Sunkist and Sudafed

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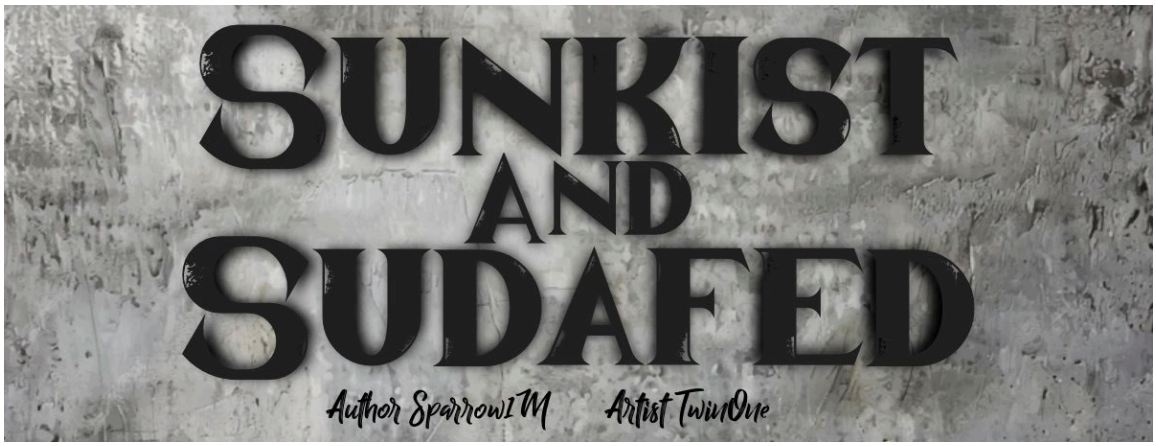
by Sparrow1M

Summary

With Sam gone and Dad off on some hunt of his own, there's no one around to notice when Dean disappears. He finds himself aboard an alien spaceship, killing more monsters than he'd ever dreamed of on Earth—until the arena manager gives him an ultimatum.

Notes

kindly betaed by AJ, with epic art by TwinOne! That art can also be found here, so go give it some love on Tumblr!



There’s nothing better than a parade of sweating beers and a game of pool. Home is sitting right in the parking lot, moonlight shining off the rain collecting on her like stamps on a box sent halfway around the world; Dean’s lucky to have her. He’s not even playing for money this time. He’s playing ‘cause he doesn’t know what else to do now that no one’s around. The silence is too loud in the driver’s seat when there’s meant to be someone riding shotgun. He’s been tryin’ to drown it out with Metallica, Guns N’ Roses, hell—he’s even settled for a new TOOL cassette—but in the flood of folks screamin’ about love and loss, damn. He needed to pull over and get some alcohol in him.

An hour and a half in, three beers down, he decides he needs something worse. A whiskey, sturdy and scorching. Nothing he needs more than to get a grip on himself; clench his jaw, throw the shot back. Ugh, it hurts. Reminds him he’s still real in the haze of cigarette smoke and dim lights. The pool table is illuminated with a heavenly glow, hypnotizing; he gravitates toward it—of course he does—picks up his cue again. His boots scuff heavy along the ground as he sidles around the table, lining up any shot, any shot’ll do. Anything to think about. Anything so he doesn’t have to think.

He loses the game, loses his head, finds himself on his ass in the parking lot. Yeah, okay. Awesome.

He doesn’t wanna go home yet, doesn’t wanna slip into the empty car where the air is clear and there’s no one in the backseat, so he parks himself on the hood and stares up at the spinning sky where clouds are dispersing and the stars are always in motion. He could lay here forever, hell, he could sleep like this no problem. Maybe he will.

He feels like he’s swimming through the sky, somehow good enough to keep himself from drowning, but he can’t keep it up forever. Someday he’ll tire and the mechanical rabbit will run on without him, runnin’ down the track and over the finish line. Dad’s gettin’ tired, too. Dean can tell. He could always tell. The lines keep carvin’ themselves deeper and deeper and someday they’ll start eatin’ into the bone of Dad’s face until he can’t smooth ‘em out no more. And someday it’ll happen to Dean.

He’s floating above himself staring half at sky half at gravel, thinkin’ *man, I hope I don’t live that long.*

Where the hell did he fall asleep last night? He feels like crap, too frickin’ insane for this right now. His back’s creaking like an old door and he can hardly turn his neck, geez; and there’s a weird sugary taste in his mouth. He doesn’t remember goin’ home with anyone, and it doesn’t feel like he’s outta his clothes or in anyone’s bed, but the sun sure is shining in his eyes with a vengeance.

Maybe cause it ain’t the sun.

From the moment he opens his eyes it only takes half a second before his mind turns on, shedding its regular morning drowsiness. He’s on his feet, taking everything in. Metal. Stainless steel, maybe, something shining. He feels like he’s inside a frickin’ mirror or somethin’. There’s a mattress of something fluffy, like someone took a sheep and sheared it and whipped the wool into shape, then laid it out with no pillowcase or mattress cover or nothing. And below that is just some kind of metal tray held up by a pair of chains, with an alcove where he assumes it could be tucked in when not in use. The room is, oh, ten feet by twelve. There’s lines all over the walls, like there’s more tucked away he can’t see; on the wall adjacent to the bed is the outline of a door. He can’t see any cameras, no restraints or weapons. Just himself in an empty room, the only weapon in sight.

He doesn’t need any weapon but himself, but it’d sure as hell come in handy right about now. He’s got no shotgun, no pistol, just a bowie knife in his boot. He’s saving that for emergencies. Best not to let anyone know he’s got it until he understands just what’s going on here.

Far as he can remember, he hasn’t pissed anyone off recently. Well, there was... Clara, was it? Courtney? Whatever. Sure, he’d left before she woke up, but usually a one night stand isn’t enough to kidnap someone over. There’s etiquette to it: never expect the guy to be there in the morning is rule numero uno. So... some monster? Did he gank some poor kid’s dad who just so happened to be a bloodthirsty werewolf, or what?

There’s something in the wall across from his bed, a crackling, gravelly sound, then a tray extends from the wall holding several different, violently coloured piles of varying consistencies. One is in a bowl, thin and beige and an awful lot like soup.

Great, so they’re trying to poison him. That’s just perfect. They want him to eat their slop and they won’t even have to touch him. Right, awesome. He’s not eating anything.

He walks the length of each wall, trying to pry open any of the cracks for even a peek at the other side. It’s gotta be near a highway or a factory; there’s a constant buzzing loud enough to rattle his teeth outta his skull if he isn’t careful. Then, of course, there’s his hangover. Of course there’s a damn hangover, there’s always a hangover when he doesn’t need one. But usually he doesn’t need to wake up frickin’ sober in some weird room with no way of knowin’ where he is.

Once he's determined there's not really much he can do, he sits on the far end of his bed and stares at the piles of whatever they want him to eat. Unless they want him to smear it on his face and start screaming like a damn ape, which he refuses to even consider. He closes his eyes to the scalding light and listens to the hum as it thrums through his body and everything around him. It's no highway, that's for damn sure. It's probably some kind of factory. He hates factories.

Passin' them on the road always feels good, feels like he's provin' a point to someone. Maybe to himself. That he's better than some smalltown kid stuck workin' in the only plant in town, the only job willin' to take him. No, he's got purpose. He's savin' people all the time, all over the country. He's not just some chum wasting his life away for a reward he'll never see; poor suckers, clocking in day in and day out for what? He sees the good he does on a daily basis.

Someday it'll be enough.

With a faint whirring, the tray retracts into the wall and a grinding kicks up within the outline of the door. A few heavy clunks later, it begins to sink into the floor, a space at the top opening. He jumps to his feet, ready for anything, but there's nothing to fight. On the other side is a hallway, long and dark and ominous: echoey stone and yellow lights caged like fireflies. He steps out cautiously, like a fawn pausing in dappled light, listening for any sign of another living thing. There's noise from the end of the tunnel, pulsing along to meet his calm heart, and like moth to flame he needs to follow it. Roaring. Clicking. Is it just the blood in his ears or can he also feel more vibrations beneath his feet? A rhythm, like—

The end of the tunnel.

Just a dead end, but on the other side is a waterfall of sound rushing down from above. Then the end of the tunnel isn't the end, it's fading away into a metal grate that lifts with a horrible grinding sound. Is he in some kind of freaky dungeon? He didn't sign up for that kinky shit, no way.

Like a sunrise, light pierces his headache until he wipes the glare from his eyes and finds a field of red, spongy material. Rotating around the center are rows and rows and rows of creatures, cheering and shouting and screaming a cacophany of unfamiliar sounds; they look down on the center like a circus, watching a group of larger creatures. Everything here looks different from everything else, a mess of fangs and claws and ectoplasm like pages torn out of Dad's journal. He's never seen anything like them, anything like this.

He hasn't got long to take in his surroundings and adjust to the fact that he's in a lair of monsters before there's something pushing him forward so the grate can close behind him, locking him in. All around the edge of the arena are other humans, all ages, both men and women, appearing to be from a variety of backgrounds and countries, standing petrified like lambs at a slaughterhouse.

Well damnit, Dean ain't no lamb.

He charges the monsters in the middle as they begin to disperse, rushing out towards the other humans like water spurting out the top of a fountain; as he rushes in, they begin to turn back like water circling a drain. With a shout he leaps upon one, a purplish-blue striped snake

creature—maybe a naga?—with eyestalks, short arms, a gaping leech-like mouth, and long claws. The knife in his boot burns like wildfire, beggin' to be drawn out and used, but he doesn't need it yet. Keep it secret until he can't live without it, that's his plan. Instead, he grasps the creature's arm as it writhes and bucks beneath him, and forces the tips of its claws into the soft space where its underbelly scales thin, the warm flesh of its neck where blood must flow like a river.

The claws sink in, in, in as he draws them toward himself, drags them down the creature's stomach until its entrails spill onto the ground. There are other things approaching, far more interested in him than the other humans cowering near the edges, and they hold a red lust in their eyes now that he's killed one of their own.

Ripping off a claw, he crouches and watches for the first monster to go for him. There's quite the assortment: several creatures with rocky skin who radiate heat and steam, a few with mottled skin, and lots of others. He's never seen monsters like these. There's one with horns and cloven feet like the wendigo pictured in Dad's book, but this one looks... more alive, less skeletal. Maybe well-fed, or maybe just not as far on its supernatural journey as most of the creatures Dad and the other hunters have seen. It's almost human, staring him down with a starving glare.

It'd be easy enough to take it down and duck outside this circle where he's quickly losing his escape route. He glances around, guaranteeing he knows where each *thing* is, and, without looking, leaps into the horned thing's space. Its antlers are tall and branching, easy to grab and hold himself up with as he jabs the disembodied claw into its throat, its eye, its shoulder where its heart should be. The flesh withers away from the wounds, drawing in on itself and thickening until he thinks he probably doesn't wanna eat beef jerky for a week or two. Still, the creature sinks to the floor bloodlessly. He hops over the antlers and, free of the encroaching circle, faces the monsters again. The claw in his hand is covered in some weird ashy substance, like the deer creature was already dead and just waiting to disintegrate. But its eyes had looked so alive!

No matter. There's still too many monsters to take out, and the other humans here aren't doing anything. The monsters are already turning their heads, eyeing them like fresh meat that won't kill anything in cold blood. Just because they're defenseless doesn't mean they're easy pickings.

One of the monsters breaks away from the pack, prowling toward an older man who seems unable to defend himself. The other humans are fine, for now, the attention is off them. But this man needs someone's help and the only person around is Dean.

He wonders briefly if Dad's on his way, if he even knows Dean's in trouble.

Probably not.

Dean doesn't make it in time; he turns, disappointed in himself, so he doesn't have to see the poor guy's demise. He's already failed.

The crowd cheers violently, breaking through Dean's concentration. He'd almost forgotten. Who the hell would wanna watch this kinda thing? Then, he guesses, if you're a monster who

kills people, why not make a sport of it and popularize it and monetize it and everything? If Dean weren't always travelling, he probably could'a been a good wrestler. Popular? Nah. But good anyways.

One by one, the other humans fall as the monsters pick them off one by one and cut Dean off from rescuing them. Still, he takes down more than half of the monsters by the time all the other humans are dead and it's just him left, kicking himself for not being able to save any of them. Not even one. That's on him, that's his fault, and Dad's gonna kill him. Maybe, y'know, it'd be better if Dad doesn't come around to save him this time. Dean can... he can rescue himself, that's fine, he can kill every monster here on his way out.

Dean is... well, he's the last one standing, piles of corpses already beginning to rot as blood runs in rivers across the spongy floor before gradually sinking down into the material. The crowd has fallen silent as they peer down at the human, the only living thing left in the arena. They judge him.

Then one must find him worthy, or strong, or successful, and the silence drags into cheers as he sways on his feet. This is too much, too many too fast, and he couldn't save anyone. Dully, he stares at the claw cutting lines in his grasp. It's almost clean. His clothes are covered in gunk, all sorts of monster blood and ash clotted into gross chunks that cling to his shirt and jeans like bile, bunching on the toes of his boots. He doesn't even want to look at the soles and see how hard they're gonna be to clean.

The cheering rises, swirling around him like a dirge. There's no melody, no tune, just a rotten scent and a bitter remembrance that he's still alive and kickin'. For now.

Dean gets what's happening here. It's been a while, a few fights, lots more meals and weird tech. He gets it. As much as he hates to admit it, and he has *no* idea how to break it to Dad someday, but he's a gladiator. A captive in a pit of monsters and creatures of the night. He's ganked more monsters here than he ever has before—probably in his whole life. Maybe soon he'll even surpass Dad. Nah, not likely. He'll escape before that. 'Sides, Dad's killed a lot.

They're givin' him one-on-one fights now, nothin' like that first fight. Matter of fact, he's starting to think he was some kinda fodder in that first fight, like the lions they used to use in the Coliseum, just somethin' to be killed and thrown away.

Killed and thrown away, huh?

Well, he plays by their rules for now—like he's got a choice—but he's good. Drawin' in bigger and bigger crowds to his solo fights, and they've given him a different room that overlooks the arena. It's bigger, more open, with one bed dropped down and one tucked away into the wall. The arena side is thick glass, too thick to break but easy enough to watch fights through, and on the other side is a solid wall that leads out into the hall. He's likin' the new digs; gives him room to exercise and stretch out, somethin' to really call his own here. Wherever *here* is.

He hasn’t seen any more humans pass through, though he can see every fight. It’s probably for the best. He’s in his element here, they just keep feeding him monsters to kill. No handwringing, no tracking ‘em down, no family or whatever. He drops ‘em dead and the crowd cheers. Like a—a bear eating honey straight from the hive. Sure, a few nicks and scrapes, but nothin’ he can’t handle; anythin’ they think might slow him down, they’ll take him straight to the infirmary. He’s gettin’ too valuable to lose, that’s what’s happening, and he really can’t complain. The room service is great. And the gankin’ monsters, too. Big plus. His only objection is the complete lack of anything that resembles food. After getting over his issue with the weirdly vibrant foods, he’s decided they’re *fine*. But not good. Just give him a hamburger and some fries or somethin’, doesn’t need to be fancy.

Sure, whatever, they need him in top shape to fight. Well, pretty soon he’ll stop fightin’ until they requisition some frickin’ fast food for him; he can feel his arteries clearing by the day. It’s not rabbit food, but it seems like some kind of ultra-nutritious crap meant to keep him at the top of his game like a prize racehorse.

Still, it’s fine. He gets to gank monsters; hell, they’re just feedin’ them all right to him, no hunting required. Sure, it gets kinda boring at times, and he misses Baby, but he still gets the thrill of the chase. He’s been letting himself go, in a way, letting it get to him. They’re letting him stab his heart out, sure, he’s gonna start enjoying the kill more. He doesn’t have to hold himself back for the sake of humans around, or pretend he’s not a psychopath, or whatever. Not like the monsters care; they’re all dead. And the ones that aren’t are here for big displays of violence, the spurts of blood and the dying screams and the steely determination in his eyes.

Just as he’s finding his element, they send in some creature dressed in white robes holding a long, thin canister like an EpiPen. Another creature enters to restrain his arms with their many hands. He struggles, wriggling in their grasp, but they don’t let up as the first monster presses the tip of the canister to the soft skin behind his ear. With a loud thunk, they depress something into his skin, and it smarts like he’s been smacked upside the head with a 2x4. Then they pull away, smooth the skin over, and leave him there to rub the base of his skull. The skin isn’t broken, but... it must have been, there’s a tiny bump beneath the skin.

It doesn’t move when he touches it. Could it be anchored in bone? The hell are they doing to him?

A few hours later they retrieve him again, restraining his arms and leading him down the hall of gladiators’ rooms to an elevator. Everything’s very clean, polished metal that reflects him until he outnumbers the guards. He should kill them all right now. He should drop them on the spot and break out. But he’s gotta wonder where they’re takin’ him.

So he waits. He lets them lead him up the elevator, down several halls that turn back in on themselves, and into an office where a monster sits poised behind a desk. It has a muscular body, some kind of shorn skull for a head and a vibrant black-and-red collar with bells hanging off fabric petals. The closest creature he knows off the top of his head is the Dutch capirussa, with a jester’s collar but a human face.

“You,” it says, “are becoming a problem.” When it speaks, a thin ringing radiates from whatever they inserted earlier until he feels like he’s got a hangover. He *wishes* he had a hangover. “We thought we’d simply restock our supply of livestock at the nearest planet as we passed; grab a few lonely critters, be on our way. Then you won. You, Human, were a wonderful underdog. The audience, the crowd, they *love* you. But you’ve been killing all my best gladiators, and if you continue on as you are, I’m going to have to place you in a fight you can’t win.”

It’s the first time anyone’s spoken to Dean since he’s been here; usually they grunt, or make their creepy crawly inhuman sounds. And he’s supposed to believe...

Okay, they picked him up from the planet. So he’s in space? He’s in frickin’ space and no one thought to tell him until now. That’s just great. So Dad’s not here, no one’s comin’ to save him because he’s not even on Earth. They aren’t creatures of the night, they’re aliens. Aliens, dude, frickin’ aliens, and the owner’s an emo ripoff of the Killer Klowns.

“There ain’t a fight in the universe I can’t win,” he smirks, eyes lidded, projecting comfort and trust he’d never extend to this creature in a hundred years. It doesn’t look amused, so he shifts gears. Dean looks the monster—alien—in the eye through empty sockets, and squares his shoulders. “Listen, pal, I don’t care why you think I’m here. I’m a hunter. My whole *job* is killing bastards like you who pose a threat to the regular Joes of the world. Hunter, underdog, whatever. I’m just happy to keep killin’ whatever I’m up against.”



Leaning forward over its desk, the alien steeples its long, bony fingers. “I don’t think you understand. The demand for you is growing; you know, you have *quite* the following. The issue is that I’m running out of gladiators for you to fight. To keep them entertained, I need you to stop killing everyone you fight. If you can’t promise that, I can’t afford to keep you alive.” Its tone is steady, calm, everything Dean likes to hear when discussing life or death.

Either he keeps ganking monsters and they kill him for it, or he gives up and stops doing the one thing he's always done. "I got no loyalty to you or anyone else," he decides. If they wanna force him, wanna punish him, so be it. He's gonna go down swingin'.

The arena master stares at him for a moment, then tilts its head briefly. Whether in acceptance or disdain, Dean can't tell. It gives an unknowable gesture with its hands, and in response the guards grab him by the arms and begin to lead him back to his cell; he doesn't fight. What is there to fight? He's in space, surrounded by aliens. Even if he were to escape and fight his way through every monster onboard, he'd have no idea how to fly a spaceship. Sure, he's seen Star Wars a hundred times just like anyone else, but that's... that's fake, theoretical. He can't even read their language. Languages? Who cares. He's frickin' stuck.

Dean changes nothing after their little talk. If he's here with the opportunity to kill monsters, he's gonna kill every bastard that crosses his path. After three more fights this way, he returns to his room to find the arena manager standing there, cloven hooves bare against the grated floor, and another creature cowering on the floor behind it.

"I've brought a... *gift*," the manager says pleasantly, with the underlying tone of a poisonous butterfly flashing its wings. "A roommate for you to take care of. If anything happens to him, on *your* head it will be."

The creature is around his size, if he curled up the way it has—maybe a little smaller—and it's shivering, watching the capirussa with wide eyes. Its back curls in a way that seems like it may be both bipedal and quadrupedal. He'll find out soon enough if that's true. It has large... horns? antlers? or something like them; branching like antlers, but each branch curls like a ram's horns. Instantly he imagines this to be what Lucifer looked like when he fell—a fallen angel with ten halos tilted around his head. He's trouble, is what he is. And when he looks to Dean, his eyes look just like Sam's. Those damn puppy eyes he could never resist.

Great, just great.

The owner leaves them alone in what's now not just Dean's room. He grunts and collapses onto his mattress; across the room, the other bed has been unfolded from the wall, and he gestures to it vaguely. He can't kill this monster.

It's, fine, it's a worthwhile deal. Keep this one alive and gank the rest. And someday in the distant future when he's done here, he'll kill this one too.

By then it'll be more grown up.

He's more on edge than he's been almost his whole time here, this kid's givin' him a heart attack. Locked in with it, he can't know when it'll regain its wits and whether it'll slaughter him in cold blood. The knife burns in his boot.

"I'm Adam," the kid says eventually. "I *just* came of age. Can't believe I'm here already."

“Maybe you shoulda been more careful,” Dean grumbles, “wouldn’a ended up here where I gotta put up with you.”

Adam huffs briefly. “You’re supposed to tell me who *you* are, not criticize my life,” he titters.

Dean doesn’t dignify any of that with a response.

The monster continues anyways. “I mean, I know who you are. Who doesn’t? The great gladiator, galactically renowned for wiping out a pack of gladiators in your very first fight. You were just supposed to be fodder, but you did it, you really killed them all! You’re a legend. But you’re real, you’re not *completely* made up. So... what’s your name, what should I call you?”

“Name’s Dean. I kill monsters like you.” He turns his head to the wall and tunes the kid out. Ants run up and down his arms and legs, they gnaw on the bones in his hands; he can’t stand being around a monster all the time. He won’t make it through this dumb challenge, and the arena manager knows it, which makes him all the more determined to try.

The best Dean can do is attempt to teach him how to fight. The kid picks it up scary fast, enough to worry Dean that one of these days he’s gonna fall asleep in their shared cell and never wake up. What other choice has he got, though? The kid’s gotta stay alive, so Dean’s gotta teach him how to survive a fight.

It’s actually kind of a challenge. He runs the kid through a few basic paces, watching how his body moves. He switches fluidly between standing on all fours and walking on his hind legs, or the other way round. It doesn’t seem to matter much to his coordination, giving him a versatility Dean almost envies, were it not for the fact that he doesn’t wanna be anything but human.

He studies how Adam’s body moves: particularly his center of balance, use of limbs, and flexibility. His front limbs split at the elbow; one branch leads down to a foot-paw sort of thing, with thick padding on which he walks, and the other branch leads to a more hand-like structure with flexible digits, two of which appear to be opposable. His horns are also quite the weapon, and seem to be rather strong: horns, not antlers. These won’t fall off easily with the turn of the seasons—if there was seasons in space. Right.

In his mind, he can imagine the horns sharpened down into blades, or carved into handles, but of course that’s useless to him here. Adam isn’t going to spend his time filing down his precious horns, which... seems like it’d hurt, from what Dean’s seen, but he can’t really know enough to judge.

He works with the kid on a new style of fighting, starting with the blend of military martial arts Dad taught him and Sammy—Sam, now, it’s Sam—and finding where it fails. The extra arms get in the way a lot, for one. Frickin’ monsters and their freaky anatomy. The upside to all this is that Dean gets a chance to familiarize himself with some nonhuman anatomy unlike any creatures on Earth, and he can practice adapting his own skills more. It’s one thing to be fightin’ monsters with similar anatomy when you can just hold a shotgun to your shoulder

and set it off; it's another to be fighting hand-to-hand with all sorts of different monsters with no advance warning. He's never been able to study their weaknesses before. Now, his study has two benefits. First, he gets to practice. Second, he puts the kid in his place.

He needs to remind Adam that he's a monster, and that Dean doesn't approve of monsters. The kid knows by now that Dean doesn't want him alive. Together, they've made their peace with it.

They don't talk more than they have to; the kid shuts up eventually, and Dean sees his expression harden drastically after the first real fight. He leaves as a cub and returns a lion, blood smeared across his face. He's a disgrace, and Dean loves it. Adam, though, doesn't seem to enjoy it; he doesn't revel in violence the way Dean does. Maybe he doesn't understand that he's a monster, that monsters are meant to kill. It's nothing new to Dean, that monsters kill. Someday Adam will understand. He's lost his youthful energy, a haunted look glazing his eyes over. It's the same look Sam got when he found Dad's journal, when Dean had to explain what Dad did. Yeah, monsters under the bed and in the closet can be real; and monsters kill; and he kills *them* until everyone in the world is safe. And now Dean kills because it's the only thing he knows how to do here. There's aliens, there's weird food he's never seen before, and there's blood on his hands.

Good, he thinks, that the kid's growing up. This is no place for youth to remain.

It falls off Adam like a selkie coat slipping from his shoulders: his haunches thicken like a horse's, both sets of arms bulking up as he almost begins to rival Dean, his stature filling out to stand tall and sturdy. Dean almost feels guilty about it, like it's Sam growing up in an instant all over again. But what could Dean do? This isn't on him, it's never gonna be on him. He's just gotta keep Adam alive and he's doing what it takes to fulfill that promise.

It's no skin off his back if the kid's, what, traumatized? Angry? Who cares?

Dean's perfectly capable of watching his own back while he sleeps. He's capable of defeating Adam in a fight, capable of killing him if the need arises. He's no stranger to self-defense and he's not shy about his violent tendencies. Is he Adam's keeper?

Adam is improving in leaps and bounds. He's still no match for Dean, but what dumbass would train a monster to be able to defeat them? He still plans to kill Adam as soon as the challenge ends—if it ends—and he's not gonna make that any harder for himself than necessary.

Still, the kid can handle himself in a fight. Dean watches, observes all the mistakes he makes until his inevitable victory and points them all out when the kid wakes up from his post-fight nap.

When they're led down the same tunnel to the arena, Dean's not worried. As a team, he's pretty sure they can win at the snap of his fingers. Then the door opens, the grate lifts, and they walk into an arena filled with deadly creatures. They're reptilian, slimy and gross as hell, the size of a small dog with teeth that grow in rows constantly pushed forward and out

like a shark. These aren't sentient, they're not meant to win the fight; they're just meant to kill and devour any gladiator they face. Dean's beat 'em before in a two-on-one fight, but now he and Adam are outnumbered... he counts four to one, and he doesn't know if Adam's ready for the painful venom that sinks from the creatures' gums into the bite. Not that he cares about the kid, but he knows if Adam can't handle it, it's Dean who'll take the fall.

They haven't got weapons, only their wits. The creatures are obviously immune to their own saliva, which... Dean shouldn't have had to find out the hard way, but he was cornered. It was a last resort kinda thing at the time.

Okay, the critters seem to have cooperation, but with their attention divided between two people, they'll probably try to focus on both at once. Dean and Adam are rather average sized, if a little small among aliens, so the things... he needs a name for them. The lizardogs won't see them as much of a threat.

"We'll split up," he tells Adam, too quiet for the announcer to hear what they're talking about but loud enough to be heard over the roar of the crowd. It used to distract him, when the implant first started translating their cheers and gave him horrible headaches; he's grown used to it, especially with the extended use when Adam first started rambling to him all day long. "You head to that side, handle half the pack, I'll deal with the rest."

Nodding, Adam strides to the left, muscles finally more prominent than his skeleton, and Dean almost feels a strike of pride. Almost. His efforts to keel the kid alive and hold up his end of the challenge are paying off.

The lizardogs don't split quite evenly, crowding five to Adam and three to Dean. Adam does look more intimidating, the coil of his frame clearly hiding greater stature than Dean. Well, easy enough. Dean's gotten good with his hands up here. Back on Earth that kinda line woulda done him wonders, too, but he's not tryin' to get laid by some random alien lady. That'd be weird—especially since his whole schtick is killing everything that isn't human.

It's goin' fine: he's snappin' lizardog neck, kickin' lizardog ass, all that fun crap.

Adam yelps, cry cutting through Dean's focus.

The kid's on the ground, covered by four living lizardogs tearing him apart chunk by chunk. Dean should leave the kid there if he wants to stick to his morals. He should stay in his lane and let the fight take its course. But he's supposed to protect the creature, wrong as it feels; doing so keeps Dean alive long enough to kill even more monsters. Besides, someday *he's* gonna be the one to kill the kid. To let the lizardogs do it for him... that'd be lame.

Fine.

He drops the lizardog that's in his hands—or, well, the corpse of it—and shoulders past the last lizardog on him so he can reach out and rip them off Adam. Viciously tossing them to the ground, he places himself between them and Adam.

It's wrong. Horribly wrong. He shouldn't be turning his back to something like Adam, a monster that could kill him if he's not paying attention.

This is how he stays alive: he keeps his end of the deal. Okay, right, five lizardogs. Venom that doesn't kill him, just stings. Sharp-ass teeth. If he doesn't get a chance to snap their neck, his best bet is to make them bleed out by ripping into their chest or stomach. The neck, soft as it may be, is too close to the teeth and the spit. But they've got a soft section where their stomach is, almost gelatinous, that's easy enough to reach into and rip open once he first got past the fact that it was real frickin' gross.

The other problem is that they're snappin' at him with the toothy end, and the stomach is, for the most part, on the other side of this wall of teeth. For all five of 'em.

But one, on the side, nearest to Adam's head...

It's chewing eagerly on a broken section of Adam's horn. Dean can work with that.

Behind him, the kid's slowly rising to his feet to keep fighting. Dean can admire his spirit, his determination. With Adam somewhat in the game, Dean's okay leaving him open to attack for a moment while he dives to wrestle the chunk of horn from the lizardog. Its slobber covers his hand, but he's got no open bites there yet so it doesn't sting. It's just sticky and disgusting. Well, it's about to get a lot worse.

He holds it down by the head, repositions the horn so the tip extends between his thumb and forefinger as he grasps it like a knife, and drives the sharp point into the lizardog's stomach. It yelps and yowls mindlessly as he rips its gelatinous stomach open, the chunky fluid pouring out onto the spongy floor, something like jello. Yuck.

There's a brush of air behind him, and he turns faster than he thought possible, driving the stake up just in time to catch a lizardog under the chin. The tip sprouts from the slope between its eyes. Its weight collapses against Dean's chest, knocking him back but providing him with a makeshift shield as the other creatures also turn to focus on him. He's the bigger threat, and they know they're trapped in this arena. They don't even see Adam as a threat, injured as he is. There's only three left. Dean can do this

Rumbling deep in their chests, they approach slowly in unison, rows of misaligned teeth glistening with the steaming drool that slips between them and drops to the floor.

Dean catches Adam's eye, gestures to the lizardog between them, and makes his own plan for the other two. He tosses the corpse that hangs from the horn, and it lands awkwardly atop the lizardog in the center; he takes the opportunity to focus on the third, lunging around the side and jutting the horn into between its scales.

It rears up, jaws mawing in his direction. He throws his free arm across its mouth to give it something to bite down on and to buy himself time. The teeth break skin as he drags the horn down its side, jello-y insides sliding out like someone forgot to set it long enough. The pain erupts within each puncture, like someone took a buncha hot pokers and branded 'em in his skin. The last lizardog comes at him outta nowhere, musta wriggled out from beneath the corpse of its packmate, and locks onto his shoulder. He struggles to take the horn back, but with his other arm trapped there's little he can do. He can't get the right angle to stab this bastard.

It rears back, ripping a chunk of his shoulder off. He can see the bone, the top of it where it fits into the socket, and realizes he doesn't have control over that arm anymore. Not enough, anyways.

He's shocked, too shocked to move as Adam kills the last lizardog and pries the dead jaws from his left forearm. Blood is pulsing through his shoulder, not making it to his arm. He's seein' bits of himself he's never seen. It's different when he's lookin' at the corpse of someone he didn't know, but when it's *him*... He's gotta live with this injury, now. The struggle to regain movement when he's lost a big hunk'a muscle. The blood loss.

Oh, yeah, the blood loss. That's what the black is at the edges of his vision, black swirling with stars and colours and rainbows like an oil spill in his head.

He's never protectin' another monster for as long as he lives—*if* he lives any longer.

Adam drags him to the side of the arena, where they load him up on a stretcher and rush him to the infirmary. He's only been there a couple times in passing for smaller injuries; it's too neat of a place to die. He doesn't wanna die in a hospital room. He wants to die on a battlefield with a banshee's claws in him. He'd even settle for a werewolf or something cool like that. Not frickin' surgery *after* the fight.

It hurts, and he hasn't even got any alcohol to numb the pain, but he keeps himself conscious as they graft some kinda fake skin to his shoulder and carve it down to whatever it should look like, sewing it into place. Blood begins to seep back into the rest of his arm, and he can even move his fingers a bit by the time they take off their gloves.

Darkness hits as they're wheeling him back to his room. Realistically, he could walk, but he ain't complainin' after the fight he just had. He wants to lay down and sleep for a week straight, maybe more. Long enough to get drunk in his imagination and sleep off the resulting hangover.

Funny, if he's unconscious, why's everything glowin' red?

Somethin' white flies down the hallway, near the ceiling, looking an awful lot like a ghost. He hasn't run into any ghosts on the ship, which sorta led him to think it's not possible in space where bodies can't be buried, but maybe this is a special circumstance. He knows they used to toss dead sailors overboard as burial; up here, do they just jettison the bodies? Gross. Maybe ghosts are real here; but he'd expect a few more to be tied to the arena, or even to *him*, and he hasn't seen that yet.

Doesn't matter. There's a ghost floating down the hall, some kind of iridescent form like someone tied a bunch of ragged and torn bedsheets together, doused 'em in shimmering oil, and tugged 'em along on a string. But seven feet off the ground. It releases some sort of pulse, blowing Dean's greasy hair off his forehead but knocking away the nurses at the sides of his stretcher. Then it leans down close and examines his shoulder.

"I can help that," it says in a breathy, hoarse voice. "My name is Castiel, and if you are willing to cooperate, I can free you."

Dean hardly dares to breathe with it so close to his face. Is it a dream, a hallucination? He's never reacted this way to pain but maybe one of the meds they gave him is doin' this somehow. He wouldn't know, he's never needed any of their weird alien medicine before. He should fight it. He needs to fight it. He's in no shape to fight it.

With a limb like breezy, torn fabric, it lifts something to his lips. "Eat. I know you are hungry."

Tentatively, he draws his tongue across it and waits for the sting, the telltale buzz of poison, but it never arrives. And it tastes... well, goddamnit, it tastes like a burger patty. Cold, sure, but he ain't picky. He's been eatin' day old burgers from the fridge since he was a kid. Besides, it's been who knows how long since he's had a familiar flavor. He assents, releasing his hesitation. He's already half dead anyway, why not let himself have this? It's a different texture, something smoother like ice cream or butter, but it tastes just like a plain burger. He can almost pretend, when he's done, that he's just eaten food back on Earth, and if he closes his eyes it's like he's just lyin' in a motel somewhere after patchin' himself up.

But he's not, and there's a weird alien floating over him, and he's barely holdin' onto his life as is.

The creature reaches up to his face, smearing something across his forehead. "That should heal you. We have little time, listen to me. We will smuggle weapons to you and your roommate. In return, we will ask for information about the guards' schedule, the layout, and other information. Then we will tell you what comes next, and we will free you."

Blinking himself awake for the third time in a row, Dean frowns. "Why? Why me?"

"We are freeing all gladiators. We feel it is... *inhumane* the way you are forced to survive or kill. You, Human, we trust to stay alive long enough to bring this plan to fruition."

He huffs out a wry laugh. "You know I'm here to kill the monsters, right?"

A ripple runs along the alien's body, accentuating its iridescence and the way even in the red light, the colours shift and swirl beautifully. "We do not approve of your killing, but we are aware. A time will come when you will change. This much is known, this much is trusted. You will change, Human, as you have changed from Survivor to Killer to Monster."

"I'm no different than I was, Castiel. I've always been a hunter, always will be; you're not gonna change that just 'cause you think you can make me owe you one. That's one favour, one time I'll save your ass. That's it. I'm not—not giving up my life goal for you." He winces as a headache begins to form, not from the implant but instead a real, genuine headache. Aw, that's just awesome. But whatever the alien did earlier, his shoulder and forearm feel lighter, dragged down less by pain.

The alien just hovers above him a while longer, then turns and leaves the way it came.

Weird. Real weird. He doesn't like it.

He’s worked this long to stay alive, and somethin’ can just come in here when he’s not at the top of his game and... not kill him?

Any other monster he knows would take the opportunity to off him, just like that. Except maybe Adam.

And now he’s got a choice. He really hasn’t had one of those in a while. He can help whoever’s workin’ to free everyone from this dumb place, or he can... turn them in? How would that work? Okay, he can refuse to help. But where does that get him? If he gets out, he can try to head back home. He can see Sam again, maybe track down Dad or somethin’. He can get back to hunting things that go bump in the night. Stuff he knows.

Tossing and turning in his bed, trying to get comfortable with his shoulder half artificial, he runs his good hand down his face. Part of him’s gotten used to not making decisions, just walking to and from the arena, killing everything in sight except the guards. It’s hard to know what the best option will be when he doesn’t even know what it’s like outside this... station, ship, whatever it is.

Good thing he’s got a while to decide.

The first weapon arrives the next morning. Dean wakes to a guard poking something into the room and chucking a blanket at Dean’s head. It’s a strange weapon, probable some firearm he’s not used to ‘cause it’s frickin’ alien tech.

Adam’s still asleep in the other bunk.

He picks up the firearm, points it at the kid experimentally—he certainly hopes it’s the right end—but he doesn’t pull the trigger... or, he doesn’t push any buttons that might be the trigger.

Holding it in his hands, turning it over, he thinks on it and reaches a conclusion. He wants to gank monsters, sure, but he wants to be free, too. He wants to track ‘em down himself, not just kill whatever fresh meat’s placed in front of him.

Two nights later, he spares his opponent for the first time. “We’re gettin’ out,” he mutters in its flattened ear. “Get on board or get shot. Spread the word, Dean Winchester sends his regards on behalf of some guy named Castiel.”

The alien, terrified, nods its head as Dean stands and walks back to the tunnel that leads outta here. Above his head, the announcer is shocked to silence. His alien opponent doesn’t even move to stand. Dean just waits by the grate.

“Well folks, it seems our dear champion has... found some spare mercy in his soul for his opponent. The Human has won, and the Arkion is the first opponent to face it and survive! Time for a bit of soul searching from them both, I’d say. Wonder why the Human chose to spare this one? How strange! All the more reason to tune in—“

The gate lifts and Dean prowls back to his room with no need for an escort. He's goin' frickin' soft is what's happening.

He repeats this every fight: twenty, thirty, forty monsters he should be killing, instead sparing them. And the worst part is that when he lets them live, he sees how shocked they are. He sees a form of camaraderie there, and he... he realizes what he's done. He doesn't want to understand the depth of it, not really, but he sees it now. He doesn't care about the other gladiators; he doesn't care about Adam; he doesn't care about monsters.

No, that's not quite right.

Dean doesn't care about any monster but himself.

The blanket is big enough to drape off the side and foot of Dean's bed, and surprisingly comfortable after... however long he's gone without a blanket. Listen, he's not a wimp, he can sleep anywhere in anything, even his filthy, torn clothes that they keep haphazardly patching up between fights. But the blanket is nice, and he'll fight anyone who thinks it makes him weak.

It also hides the stash of weapons beneath his bunk which grows almost daily. They've started giving him incomplete blueprints, which he fills in to the best of his ability, and timetables, which he fills with the few guard schedules he knows. He can't give them all the information they want, so they'll have to make a leap of faith at some point, but he really does try to remember everything properly.

They give him a large bag one day, telling him it's time.

There's going to be an all-out brawl, every man for himself in the arena; Dean's job is to smuggle the bag of weapons down to the arena by dropping the guards first, then distribute them among the gladiators who will dispatch the remaining guards. Castiel's group has promised to deal with the audience, whatever that means. Dean doesn't really care. They're all monsters, too, and they pay good money to come watch the fights in person. Screw them.

The moment guards open the door, he's bursting through, swinging at the guards with measured strikes that take them down almost instantly. Only one has time to draw its gun, and Dean quickly notes the way it holds the gun as he dodges the line of fire before knocking the gun out of its hand and dropping it to the floor. For good measure, he picks up the gun and shoots each one to make sure they're extra dead.

He and Adam both make it to their entrance to the arena with no issues, waiting for the other gladiators to be positioned and ready. More join them in their tunnel, and Adam explains the situation as Dean quickly shoots the guards that accompany them. Together, they're really not such a bad team. Or they wouldn't be, if Adam wasn't an alien creature and Dean wasn't a monster.

The grate raises, and they all enter the arena. Dean has already distributed weapons to this group, so it's only a matter of spreading the message to everyone else. They've all fought

Dean, or fought each other, and lines are drawn. Several gladiators abstain, probably assuming the guards will always win. Dean scoffs at them. Survival's always worth a shot, no matter how slim. This, here, is no way to live; they're foolish not to embrace a chance to escape. But it's not up to him.

As he finishes handing out weapons, the lights on the audience go out—not how they dim during fights, they're in true darkness, and a voice speaks in place of the announcer.

It's a testament to Dean's will that he doesn't stick around and listen to Castiel's hypnotizing voice, proof that he wasn't hallucinating. No. He can't stick around, he's got work to do.

The grates never closed behind them, leaving easy access to the guards' routes. The armed gladiators disperse to take care of them while the remainder huddles in the center of the arena. Dean doesn't know what they'll do when the insurrection wins; he doesn't care. They're monsters. They've killed things, people. It's not his job to care what happens to them.

But after being in their shoes for so long... he absently wishes them the best.

Dean finds himself riding the elevator to the floor where the arena manager's office resides. When the doors open, he sees instantly that he's too late. The arena master is facing off against Adam with a grimace. Adam holds a knife, something Dean never taught him to use. He can only hope the kid already knows how to use it, but if his grip is any indication... he has no hope.

"Ahh," the capirussa purrs, "excellent, our Human. Dean, they say? It's no pleasure to finally meet you. Adam, this *is* the one who has mentored you, correct?"

Chancing a glance backwards, Adam smiles at Dean and nods to the manager.

"You look up to him? Hm. You shouldn't. You know, the only reason he protects you, the only reason he cares about you at all, is because we made a deal. Before you understood what we were saying—you were scared stiff, and we hadn't given you the chip just yet. But I gave him an ultimatum: if he killed you, let you die, anything of the sort, I would kill *him*." The manager takes an echoing step forward, another. Dean's fists clench to see it so close to Adam. It could kill him now, rip him apart and then come after Dean. Then it wraps its arm around Adam's shoulders, turning him around gently and pointing to Dean. "I believe it was —how did I say it?—'On your head be it.' He doesn't care about you, not really."

"Bullshit, he's here to save me. He's the one that taught me to fight!" Adam counters, glancing between the two.

"He's here to kill *me*, isn't that right, old Monster? He wouldn't risk one hair on his dangerous head to save a creature like you or me. He only cares about killing and killing and *killing*." It tosses Dean an empty look, the empty sockets where its eyes should be burning with black fire.

It's true. Dean is here to kill it, not to save Adam. But he's... for once, he's afraid. Just as afraid as when a monster takes Sam or Dad, just as afraid as when they're in danger. He

won’t lie to the kid. “Move, Adam, I’m here to kill this bastard. I don’t need you in the way.”

“He’ll shoot right through you, Adam! He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about you.”

“Shut up, bitch!” The gun is out of ammo, clicking when he aims it at the alien’s eye over Adam’s shoulder. Fine. He’s got a backup, a shotgun. The spray will hit Adam, though. New plan, quick, something.

There’s nothing in the hall but walls and ceiling. Those aren’t helpful.

Other possibilities depleted, Dean rushes in and pulls Adam’s shoulder from the manager’s grip, sending him careening away. Dean is up close and personal with it, and still he can’t tell what it’s deal is. He grabs it by the throat, applies pressure until its spindly fingers pry him off; then, ripping his hands away, he cocks the shotgun and fires it directly into its chest.

Its hooves reverberate as it steps back, heavy, dying. It laughs. Light and airy, like something that loves fighting finally meeting its match. Dean knows; he’s laughed the same way many times. This time he’s worried.

“Dean?” Adam ventures. When Dean turns, he sees the kid pointing to a pool of very red, very human blood that’s trickled down his leg. He must be injured.

“Get Cas,” he says, a fool’s errand. The kid nods halfheartedly, dropping into the elevator.

Behind Dean, a smoky smell accompanies a sizzling sound.

It’s right behind him, isn’t it?



The manager is twice its original size, chest filling back in with tendrils that knit its flesh together. It looms over him with the trademark grin of a jawless skull.

Swinging its arms, its bony fingers grasp at him as he ducks and dodges, rolling beneath its arms to climb up its hunched back, bowed to fit within the ceiling. This hall doesn't seem super well thought out, if the manager's the one who owns everything. Didn't it expect it would transform at some point into this... whatever the hell this is?

He doesn't have time to question it as it bucks its spine up to the ceiling, nearly crushing him until he drops down from eight feet in the air, rolling the energy out. The shotgun is lying on the floor by the elevator, and the moment he spots it he feels the air shift—the alien has spotted it, too, and snatches it up impossibly fast. He instead leaps to his feet and ducks in too close for it to shoot him without also shooting itself. Using its jester bells, he latches onto its collar and pulls himself up. He's only got one shot at this, he's gotta get it right.

Letting go with one hand, he pulls the knife from his boot.

It’s nothing special, just a bowie knife with a short serrated segment near the guard. The grip is wooden and the blade is stainless steel, all riveted in place. Simple. It was also the first thing Dad gave him when they started hunting together, the first thing that was really Dean’s that wasn’t also Sammy’s.

He stabs, over and over again, patternless and thoughtless, slashing and hacking as blood pours around him and his grip on the aliens’ collar begins to tremble with exertion.

Once it regains its wits, it bats him away with ease, knife stuck in its collarbone, or where it would be were the creature human.

Cas materializes behind the manager, puffed out like... like a cloud, or a sail in the wind. He shouldn’t be here, he wasn’t supposed to come. This was supposed to be Dean’s fight.

When the capirussa turns around, Cas becomes something mostly solid and rams forward into it. Off-balance, it stumbles and falls backward, where Dean shakes himself out of his stupor and crawls forward to take back his knife and deliberately rip the blade across its throat.

It garbles, blood bubbling up and pooling at Dean’s knees.

“It’s dead, Dean,” Cas says.

When did Dean start thinking of him as anything but Castiel? Why does he feel so... so okay with asking for this creature’s help, with trusting him to save Dean when Dean knew he wouldn’t last alone?

“It’s dead. Everything else is complete. You’re free.” He puts a—what Dean assumes is meant to be a hand—on Dean’s shoulder, trying to be comforting, but he doesn’t feel comforted.

This whole time, Dean’s been... he’s been as bad as the monsters he hunts. He killed without remorse, without cause, without thought. At least on Earth he’d researched, only tracked down monsters that had hurt humans. Here, he killed because he assumed all creatures were killers. He’s committed atrocities here, the blood on his hands thick enough to drown him several times over, and yet here’s a kindhearted creature looking at all he’s done and offering kindness regardless.

Adam, too, appears to crouch beside Dean.

Dean’s... he’s loathe to admit that he’s jealous of Adam. When he was young, learning to hunt, Dad threw him in the deep end. He was never coddled, never protected except from certain death. Injuries were... they were just a kind of punishment, so he could identify where he’d gone wrong. They were a reminder of how to change, how to improve. But Adam was thrust into this terrible place, and still he had someone to protect him. Sure, Dean wasn’t just doing it out of the goodness of his heart, but Adam was protected nonetheless. He was taught. He had a beginning kinder than any Dean could have imagined for himself.

But Adam, despite everything Dean's done, has returned, and he rests his first forearm over Dean's other shoulder comfortably. "I knew you wouldn't shoot through me," he says. "Whether you want to or not, you like me."

Dean just stares at the corpse of the capirussa. It's not a capirussa, not really; it's done terrible things, but it made the choice every time. It wasn't driven by any sort of nature, it's not some mythical being that's ontologically evil according to all the lore books.

It made its choices, and Dean has made his choices, and everyone here has made choices that bring them to where they are.

Cas asks what he'll do now. Well, first, he finds out where the hell in space he is. He's... what now? Five years from home, travelling at a nonstop pace. Five years. Sam must've gotten his undergrad by now. Dad must've given up on him. Dean can't even imagine how they'll look when he returns.

But... does he really want to return? Sam's happy off at college. Dad loves hunting, and without Dean to hold him back, he's probably doin' great. Space is open, it's free. And there are two aliens looking at him wondering where he's going next.

He rubs the back of his neck. "Maybe a mercenary, maybe a pizza guy. But, uh, if you've got an open spot on a ship, Cas, I'd... I'd really appreciate that."

Cas beams, undulating calmly as the glow around him brightens. "Of course, Dean. We would love to welcome you and Adam aboard with us. In fact, I believe if we teach you to fly a ship, we've got the perfect job for you."

Dean stands, dark blood dripping from his legs and hands, and he stares at the knife in the creature's neck.

It's still there when the cleanup crew comes along to jettison the bodies; they jettison the knife just the same. Dean doesn't need it anymore. He has the blood on his hands and the choices on his conscience to remind him what a monster can do.

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