but Etienne sure as hell didn't stop it, did he? I bet he's known about the demon for a long time." He turned to her, and Sam couldn't see what happened to Dean's eyes, but he heard it in his voice. "Under the stage, that time. Remember? This kind of evil gets hard to ignore."

Shivering, eyes dark with unanswered anger, Béatrice nodded forcefully. "I don't fuck with that. He's too dark. Céline, she thinks he's got a problem, like he could go to a re-hab center or something. I thought Etienne might work for him. And Tadeusz, he got nervous, starting talking about the zubir, about how the zubir would protect us. Crazy fucking Lithuanian *lugan*."

Dean turned, and his back was to the flames so Sam couldn't see his face. "Etienne's got a lot to answer for, and she has the right to ask the questions."

Sam nodded, saw the sense of it. Back when all this had started, he'd dreamed of a girl on the ceiling, burning. Neither Béatrice nor Dean needed to be a sacrifice tonight; Sam would take care of that. He didn't like it, didn't really want to take on the demon by himself, but the concept of choice was in short supply. "Okay, then."

"You'll stay here?" Dean asked, and Sam knew this is where his acting would have to be at its best. Sam had no intention of staying here; he had an appointment at the tree, five stanzas of memorized Latin to recite, and a buffalo to save.

He was almost sure he was supposed to save the zubir. Almost.

For once, Dean didn't wait for an answer, and Sam hoped fervently that Dean wouldn't regret that lapse, later. If things went well, Sam would be there and back, the demon exorcised, and the zubir saved, all before Dean even *found* Etienne.

Tricksters, Sam knew, didn't usually hang around after they'd been exposed. Sam suspected that Etienne was long gone. Luckily, Dean wasn't in the habit of reading mythology texts, usually gleaned his information from their father's journal and old episodes of *Night Stalker*.

"Looks like they've got it under control," Dean said, turning to where a fire truck was hosing the building, smoke rising gray into the night. Kept turning to the contortionist, and Sam realized that it wasn't pool water on her face, but tears. Watched as Dean took her under his arm, pulled her close. Not a challenge to Sam; it had nothing to do with Sam.

He kept thinking about that, even after they'd gone. Thought about it as he took a few minutes to quietly rip off the bandage that bound his arm and shoulder, unwound the bindings, shoulder sore, tendons needing more healing than they'd now get. Still, better than trying to do this one-handed. He borrowed a pair of sneakers from the hotel's night manager and disappeared down the darkened road to Parc Oméga.

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This was the worst kind of fucking thing for him to deal with. Werewolves, fine. The occasional skinwalker, ghosts of numerous persuasion and variety – no problem. Black Dogs? Hell, any day of the week. Poltergeists? Like taking out the trash, man.

Dean had never heard of anyone who'd even pretended to know how to handle a Trickster. Shit, he'd never heard of anyone who'd actually *met* one. So what did he, with his self-proclaimed shoot-first, ask-questions-later philosophy, know about them? Well, for starters, he knew that they didn't like to be exposed. Second, they usually got defeated by a taste of their own medicine. You didn't kill the fuckers, you just shooed them away, leaving them to wreak havoc on the next poor asshole that wandered into their sights. The ultimate NIMBY supernatural foe.

So having two pissed off people to call Etienne out was better than one. And anyone could see that Sam wasn't up to it, was bruised like a banana at the bottom of a gorilla cage, was dopey with painkillers. Best he get a rest, since tomorrow they'd have to deal with a fucking demon. Exorcisms were two-man jobs, since demons were squirmy fuckers requiring a lot of Latin verse, the precise use of which usually precluded exercising a lot of muscle. Exorcising a demon, in Dean's opinion, would demand *his* physicality and *Sam's* level-headed intelligence. The perfect team.

He smiled grimly, knew that it was a smile that scared babies.

He'd left his boxers poolside, jumped into his jeans from dripping wet. Going commando, they *chafed*. He let these small physical annoyances fuel his anger, hazarded a glance to Béa, whose face was set like porcelain, still with fury. Man, he would not want to be Etienne now.

His spirits were bolstered by one remembered story about Whiskey Jack. Must have heard it when they'd spent those three months in North Dakota on the reserve, when John had recuperated on the trailer's spongy bed, halfway between death and a drunken coma, had returned to his young sons so mangled by a shapeshifter he'd made Sam scream with terror.

The native kids had pushed Dean around at school, though he'd hardly been the type that had taken bullying very well. Eventually, just in time for John to pull up roots and start the engine again, Dean had made a couple of friends.

Between Coyote and Whiskey Jack, the rez kids usually had a clear favorite: whoever swung the biggest dick. Elias, a loose-jointed rodeo rider a year older than Dean, had gleefully told him the best story: when, one by one, Whiskey Jack had posed as the husband of every woman in a medicine man's family, only to have his cock trapped while inside the medicine man's beautiful virgin daughter, who had a snatch like a steel trap. Whiskey Jack had then been roundly beaten by all the women, from oldest crone to budding girl. Even a couple of the boys, Elias had said with a broad wink. Elias had laughed and laughed, probably at the pole axed expression on Dean's face. So if all else failed? A shit-kicking was always a valid last resort.

A beating or a talking to, either required that they find the asshole and Dean didn't really know where to start. Béa, shivering, huddled against him and Dean pulled her closer, could feel her ribcage frail against him, only bone and a covering a skin. Not much to her, in some ways. Then looked at her, the tufted hair and dark eyes, gleam of collarbone as she twisted her head to him. Dean was just wondering what he might be able to salvage from this evening other than a head cold, when she said, "He has one of the cabins down by the river." And either Etienne would be there and Dean would beat him senseless, or he wouldn't be and they'd have a cabin to themselves.

And that settled that.

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The fence was meant for keeping family wagons and mini-vans out, not for barring a determined young man with an unreasonably vast knowledge of lock mechanisms, and a body to make a cat envy. Sam had the main gate's lock undone in twenty seconds. He ran past the dark ticket booths and slipped sideways between the inadequate gate and post that separated the wapiti from the fallow deer. Breathing still raw, he slowed, trotted down the dirt road that they'd driven earlier that day. The wolf pens were to his left; he could see one gray shape follow his progress along the fence and the hair on the back of his neck rose in response. The gray shadow stopped at the far fence, observed him as he crested the hill.

The moon wasn't full, wouldn't be for another week or so, but it still cast enough light that the buffalo pasture looked like an old Technicolor movie's night scenes, filmed during the day and hand-darkened in the editing booth. The forest was ominous and shifted around him though the night was windless. His lungs were soggy and impaired, dirty sponges moldering in the laundry room sink. He couldn't see any buffalo, only light gray grass and black forest and the darkness beyond the cliff's edge.

And the tree of course.

It was dark against the plain, stark and melancholy and so much more than a dead tree in the middle of field had any right to be, sad as an unvisited senior sitting on an old age home's porch. Not quite, maybe, for another dark moving gray shadow, too big to be a wolf, moved under its branches and the tree was not a sad abandoned shell, but rather the hard remains of something too stubborn to actually die.

Sam made no attempt to disguise his approach; his approach was the point. He wanted to be seen.

The exorcism he had in mind was blessedly quick, no long passages interspersed with liturgical hymns or the sprinkling of holy water. They'd always been so excessive with that as kids, throwing it around as though they were in a playground water fight. Sam smiled tightly, imagining Dean facing a gaggle of lesser demons with a pump-action Super Soaker full of holy water.

Shit, he was nervous, now that it came to it.

Glanced back at the forest, now a few hundred yards behind him, up the hill. No buffalo, not that he could see, but he felt a vague presence, an *interest*. In the time it took him to turn back, he realized that René hadn't come alone.

*No fair*, he thought.

Hand clutched in her husband's, the diva of the four-octave range stood meekly, head bent to the grasses at her feet, swaying gently as though she were a bobble-headed version of herself on a massive dashboard. A handful of pills to calm her, Sam remembered, steeling himself.

He didn't need much time for his Latin, but he'd have to be actually touching René for it to have an affect, so he needed to come a whole lot closer than he was now. And Céline, knowingly or not, could reach that high unpleasant note more quickly than Sam could reel off five ancient stanzas of a dead language.

But what was really unfair, Sam thought, was the fact that René had a *gun* trained on him.

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The absurdity of knocking wasn't lost on Dean. *Hello, could I please come in to kick your ass?* Still, lamplight streamed through the window by the door, someone obviously home, and Dean wasn't sure that Etienne wouldn't just let them in, if only to toy with them some more.

Impatiently, Béa knocked again, actually got in front of Dean before he could open his mouth in protest or pull her back. "Hey," he said, but the look she gave him then silenced him in a way few things could. By the time they heard steps, Dean made his peace with the fact that Béa was more pissed off than he was and that you didn't want to get in her way when she was mad.

Etienne didn't have time to say much either, not before Béa slammed open the door and slapped him soundly across the face. The door rebounded off the wall and came back to knock Etienne hard on the shoulder.

He didn't look remotely surprised, which was the first thing that pissed Dean off.

The second thing was the smile, of course. "Come in!" the Trickster said, as though he'd invited them over, which was the third thing.

"Fuck you," Dean replied, walking in and slamming the door shut. Stood a moment, getting his bearings, wishing for a saltgun, though he doubted it would inflict much damage, though even a little damage would be sufficient and there was nothing like pulling a trigger to blow off some steam. "Missed you at the fire."

Etienne wasn't looking at him, he was watching Béa, which further enraged Dean. *Stop it, he wants you to get mad.* Took a long calming breath that made him think of those stupid yoga shows you sometimes caught on early morning television. Thinking of yoga at a time like this made him even more angry. Pushing buttons, this one's an expert. *Watch yourself, Winchester.*

"So nice to see the two of you together again." Etienne held up a half-empty bottle of red wine, raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Béa was having none of it. "You knew what would happen," she challenged.

Etienne poured himself a glass, turned it in his hand. "I never know what's going to happen. What would be the fun in that?"

"Why us?" Dean asked. "Why'd you pick us?"

The Trickster moved to the sitting area of the faux-rustic cabin, all Stickleby furniture and fat beeswax candles, ornamental swords mounted over a river-rock fireplace. Etienne sat in an enormous chair, shaking his head. "I didn't pick you. Though you're interesting. Maybe next time."

Baffling Trickster double-speak.

“*Ben wéyon don.*” Béa shot back, then glanced at Dean, having slipped into French. Apologetic. Hard to concentrate in another language when you were furious. “I don’t believe it. You gave the flower to Dean. You told me to find him.”

“You didn’t have a nice time?” Etienne feigned concern, spread the fingers of one hand. “I am often misunderstood. I gave him a flower, told you to follow it.” He shrugged. “The rest was up to you. It had the intended results.”

As she spoke, though, Dean was turning over what he was saying. What he wasn’t saying. “We were just tools. Means to an end.”

And Etienne’s eyes narrowed, assessing Dean. A shiver ran over him, though the room was warm. The Trickster set down the glass, stood. “You are always a means to an end.”

“Tricksters only want chaos. Since when do they *plot*?” Tricksters were essentially *unreasonable* creatures, like three-year-olds with cunning. “It was to get to Sam, not me.” Béa was by the fireplace; if Dean made a move against Etienne, she was well out of the way.

Etienne shrugged. “You know a lot about what I do,” but it came out soft and sarcastic. Antagonistic, a mosquito of a man. Not a man. Man-like.

“I find my own trouble,” Dean said. “I don’t need your shit.”

Etienne started to pace the room, but his face wasn’t as playful as before. “No, you’ve got a lot of shit without my help, that’s true. Béatrice, do you think I murdered your friends?”

She stood quietly for a moment, considering the Trickster in much the same way she would a car salesman. After a minute, she shrugged. “No.”

Etienne turned to Dean, a body’s length away. “Think, Dean Winchester.” The room suddenly went dark as the single lamp flickered out. Might have been a loss of power due to the fire, but Dean didn’t think so.

Despite the disorienting dark, he didn’t flinch, didn’t move, could still see Etienne’s outline in front of him. “You work for the demon,” he tried.

Etienne chuckled, unamused. In the sudden hush, he seemed insubstantial, only voice and vague menace. “I work for myself.”

“But, a demon...” Béa whispered, turned to Dean, who could only see the white blur of her face. “He’s fucking with the demon, not us.”

Again, the dance of movement that Dean associated with a shrug. A laugh. And now he was fairly sure the Trickster was only partly there, was half shadow and air. “*Sadlairasah*. Looks that way.”

Like the Cheshire Cat, the last thing Dean saw of Etienne Marcoux, Trickster, was his smile, gleaming white in the night. “And you should be wondering, right about now, where your brother is, Dean Winchester.”

And with that, not so much as a goodbye, the Trickster vanished and the light came back on. Dean stared at Béa, and she at him, and he knew they wore almost identical expressions of

astonishment. Except that Dean's expression was slowly changing to something else, which was fear. Because he was taking the Trickster's advice and was indeed wondering, right about then, where Sam was.

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Thank god Céline kept her mouth shut.

Though all the demon really needed was the gun to render Sam pliable, didn't need the big debilitating note. The demon was saving that for something else.

Sam knew it wasn't going to kill him, not yet. Not when it could tie him to the tree and cut delicate lengths of skin from his body to hang from the low branches. Not when Sam's young skin was needed to call the zubir, which was – in turn – the largest of offerings to make to dark fucking powers.

*All dark, like*, Sam added to himself, thinking of his brother and wishing desperately for his presence. Couldn't take that much further, because Dean being here meant Dean dead, and Sam wasn't going to wish for that. The demon needed Sam, but it would shoot Dean without hesitation before he got within fifty feet of the tree.

*C'mon, lay some hands on me*, Sam thought. *Gotta surprise for you, asshole.*

As though wary of just that, the demon directed Céline to tie Sam to the tree, which had the one possible advantage that Céline Dion was no fucking boy scout that knew her way around knots.

With the gun muzzle resting against the nape of his neck, Sam was pushed face-first against the rough bark. The rope went around the tree and around his neck. Around his wrists and his waist and threaded through the belt loop on his jeans. Something he could get out of in a minute or two with only rope burns to show for it.

Oh, Jesus, and Sam knew what was coming next, because he had always been the one kid who'd paid attention during museum field trips and he wasn't out of the habit as an adult. That fucking tree display at the Museum of Civilization had been pretty specific and the demon had a knife in addition to a gun. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going to happen next. What he was hoping for was enough contact during the process of getting the skin flayed from his back that he'd been able to work the exorcism.

The demon slit Sam's t-shirt from neck to hem, and at the first light touch, Sam started chanting, Latin slipping easily from his tongue, not rusty when it was so desperately needed. One thing Dean had always said about Sam, even within his earshot: *Sammy's good in the clutch, Dad*. Got to the fourth stanza before the demon took the first strip of skin from Sam's back.

He had to stop. Grace under pressure, yeah, but come *on*. He couldn't even think with a sharp knife sliding from shoulder blade to mid-back. Once, then twice. Couldn't speak, could only scream, 'cause *that*? That *hurt*.

Sam sagged against the ropes, weeping, air whistling through a torso burning front and back, scraped from the rough bark into shreds on the chest, running with blood on the back, pooling at

the waistband. Took a breath, tried to find the Latin, tried to find some comfort in it, knew what was being summoned and for what purpose. Heard the demon laughing.

“No need, boy. Your magic has no effect on me.” Some movement to Sam’s right, by the nearest branch and he swallowed bile as he saw the demon’s hand dripping with blood, hanging a thin strip of Sam’s own skin over a dead twig. Sam rested his forehead against the bark. A demon would lie. This *would* work, he had to believe that.

Started the Latin again, but the demon knew the pace of it, almost let Sam get to the end before taking his fingers away, removing another slice of skin. Playing with him. *Does it count*, Sam wondered, all around him red, *does it count as having contact if he’s handling my skin? Or does my flesh cease to be me, once it’s parted from my body?*

Gagged, thinking about this. He hadn’t known he was able to make the noises he was now making. Three strips of skin, hanging. What was the magic number? Three was good; shit, three was a magic number, wasn’t it? But four. Four seemed to be it, because after that the demon stopped.

And Sam felt the shift in the air temperature, felt it drop and drop and drop and smelled, above the ferric odor of his own blood, the scent of *wild* and *old*. Though it was an effort, more even than the Latin, Sam turned his head to see dark shapes on the plains behind the tree.

The zubir had come.

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Really, there was only one place Sam could be: with the buffalo. No other place was that dangerous and that potent, and Sam had fucking told him, hadn’t he? Had showed him graphically what he intended to do, earlier this afternoon at Parc Oméga.

Dean wasn’t a complete idiot, he knew the Trickster had its own reasons for setting that bait. But it seemed that the Trickster was playing havoc with a demon, using the Winchester brothers to confuse and confound it. Dean hoped that’s what was going on, because if Etienne was sending him on a fool’s errand to the middle of a game park at midnight, well, Dean could easily name at least fifteen different ways he was going to fuck Etienne up.

Could contemplate it, but would never be able to do it, actually, because the Trickster was gone and wasn’t coming back.

This time, Dean wasn’t entertaining the notion of bringing Béa with him, no matter how mad she got. This was *Sam* they were talking about, and once it was Sam, Dean was through talking.

He parked her at the hotel’s mustering station, told Tadeusz to look after her. Dean wanted to find out everything the strongman knew about the zubir, or whatever crackpot god the Lithuanians had conjured up to protect them against a demon, but Dean had just officially run out of time for research.

Sam, Tadeusz explained unasked, had borrowed some shoes and gone that way. Pointing down the road, and the only question Dean considered then was whether or not he could ram the Impala through Parc Oméga’s gates.

*Don't need to*, he decided, once in front of the gates, noticing that they were unlocked. Sam had done that and it was all the evidence Dean required. He drove the car as far as the wapiti enclosure, ignored the obvious joke playing in the back of his mind about impalas in game parks. The lock on this gate was on a timed alarm, too complicated to figure out in the dark and when he was in a hurry. He couldn't be far now, anyway.

The gaps in the railing, while too small for wapiti, were plenty big enough for him. From the trunk, he unpacked a spare pair of boots, a knife, the salt rifle and the Glock. Extra ammunition, just in case.

He followed the dirt road, rifle dangling from one hand, but didn't see anything. Came to a fork in the road. Was the buffalo meadow on the other side of the bear pen? Shit, why hadn't he bothered to even *look* at the map? He knew, though. Because he always followed his nose, was the one who took the leap of faith. Their father alternated between identifying this tendency as either lazy or stupid. But Sam? Sam reasoned things out, Sam studied the map. Had fewer bruises and scars to show for it.

*Fuckitfuckitfuckit*. Stood in the middle of the road, between the big sign that said *Ours* and *Loups*, little pictographs of lethal animals, arrows pointing in divergent directions.

Hard to say whether the scream he heard then was helpful or not. Helpful, perhaps, in the way that it indicated a general direction to proceed. No so much that the general direction was as the crow flies, and Dean's crow was about to make a beeline through the wolf enclosure. And screw whatever his father would have said about that, 'cause he wasn't here, now, was he?

*So be it*, Dean thought, ignoring the Danger and Attention signs, which he could easily read in both English and French, because any hunter worth his salt knows when he's being told to kiss his ass goodbye, no matter the language.

The fence wasn't electrified, but it was high. He was fine with high, though, and he almost wished something would come after him, because his worry was cutting a fine line in him, was slicing like a blade of razor wire, and Dean just wanted to kill something.

He moved easily through the underbrush, silently, listening to the far screams, sweat trickling down to the small of his back as he realized it was Sam, it was Sam screaming and his brother had a goddamn miraculous tolerance for pain and didn't scream easily.

Wolves were all around him; he didn't see them, but he felt their presence. Normally, and despite recent experiences with a particularly nasty possessed dog, Dean didn't ascribe human qualities to animals. They were animals, not people. If he thought they had emotions, consciousness, he'd be eating tofu, wouldn't he?

Still, the not-quite-seen gray shapes gliding around him felt uneasy, felt eager and excited and ready to run. In the dark, they were wild and old and Dean recognized them on some elemental level, felt something in himself respond to that. Evil was gathering up ahead, and they were all being drawn to it. Dean moved faster, told himself it was the screaming and that might have been true.

Got to the final gate, and this one was electrified and he put down his rifle. The moonlight made finding the wire easy, and Dean only got a minor shock as he disconnected it.

He turned just in time for the wolf to hit him square in the chest. He slammed against the ground with force, the air exploding from his lungs and he thought, *this is fucking it*, as the wolf growled and he felt hot meaty breath against his face.

Then another scream, close enough that Dean knew he could make it in time, if only this fucking *mutt* would get off him – except he couldn't breathe properly, the muscles in his chest having just gone on vacation.

Slow wheeze – and the wolf jumped from him, collided with the gate, escaped through it, followed by three others, wild yellow glow in their eyes, maddened by the smell of blood perhaps, or the proximity of evil. Ran towards another of Sam's screams and Dean rolled to his knees, breath suddenly coming, *ah shit, fuck*, dragging oxygen in painful gasps.

Dean staggered to his feet, kicked the gate, picked up the rifle – and ran after them.

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The red eyes glowed as the zubir moved slowly to the front of the herd, and the cold coming from it was welcome because it eased the fire on Sam's back, numbed his cramping fingers. He wiggled them a little, felt the ropes slide, maybe on his own blood. Behind him, he heard René murmur to his wife, for all the world sounding just like a concerned husband.

The zubir had come, but not for its sacrifice; it might justly lay claim to the bloodied flesh that hung from the tree, but the summoner wasn't seeking to appease the zubir. The summoner was seeking to kill the zubir.

Sam didn't doubt that his life was part of it, though he didn't know the sequence, like he'd ended up in a big dance number with no one showing him the steps. The zubir was close, the smell of it dizzying.

Then Céline began to sing.

Sam almost laughed, wanted to know if she took requests, but the demon also started to chant then, and it wasn't Latin, or French, but some other language, harsh and metallic as raven-talk. Céline was running through a series of tonal pitches, each one designed to unlock, for Sam knew puzzles ancient and modern, from cultures local and far. He appreciated how they worked, recognized the methodical sequencing going on behind him, even as he began to slide down the tree trunk, further shredding his chest, his shaking arms and legs no longer able to bear his weight.

Slumped against the tree roots, he negotiated a tortuous turn, tried to get an arm under him to lever his weight to his knees, the rope falling in coils around him. The demon stood several yards to Sam's left, back to the cliff, facing the woods and the herd. Beside him, the singer, her shoulder enveloped by the demon's large hand. Her eyes were closed as she started to reach higher with the note.

Sam didn't think he could take that. Couldn't take that fucking note.

The zubir faced Sam, was ignoring the demon altogether. Sam raised his head and their eyes locked. *What do you want of me?* But he knew. The zubir had been summoned by his flesh, and that's what was required. All of it.

The note went up again and *there*, triangulated between all three, demon, sacrifice, and zubir, a swirling blackness opened, beckoning. Sam leaned forward across his knees and emptied his stomach on the grass, sickness overwhelming him.

The zubir shifted, eyes rolling, large nostrils flaring wide.

And behind them, coming from the trees, Sam heard the wolf-cry. It matched Céline's note, fell into it, and the entire herd shifted, started to move.

Sam looked at the demon, and it was smiling, but not looking at Sam, looking at the zubir. The demon had the gun in its hand, raised it, took a step towards the god, barrel aimed precisely between the animal's eyes.

*Run*, Sam thought helplessly, though that was merely a different kind of death for the zubir. Re-thought it, changed his mind. "No!" he shouted, struggling to his feet against the black vortex, against the spun note, against the sudden urge to just run from danger, no matter the cost. "You're stronger than this," he whispered, coming one step closer to the zubir. He fell to his knees again, unable to stand. "Please."

*There's a cliff*, he wanted to say, but didn't know how to explain to a god why a cliff was dangerous. An abstract notion for a buffalo, flying.

One gray streak, far to Sam's left, maybe three hundred yards, low to the ground and the entire herd started to trot uneasily around the tree, parting like a dark river around a big rock. Sam dared to look at the demon, who kept the gun trained on the zubir.

And then the zubir bellowed. That was the only word for it, and Sam shuddered with fear. Fear and relief. The herd shivered as a whole, but stopped. Stopped at that sound, unchanged through the millenia.

Beside Sam, a low chuckle. "You *will* submit," the demon breathed quietly to the zubir. "In one manner or another." And fired.

The shot rang out with another bellow, this one so fierce that Sam held a hand to his head. At least it stopped the singing. Céline stumbled to a halt, quivering like the herd. If she took one step forward, she'd drop into the black gaping hell maw.

The herd moved again, responding to the shot, to the gathering wolves, fear kicked up like the dust from their hooves. All around Sam, now, moving dark shapes, fearful in the night.

The zubir still stood, eyes now red as blood, shook its head back and forth at the demon, raining blood as it did so, but *it still stood*. It was so cold that the shaking grass grew brittle under Sam's fingers and the blood on his back cooled and began to form ice crystals.

Nearby, close enough that Sam could see moonlit feral eye-glow, a pair of gray wolves hunkered down beside the tree, drawn by the blood maybe, or the buffalo, or the demon. Low moans came from the buffalo cows and their calves, secreted in the middle of the shivering, moving herd. The

buffalo, crazed with blood and wolf and evil, turned around the tree, came back, confused, circling. Enclosing them.

The zubir lowered its head, meaning to charge. The demon drew back the gun's hammer once again, preparing to shoot.

This was the weirdest Mexican stand-off Sam had ever seen.

The zubir took one step, then another. Towards the black hole that, for all Sam knew, led straight to Hell, eternal brimstone and agony, no backdoor to limbo or purgatory or some other dreamt-of antechamber, but straight to fucking Damnation.

One step, and the demon smiled. Another and the zubir turned its head to Sam, snorted. Close enough to touch. *The business end of a blowtorch*, Sam remembered, felt the dream's flame licking at him, knowing it would hurt. And did it, anyway, reached out, fingers of his hand shaking. A bare inch away from the zubir, an audience of wolves, buffalo, and a multi-platinum recording star to witness, and streams of electricity arced between Sam and the zubir, fed each other, went from Sam to zubir, right into the hellmouth's rotating axis.

*Reversed the turn.*

The zubir snorted again, shook its head and *roared*, felling the demon as though it were a rotten-cored tree. René collapsed, and Sam saw the rich malevolent smoke, closer to a snake than anything other than a serpent was, pour from René's contorted mouth in an agonized, endless scream. It swirled ominously, the demon in its non-corporeal form, and then it was dragged into the reverse-vortex of the hellmouth, disappearing completely.

Between one second and the next, the Gates of Hell closed up without a sound.

When it was over, Sam slumped onto his hands and knees, slashed t-shirt hanging in shreds, slick with streaming blood, gasping and so sore he hardly knew where to begin his inventory of hurt. Céline swayed again, blinked suddenly, shook like a retriever coming out of a lake. Shrieked as she realized that she was in a strange plain at night, surrounded by stampeding wild buffalo and wolves, coolly observed by a flayed man bleeding into the night, her husband laying like a corpse at her feet.

And Sam was spared his pain-filled cataloguing efforts by one thing. The cold.

The zubir leveled a stare at Sam, was only a foot away now, heavy and old and in need. All around darkness, and dust, and buffalo-noise and wild smell. Above that, Sam heard his name being called, but it was so far away, was beyond the circling buffalo, he barely registered it. *Aw, Dean, man, sorry.*

He swallowed; it wasn't over just because the demon was gone. It was over when the zubir was appeased, because it had been properly summoned and it was a power without precedence. Who was Sam to deny it?

It was true, was all true, and so Sam shoved himself from the tree once more, came as far as his knees, hurt and bloody and raw in every sense of the word. But there, and willing to be so. He smelled the *wild* and the *old* and he closed his eyes.

Though it went against everything he was, which was why they called it sacrifice, he let go. He didn't try to understand. He submitted.

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a/n: Wow, long freakin' chapter. But had to get y'all to this point. So I could leave you hanging while I go camping. Sorry about that. Last chapter soon...c'mon, you know you want your final dose of diva nuttiness.

## Chapter Nine - Count Your Blessings

Posted August 24th, 2006

Assorted crapiola: COMPLETE, Gen, PG13. OCs galore. This chapter contains plenty of swear-words and loads of blood and poutine. Brotherly love (no, not *that* kind) and obligatory angst. I am forced to concede once again that I own none of these characters and make not a thin dime.

Merci beaucoup, tout le monde: This whole thing wouldn't have come about without the [spn north](#) challenge forcing together the seemingly disparate elements of Outaouais region, Céline Dion, Cirque du Soleil and the Winchester brothers. [quellefromage](#), in a blatant attempt to bribe me into completing this more quickly, has written a ripping little [yarn](#) about le petit Pitou, Céline Dion's dog, winning a Darwin Award. Also, [salveo opes](#) wanted a listing of a particularly Canadian word usage, which I've embedded within for everyone's dubious pleasure. But most of all, [jmm0001](#) (who has just started a really great multi-chapter fic called [For Once, Then, Something](#), about Romani and the boys) and [lemmypie](#) can share the doorprize, because without them? Yeah, I'm all sound and fury, signifying nothing.

STF: Like you don't remember where we left off. Sam, ready to become a human sacrifice while Dean, a demon and Céline Dion look on. No worries if you don't remember, because we start off with the same scene, reverse angle.

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For one appalling minute, Dean thought he was too late. Not even too late to save Sam, because he didn't doubt for a second that the fucking zubir could kill you dead without breaking step, no matter what puny Dean Winchester and his loaded Glock did. No, Dean knew somewhere that Sam would be making his own decisions about whether or not he sacrificed himself. What was the word that Sam had used, over room-service artichokes? *Submit*.

Sam was not, normally, the submitting type. These were not normal circumstances, however, and for once Dean did not know what Sam would do.

No, what Dean was afraid of, what he was *terrified* of, was that he'd miss it. That he wouldn't be there when it happened, wouldn't be there in any way that was meaningful, except to pick up the pieces. His desire to be there wasn't to stop the zubir from stomping on Sam's stupid ass, or to prove the Trickster wrong. It wasn't even to see the demon exorcised. It was for Sam.

Sacrifices like this, ritual ones, demanded witnesses, and although Dean didn't give a fuck about fulfilling whatever shitty prerequisites were involved in seeing Sam dead, he did care very much that no matter what Sam decided, he would not have to be alone.

Running headlong down the moonglow dirt road, Dean sensed a freeway nearby, or a quarry in full operation, some kind of industrial machinery rearranging ancient pieces of solid ground – shit, an open-pit mine? The dirt beneath his feet quivered; he thought 'earthquake' and 'construction site' and 'underground blast' based on the soles of his feet, not on any sound heard with his ears.

Hearing with his feet surprised him so much he stopped, dropped to his knees and splayed one hand out on the dirt road, glancing at the forest for the missing wolves. A train coming, maybe. *Ah, Jesus, think where you are Winchester, what you're heading toward.* Shook his head, remembering Sam dreaming, stopping short when he got to the part where Sam whimpered, because that near broke Dean's heart, every time.

*Buffalo, fuckwad.* And got to his feet, kept running, because he hadn't heard Sam scream for a few minutes now and maybe that wasn't a positive sign.

*I'm too late,* he thought, clearly, crested the hill, recognized it from earlier in the afternoon, knew that he'd have a good view of the meadow and the tree, that the sun-bleached grass would provide needed contrast in the moonlight. He'd forgotten a flashlight, but had the zippo in his pocket. *What? Gonna start a grassfire, Winchester? That'd be useful.*

*Depends,* he answered back, knew that he was having a conversation with himself only because he really didn't want to think about why Sammy wasn't screaming anymore.

He found out soon enough.

Sam wasn't alone, not by a long shot. There would be witnesses aplenty, no matter what he did. Thirty buffalo circled relentlessly around the tree, kicking up dust and flying grass. Dean blinked grit from his eyes, wished for daylight so that he might make sense of the bizarre scene enclosed by the buffalo.

Sam was standing, but only barely, t-shirt in tatters, pale torso running with what could only be blood, faced uphill. Dean doubted Sam could see him, this far away with the dark forest behind him. Not to mention that Sam had more pressing distractions, including, in no particular order: three wolves running amongst the buffalo herd; one huge buffalo – the zubir – close enough to Sam that Dean could only discern one from the other by Sam's pale body; a twisting dark hole possibly leading to hell directly in front of Sam and his buffalo friend; the white-suited demon a flame in the night; and, of course, Céline Dion. And she was *singing*.

That hole looks like a shitwagon full of nasty, Dean thought, slowing to a trot, thinking it through. Demon hole to someplace he really wasn't quite ready to face – the zubir standing there, as though poised to go in with a little prompting. Yes, starting to make sense, old gods and new ones. Struggled to connect the dots and then heard Sam shout, "NO!" to something Dean couldn't see, and it didn't sound scared or agonized, it sounded like the kind of voice that would make a demon listen up.

The tone of it stopped Dean cold, vacillating. His little brother, yes. All grown up, manifestly. Leaving Dean and all his big brotherliness...where? He trusted Sam to make his own decisions, didn't he? *Couldn't he?*

Sam took a step to the buffalo, avoiding the hell maw, reached out, and sank to his knees. And then the zubir bellowed and it was a challenge from prehistory, shook Dean to his core. Stopped Céline Dion from making that infernal racket. Snapped Dean out of his momentary consideration of Sam's options. Screw Sam's *options*.

Dean broke into a sprint, suddenly become a running 'fuck you' to anything in his way, any notion of witnessing gone because he had to get Sam out of there. A gunshot, from René's hand, another bellow. Fuck, the demon was shooting the zubir. The ancient Lithuanian god didn't seem

hurt, however, was still solid on its feet, was getting pissed off. This whole set-up was *nuts*, and that was his little brother bleeding and shaking in front of a demon, a hell mouth, a god, and a Grammy-award winning diva. Time to haul ass, Sammy.

The wolf-maddened buffalo herd was going to be a problem, though, because the buffalo didn't give a shit that Dean Winchester, demon hunter, was trying to get past them. He skidded to a halt when the buffalo herd refused to part for him, trying to find a break, like merging in Montréal traffic: the rules were all different, and none of the animals were offering anything resembling an 'oh no, after you, I insist'.

Dean still had the high ground though, so he saw what happened next, saw it through the sudden spray of blood as the wounded zubir shook its enormous head. He saw the one step the god took towards the demon. Sam reached out, and Dean's lips moved silently, pleading for him not to, though Dean wasn't sure why the gesture was so dangerous, considering the range of lethal crap around the tree. The gesture was dangerous not because the zubir would hurt Sam, because that Dean could deal with, one way or another. It wasn't what the *zubir* would do, then. It was what Sam would do by reaching out. It was the reaching out that was dangerous, in fact, because of what would follow. That would *change* Sam, would make him something other than what he was.

Would make Dean admit that Sam was something different than what he was.

The silent prayer did no good; Sam was immune to Dean's prayers, always had been. He was a tall man with an orangutan's reach and if Sam Winchester wanted to grab something, he usually did. From his angle and in the darkness, Dean couldn't tell the moment that the two made contact.

An arc of lightning, illuminating Sam's stern motionless face, between his fingers and the god and the hole straight to hell, and the demon with the gun, which had its back to Dean. Too bad, because Dean had always relished the look a demon got just before it died.

The roar the zubir gave then flattened Dean. He went down as though smashed from above by a cartoon anvil, and hit a rock – a relatively fortunate outcome, despite the inevitable bruising, because otherwise he would have rolled downhill under the feet of the herd. As it was, he was covered in dust, spat grass from his mouth. As he lay across the broad field stone, ribs singing with a startle of pain, an animal rushed over him, almost too fast to inflict true hurt. Sawing carnivorous breath, sandy fur, brush of ivory and nail. Gone. A wolf. He'd just been run over by a wolf.

A long inhuman scream ripped the night, and Dean knew that it wasn't Sam, knew all the sounds Sam made in this world, and that wasn't one of them. That was a death-knell for a demon. As Dean struggled to his feet, the earth jumping under him from the hooves of frightened buffalo, a woman's shriek pierced the silty air, surprised and overwhelmed. Céline must have come to her senses, whatever those were. Dean had no pity in him, because he was listening for another voice above the ceaseless pounding of the hooves, and it wasn't coming.

Not quite to his feet, he shouted his brother's name, hoarse from the dust and the night and, goddamn it, all right, from the fear. Standing and watching was all he could do, though, because jumping into a buffalo herd would be the same thing as stepping in front of a Mac truck on a long haul. It wouldn't save Sam, would only make Dean dead.

He still had the Glock, though the salt rifle had been dropped somewhere in the long grass, possibly when the zubir had roared. Dean stood on the rock, trying to get a better look at what

was happening next to the tree. Thirty feet away, thirty buffalo in between. Might as well be the moon.

Sam was on his knees, and the black hole was gone. Céline Dion cradled her husband's head in her lap, weeping, head bowed over him.

The zubir seemed five times the size it had before and a bullet wasn't going to stop it. The demon had tried that already.

Dean watched, though the muscles in his legs twitched from keeping him still. *Oh, god, Sammy, don't.* So much blood, and that look on Sam's face, a cousin to the one he'd worn before storming out the door to Stanford: resigned. No fear this time, though, no anger. Simply unwavering determination, which god alone knew Sam possessed in spades.

But just before Sam closed his eyes and the zubir moved forward to claim him, Dean saw one other thing in his brother's eyes. Release.

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Strange that for all the distractions, as soon as he closed his eyes, everything came to a halt: no noise, no vibrations, not even the little voice in his head that always sounded like Dean after a few beers. Just the zubir and an abstract notion that felt like justice, but older. Less formed. Just the way it is, maybe. The way it should be. That's like justice, isn't it?

If he'd opened his eyes, he'd see the zubir not a foot in front of him, curved horns sharp as sabers, hooves like sledgehammers, big head the size and weight of a boulder. So many ways he could die right now, faced with this.

*It's okay,* Sam said out loud for the zubir to hear. For Dean to hear. Or maybe those words were only in his head. Difficult to tell the difference now. *I'm here. This will make everything right.*

Thought: *justice.* And the breath of the zubir was old and wild and was everywhere. Sam became the breath, let go of all that was Sam – the curiosity, the stubbornness, the joy of discovery. Handed them over. Fur and blinding, numbing cold, welcome for all the pain in him. He didn't hurt anymore.

Thought: *Dean.*

That, he was allowed to keep. And with that one thing lingering still, the zubir came.

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*Dammit, Sam. Not like this. This is not how you surrender.*

Dean realized a little sound had escaped him, in the back of his throat. Denial, maybe. Recognition, less likely. He'd made it an art, giving himself away, bit by bit. Knew the mechanics of the act intimately, no matter that he never acknowledged it.

Abandoning a sense of self like garbage at the curb, whether it was putting his body between Sam and an attacking spirit, or giving in to anger, or getting blind drunk. But at its extreme? *Le petit mort*. Complete and utter release. Going so far with a woman that everything was obliterated, was burned clean.

And fuck it if Sam couldn't even get that right.

--

A hard knock to his sternum swayed but did not fell him, forced his eyes open. He was still there, blinking away the sparkling stars. Ears assaulted by screams and lowing and growls. Ground moving like a natural disaster. Sam blinked again.

The zubir was maybe six inches from his face, so close Sam couldn't see its eyes, only its broad poll, black in the night. It huffed gently, then turned.

Done. It was done. A tap, that was all. Sam had offered, and the zubir had nodded its head, given assent. It had been enough, the offer. The zubir did not need Sam body and soul, was more powerful than that.

Sam did not for a moment think that they were friends: you didn't make friends with the gods. But he had made it *right*, everything, and that was enough, for all of them.

The night was warm and Sam noticed the warmth, noticed that along with the horrific coursing of blood through his extremities, the sudden blaze of pain along his back glowing like lit magnesium. He looked at the bull buffalo slowly moving away from him, the rest of the herd calming at its presence, and realized that the zubir had left.

He dropped to his hands and knees, brushed his forehead to ground wet with his own blood. Wailing French from nearby, the unmistakable sound of a man running, and then – “Jesus Christ, lady, he's fine,” but the known voice was moving, was coming towards him as Sam knew it would. He didn't budge, waited to hear the hiss of Dean's breath as he took in what the demon had done to Sam's back.

The hiss was worse than he remembered it.

Wanted nothing more than what Dean now did, which was to hunker down beside him and silently place one hand on the back of Sam's head, fingers entwined in his long hair. A very long moment held.

“You stupid shitforbrains. Dimfuckwit, in what twisted fucking universe was this a good idea?” And now was picking at the remains of Sam's shirt, trying to cover or to staunch, and Sam could hear the worry and the love beneath the warm rush of obscenities.

Perhaps it wasn't fair, but he started to laugh then.

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If the day got any hotter, Sam was going to take off his shirt, no matter how much his scarred back terrified the Japanese tourists. An idle thought; it would be awhile before he'd feel comfortable going shirtless in public.

Between the dislocated shoulder and the stitches on his back, Sam hadn't been able to find many positions that didn't result in pain, which meant he spent a lot of time laying on his stomach, or hunched over a table propped up with his right elbow, or just sitting upright, as he was now. His long legs dangled from the promenade wall; the Ottawa River was busy this summer's afternoon, just about dinner time, the pedestrian pathways clogged with government workers heading home, photo ID tags swinging ubiquitously from their necks as though they wouldn't know who they were otherwise.

Sam sighed, not unhappily. Sore, but sated. Comfortable in his own skin. Felt that he had earned it, his own skin. Had been willing to part with it – shit, *had* parted with it – and now it was truly his.

Still, the letting go had been hard. He shaded his eyes with his right hand, stiffly turned to look at the museum directly behind him. The sinuous shape of its design didn't bother him as much now. Maybe it was growing on him. Maybe the idea that he didn't have to understand everything, didn't have to put everything into neat rows, wasn't quite as anathema as it once had been.

After an entire day split between the air-conditioned Museum of Civilization and the equally air-conditioned National Gallery just across the river, Sam had forgotten it was a blistering hot day. A dislocation: he'd seen pictures of the river in winter when it froze solid, covered in snow, the Parliament Buildings a fairy-tale ice castle on the far shore. This place changed dramatically, it was a locus of power and transformation.

*Goddamn, what was I thinking, wanting to go into Law? I shoulda been an anthropologist. A sociologist.* Grinned outright at the thought. Right now, a hunter, like it or not. Stanford wasn't going anywhere. One day, when this was all over. Still time.

“You winning the argument?” And Dean sat down beside him, handed him a cardboard cup brimming with fries, maggot-white cheese curds, and clotted gravy.

Shit, had he been waving his hands around? Or just talking out loud?

Sam eyed the cup with suspicion. “You're going to kill yourself with this shit.”

He hadn't brought any plastic forks, either. Dean reached over, took one fry, a long string of cheese forming an attachment to the container. Dean twirled the fry, winding the string like a spool of thread. Jammed it into his mouth with more gusto than was strictly necessary. Masking, as usual. Sam knew what he'd just come from.

Reluctantly, Sam selected one fry, just to humor his brother. Tried not to think about it as he chewed it.

“Have a good day?” Dean asked, finally, but his attention was out on the water. He'd seen some sun in the last while, as Sam had rested up. Sam sometimes forgot that Dean had been a freckly little kid, until late summer hit and Dean's nose turned a perpetual pink and his hair tipped more blond than not.

Sam nodded. “Took it easy. Saw this wall of decaying fish and an amazing meat dress over at the Gallery...”

And Dean held up a hand. “Please. I’m eating.”

How an art exhibit could put Dean off cup-o-hardened-artery was beyond Sam, but he dropped it. “Didn’t go back into the Lithuanian exhibition.”

Dean gave a shruggy nod, a lazy gesture. “Don’t blame you. How’s the back?”

“Dion’s doctor took the stitches out. Good to go.” He banged his heel rhythmically against the stone wall, took another fry. The salt of the gravy was making him thirsty. “She gave us tickets to the Vegas show, said we could go anytime.” Wouldn’t look at Dean as he said that.

A long silence, only interrupted by Dean reaching over for another handful of poutine. Sam didn’t want to see the look on Dean’s face. It would either be disparaging or stricken, and both were too much for him right now.

“She said René is grateful.”

“Does grateful come with a reimbursement for your...troubles?” There. Getting a little closer to the truth of things. Ice had crept into Dean’s voice, and he’d been trying so hard to keep it light, Sam knew.

Sam did look at Dean then, braced himself for it. Dean’s eyes were flint hard. “I didn’t take it, Dean. We still have a fair bit of the casino’s money.”

One blink, then two. “Well, I guess we’re square with Céline Dion and her demon-possessed husband, the Trickster that’s been on her staff for the last few years and all the dead girls. Oh, and the buffalo god that the Lithuanian circus freaks called in to protect them. We’re square with the zubir, right? ‘Cause I wouldn’t want to owe a buffalo god anything.”

Sam grimaced. Dean was going to want to cut lose tonight, maybe starting now. He knew him well enough. “I’m square with the zubir, Dean. It basically said ‘thanks but no thanks’.”

“Yeah?” and Dean’s voice rose a little, caused a group of women with Environment Canada emblazoned on their lanyards to look over at them with concern. If Dean noticed, he apparently didn’t care. “Well I guess we’re okay then.”

Just because Dean needed a fight didn’t mean Sam was going to give it to him. “We’ve been through this, Dean. You just didn’t like to see me let go. Feet off the pedals.”

*You’ve got to let me go.* Had said that once, and that was enough, for both of them.

Sam shifted his seat, but didn’t break his stare. Neither did Dean. “You do it all the time, Dean. Do you know what it’s like, watching you do that?”

Dean’s mouth worked, then the gaze slid away to the sunbright water. “Yeah, I do.” But quiet. And Sam thought that he’d probably never truly know how many things Dean had given up. Little pieces of Dean were scattered all over – across space and time. And Sam hoarded: ideas,

knowledge, independence, his own skin, and one particular lodestone that had been his from birth. Dean.

Count your fucking blessings.

He handed Dean the half-empty container, looked back out over the river. Might as well scour the pan while it was in the sink. “When does her flight leave?”

Too much of a pause. “Already gone.”

“We could go to Vegas,” he offered, knowing what Dean would say, if not the exact words, the tone. The sentiment, and all it covered. “Free passes.”

“Ah, shit, Vegas, Sammy? Another Céline fucking Dion show? Did you not hear that woman *sing*? Don’t think so.” Shook the container to better cover the remaining fries with gravy and curd. “And your dumbfuck psychic powers are only good on slots; we don’t have to go all the way to Vegas for that.”

Okay, Sam could let it lie, flat as week-old Pepsi. No need to dig around that suppurating wound. He wondered if Béa had made promises. It hurt Sam in a deep place, both her going and the fact that Dean cared so much. But there were secrets. And then there was privacy, and Sam could give Dean that.

He was onto other things, in any case. “Hoser. Hosehead. Hosed.”

“What?”

Dean gave him a quicksilver smile. “Trying out some of the local lingo.”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t think anyone actually says that.”

“I hope we never run into that hoser, Etienne Marcoux, ever again. He royally hosed the Cirque by disappearing. If we can’t get back across the border, we are so hosed. René is a complete fucking hosehead.”

“He didn’t ask to be possessed by a demon, Dean.”

“Anyone who marries that freak of nature is a hosehead. And he made out like a bandit. Think that she’d have sold so many records if she wasn’t backed by the forces of evil?”

Trust Dean to equate Céline Dion’s material success with demonic possession. Still, he had a point.

The last of the fries disappeared down Dean’s throat, making Sam think of a cormorant gulping down herring. He tried to keep the disgust from his face. Once done, Dean wiped his hands on his jeans, adjusted his expression to something lighter, in keeping with the sunlight and the water. In keeping with the fact, maybe, that they were both alive and together, money in their pockets and a belly full of greasy poutine.

“Next time, Sam, do you think you might manage to dream about a different fucking Canadian diva?”

Sam laughed, surprised. “What? Like who?”

“Shit, even Shania fucking Twain would be better than that spastic space alien.”

“I didn’t figure you for a country fan.”

Dean’s brows twisted. “Shania isn’t exactly country, Sam. And she’s hot.”

“Can I remind you of that when you’re hung over tomorrow morning?”

Dean wasn’t taking it, was compensating hard enough for the both of them. Soon, any feelings of loss would be overcome by Dean’s practiced charm. Shit, Dean’s charm even worked on *Dean*.

“Or, like, Alanis Morissette, maybe.”

Sam groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding! She’s ever bit as all kinds of nuts as Céline Dion. Alanis would just fuck you and then write shitty verse about how you’d screwed her over. And then you’d be featured in some lame-ass video with her moaning about what an asshole you are.” Sure, he could play this game. “Nelly Furtado. I’d do Nelly Furtado.”

One look at Dean told Sam that Nelly Furtado was off his radar. His loss. Sam would take Nelly over Shania any day of the week.

Then, together, like it was an actual good idea: “Avril Lavigne.”

They looked at each other, halfway between laughter and something else.

Dean crumpled up the cardboard container, looked for a garbage can. One was nearby, because this was Canada and there was always a garbage can. Then he suggested a beer, and Sam agreed.

“*La Maudite*,” Dean said, helping Sam to his feet. “Means ‘damn fine’.”

And Sam already knew that.

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**a/n:** That’s it. My work here is done. Show’s over, folks. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.

ETA: Just because JM is NOT an anal bitch (not really), doesn't mean that I can get away with garbling the name of her fantastic new story, nor does it mean I can get away with grammatical murder. So the mistakes she's pointed out are now fixed.

## **Ficlet: Cirque Missing Scene**

Posted September 9th, 2006 |

A tiny one-shot companion piece to Cirque de Céline. [naga\\_battousai](#) asked for the break-up scene between Dean and Béa. Thanks to JM and [lemmypie](#) as always, just for *looking*.

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The light slanted through the hotel room window sideways, full daylight, hot day and she let him sleep.

An empty bottle stood on the table, Polish vodka, surrounded by peanut shells and a crumpled brown bag that had once held hot bagels dripping with grainy mustard and Montréal smoked meat grease. Yesterday's lunch. And dinner. And breakfast, even, though the vodka was gone by then. Tadeusz and the others had been there until four in the morning, at least, happy as Lithuanians got, in Béa's opinion. Her mother had never cracked a smile, was feral and suspicious as a raccoon in a dumpster.

Her suitcase was already loaded with the others; not all of them were going to the Las Vegas show, but enough that Team Céline had rented a separate cargo van for their things. Béa had been hoping for Montréal after this, and Las Vegas held all the excitement of a three-o'clock Christmas tree. No suitcase, only strewn clothes across the room, neither of them particularly neat and tidy people. She stretched out of the bed, the scratchy sheets in need of a wash, really in need, not like that time in the Hilton, where he'd been as dazed as any kid in a candy shop.

Stretched languidly, the effects of vodka still felt in her sore muscles, now two weeks past her last performance, exercised in a different arena. Standing, Béa stretched one leg to the wall, held it there for a full minute, concentrating on the static pose, the thrill of nerves and stretching muscle humming along the length of her leg, pulling to sweet pain in her thigh. Alternated. On the floor, passive stretch into a hairpin, then a tortoise, then a bridge. Pulled two chairs facing the other, tested their balance, then relaxed into a suspended split, one foot on either chair. Held, then put hands on the floor, moved into an elbow stand, legs extended. Felt a trickle of sweat roll down between her breasts, looked up and saw him watching her.

Green eyes utterly opaque; she had no idea what he was thinking. Might have thought, 'this is so weird,' or 'I want to fuck you right now,' or 'get me outta here.' She'd had them all, over the years.

The rented apartment hotel was small but her roommate was currently with Tadeusz, so she'd had it pretty much to herself since they'd returned from Montebello. Well, not to herself. Dean had been here too, quite a bit. He worried over his brother, though, as well he might.

Béa was enough of a Lithuanian to be suspicious, to make a ward against the evil eye with one hand hidden. She knew what Dean would do if he saw her make those kinds of signs, especially to protect herself against his brother.

Who was not evil, but who was chosen. The zubir had come and gone and Dean had told her enough for her to know that Sam was marked in a fundamental way beyond what René had done to his back.

He'd apologized, René, in quiet French, taken the acrobats and contortionists aside, invited them to Las Vegas, doubled their salaries. It was a good deal, one that Béa couldn't refuse. Didn't want to, because head office had sent a letter, too. Train the new performers in Las Vegas, do a good job. Next year, you'll be moved to the school in Montréal. It was enough.

She uncurled, walked over to the bed, bent down to him. "You can sleep a little more," she said.

"No I can't," he replied, pulling her on top of him, his American accent rough and deep and she liked the way it sounded like cigar smoke and leaf mulch and maple syrup. "I'm not going to," he clarified, stroking his fingers through her hair. At some point last night, after lime vodka shots, she'd talked him into cutting it and she hadn't looked in the mirror yet. She'd rather remember the way his stare roamed over her head, maybe admiring his handiwork, maybe wondering what the fuck he'd done. She'd rather remember that than think about what it looked like.

Her heart raced as well it might; he was unshaven and his eyes alternated between pleased and turned-on and what might have been sad.

Since the fire, she hadn't held back anything and she could tell that's what he'd been waiting for, what he'd wanted from her in the first place. To not care, to not edit or keep anything from him, including – especially – herself.

Just because a plane was filling with fuel for a cross continental flight didn't mean she couldn't leave it all at his doorstep, hand it over. Feet off the pedals, she remembered, thinking of a time as a little girl, going fast down a hill, heading for a crash but not minding, not minding because the wind was in her hair and no one could catch her and all wounds healed, eventually.

Just because.

When he touched her there and there and there, the noise she made shocked her, surprised her, a moan that sounded more like the noise a tree made when it fell, split in the center, in motherwood of the oldest core. He drew her out like a bucket from the bottom of a well, and there she was, her body a map to her soul.

After, when he'd fallen asleep again, sunlight playing across his scarred and perfect torso, she realized that he hadn't come, that he'd been there with her, had known and pleased but had held back himself, had not leapt off that edge.

The plane, she had thought, would end it. But as she dressed, slowly, sore in a new way, she realized it was over now and although he would wake to find her gone, he had in many ways left already.

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