

Cult- Episode Eleven

By Kittsbud & BurstynOut

Defeated, Sam lowered his eyes and waited for the inhuman growl and hiss he knew would bring his demise.

Instead, laughter.

Haris, his eyes still lowered to the floor chuckled softly. "Giving up so easily, Samuel? I gotta say, I'm disappointed. You've gone soft on me." He shrugged and stepped closer to his captive allowing his host's breath to part the few strands of Sam's long hair that weren't plastered to his forehead with nervous sweat. "I guess it's understandable. Too many years spent hiding behind Daddy and big brother. My bad, I suppose."

Haris drew back again, eyeing Sam thoughtfully, his ears carefully trained on John and Dean behind him. "'Ts alright boy. I'm here now. Hiding's over. Obviously, that was all just an enormous waste of time. You've just been kidding yourselves all these years. You were never going to escape; not from me, not from your destiny, not from yourself...I've always had my claws in you, boy."

"You lie!" Sam spat, struggling against the invisible grip. The words were sharp, and his face was red with pain and anger, but he refused to look anywhere but at his captor. John and Dean would've seen the empty, dull look of resignation behind the biting remarks. They weren't the only ones who'd learned to don masks.

Again, laughter.

"Ha, ha, yes, that I do," Haris agreed readily. "But only when I need to. Truth works much better sometimes, though. But I do go on. Don't mind me. Ya see, a couple millennia in the ether kinda makes one miss the sound of one's own voice. And this guy," he indicated the body in which he resided, "is a lawyer. Has quite a vocabulary, and he can go on for hours. I think I like him. I may never stop talking." He half-winked and cocked a grin toward Sam who lifted his chin defiantly and looked down his nose at the demonic yellow eyes. "Just letting ya know." Haris sneered.

Sam stole a glance at John and Dean, refusing to meet their eyes but noting the way they stood half-crouched as though ready to take on Haris bare-handed. That would be suicide.

"Oh, Samuel, don't worry about them," Haris said. "They can't lay a hand on me or you unless I let them. Of course, if I let them, they won't live to regret it. That's on you. Just say the word, and I'm sure they'll spring to your aid. Wouldn't be the first time, but it'd sure as hell be the last. But then, that's kinda *your* M. O. isn't it? You've been ruining their lives for twenty-three years now."

Sam shook his head, eyes squinting angrily. "You lying bastard! Leave them out of it!"

"Oh, gladly, Samuel," Haris consented, face open and almost amicable. "I would have liked nothing better than to never have had to deal with John or Dean Winchester at all. You're the one who keeps them mired in this Samuel. You're the one who's ruined their lives. Made your father a vengeance-driven widower. Made your brother a pathetic social outcast who thinks his only purpose in life is to look out for you and Daddy. There's no chance he'll ever get a life of his own."

Sam grunted and struggled against the weight that pressed him into the wall once more. He couldn't help but meet his brother's gaze this time. Though Dean looked as stoic and concentrated as he always did in the thick of a hunt, Sam recognized the wavering shimmer in his eyes all too well.

"Oh yes, poor Deanie," Haris sneered, catching Sam's glance. "So broken, so pathetic, so lost. And who's fault is that? Hmm, Sam? Who was it that took little Deanie's mommy away? Who took his daddy? Who took his home? Who took his

life, Samuel?" A beat. "Oh...that was you. You life-sucking little leech." Haris leaned closer again and smiled brightly, the lawyer's bonded veneers gleaming within spitting distance of Sam's face. "Good job, by the way. That's my boy."

Dean lunged forward but was held back by John's hand fisting in his jacket. He relented to curb his attack once he realized he had no weapon and, apparently, no backup, but shrugged his jacket back onto his shoulders brusquely. "Bastard!!" He shouted, defiantly. "You did all of that! Don't listen to him, Sammy!"

Haris gazed approvingly at John's hand now placed firmly on his son's shoulder. "Oh, do shut up," he sneered. "If I wanted any crap outta you, I'd just squeeze your head...Or, wait...maybe I'd just squeeze Sam's head. I mean, I wasn't going to go there, but if you insist..."

Dean paled and stilled beneath his father's grip, cringing inwardly as Haris smiled in approval. They glared at each other for several tense moments. Sensing a repeat of the Missouri standoff building, Sam broke the silence before Dean could.

"What do you want?" Sam demanded.

"Sam..." Dean interrupted. "Don't..."

"Shut up, Dean!" Sam snapped. No way was Dean going to keep him from finding out what he needed to know this time, and no way was Dean going to force a change of venue. Not this time. "I wanna hear what he's got to say. I need to know."

"Good boy, Samuel," Haris commended, turning back to his captive with a pleased smirk. "Take charge. Be a man. Show me what you've got." Haris leaned in even closer than he had at any point prior. Sam could smell something bitter and metallic on his breath, like black coffee and blood, and hoped to God that wasn't what it really was. By then, the Demon was close enough that, if he'd been John or Dean, Sam knew he could've felt his eyelashes against his cheekbones. It was disconcerting, having those glowing eyes so close to his own that he couldn't focus on them or glean their intentions. The hostage's chest heaved as he tried to wrestle enough slack in the invisible grip to turn his head away from the reeking creature.

Haris pulled away again, eyes distracted and thoughtful. "Answers is what you want then, eh? I shoulda figured. I mean, you always were the smart one, college boy. Stanford, right? Pre-Law?" He nodded, as though reaching an agreement within his mind. "That could prove useful." His tone was leading, contemplative.

"I said," Sam gritted, teeth clamped and lips curled back in a snarl. "What do you want?"

"Ooh, spicy. I like that."

Haris took another step back and turned the movement into a small, controlled pace between the youngest Winchester and his would-be protectors. "Isn't it obvious?" He taunted. "C'mon, Samuel. Use a little common sense, here. What could I possibly want with you? What makes you so special? I mean, if it was your skill and training I coveted, then your father would surely be a better prize. If it was your blood, then your brother..." His eyes rolled back in feigned bliss. "Oh yes, his blood is sooo sweet as I recall. Yummy. I'd have to say, the sweetest I've tasted in a good while. So no, Sam, it's not you I want, because when it all boils down to it, you're just one of them, and not even the best one, as humans go. No, I can have any mortal I want. I think I've proven that on more than one occasion."

Sam ceased to struggle momentarily. His brow furrowed deeply in confusion. "But you said you had plans for me," he said. "Me and all the children like me."

Haris pursed his lips and nodded. "Well, yes, I do need you, to some extent. But it's not so much you I need as what you have that I want."

"My powers," Sam stated bluntly. Of course, that was obvious. All manner of creatures were drawn to "the shining." He'd always assumed that's why their quarry usually turned on him when Dean would have seemed just as easy a target.

"Yes," Haris agreed. "Your powers. You know, those pesky little gifts of yours."

Sam snickered darkly at the mention of the word "gifts."

Haris returned the smirk. "Well, of course, you wouldn't see them as such. After all, they've led me to you and your family all these years. Kept me hot on your trail even when you thought it was you who pursued me. As long as you have them, Sam, I will always want you, and no one around you will be safe."

From beside him on the wall, Sam heard Sarah utter a frightened whimper as invisible claws tightened around her throat as emphasis to Haris' threat.

"Stop it!"

"Oh, I can, Samuel," Haris said. "I can stop it. Whattya say, Mr. Pre-Law? You know something about contracts? Wanna play *Let's Make a Deal?*"

Sam laughed again, this time in bitter amusement. "Why? It's not like you'd honor it."

Haris' head jerked back as though he'd been struck. His lips pursed in a silent "ooh," and his eyebrows furrowed in feigned surprise. "I'm truly hurt by that," he lied. "Well, no, I'm not. Good to know my reputation precedes me." He lowered his chin back down to line his eyes back up with Sam's as he glared maniacally. "Really, though, what choice do you have? Don't you at least wanna hear it?"

"Ahh!" Sarah cried out again, tears streaming down her face as she was squeezed too tightly against the wall to draw breath.

Grunting in frustration, Sam conceded. "Fine! Let's hear it!"

Behind them, Dean took another step forward, straining to get to his brother like a pit bull on a chain.

"Oh, Samuel, Samuel. How do you know you won't like this?" Haris asked. "You don't even want your powers. They're a regular pain in your ass," he stated matter-of-factly. "Not to mention a pain in the asses of everyone you care about. Wouldn't you like for them to just be gone?"

He would. Sam so wanted it to all be over, the dreams, the headaches, the friggin' come-and-go telekinesis that seemed always to go at the most inopportune times. He hated that the Demon had picked up on his denial and loathing. Whether or not the powers were meant to be a gift, his abhorrence for them was his weakness, and the Demon had found it. He looked away, unwilling to show that his interest had been piqued.

Haris saw it anyway. He leaned back, placed his hands in the pockets of his suit jacket, and tucked his chin into his chest. If he'd put on a couple hundred more pounds and donned a red suit, he'd have looked downright jolly; he was so pleased with himself.

"I can make this go away. If you want, I can take your powers right off your hands," he suggested politely, as though he were offering an iced tea on a hot, southern, summer afternoon. "Won't even hurt a bit," he assured. "You just gotta give 'em to me willingly. That's it. You do that, and you can go back to your normal life. Hey," he suggested with a shrug, "might even make a nice life with Sarah here. I'll go on about my business, and you and yours will never hear from me again."

Sam considered the offer but didn't answer. After all, the "business" Haris was referring to wasn't exactly house painting. His eyes darted about the room as he tried to gain focus with options swirling in his mind.

Confused, he looked to John and Dean. John met his gaze with what he imagined was a reflection of his own, shocked and uncertain. Dean however, shook his head slowly and mouthed, "No, Sam," with a determined set to his hazel eyes that Sam knew stemmed from his brother's uncanny ability to cut through the crap and see what was real and true. He trusted Dean above all others, but he ducked his eyes away, wishing that Dean had said anything else but that.

"What's the matter, Samuel?" Haris asked, voice still calm and calculated. He really did appear to be willing to listen to himself talk forever. There was not even a twinge of impatience to indicate that he was drawing short of tolerance. "Don't be like that, son. This deal's more than fair," he suggested. "You get what you want, and I get what's rightfully mine."

Mine? His?

Sam's head jerked up, and his lower jaw began to twitch as though it struggled to draw words of protest through his tightening throat.

"Sam, don't," Dean said, out loud this time, no longer able to get Sam's eyes to focus on him.

"That's right, Samuel," Haris countered. "Listen to your brother. Don't listen to me. It's all good." He sighed, but Sam could tell it was only feigned. "I was just trying to make this easier on you. You've been a worthy adversary for a couple decades now. But don't kid yourself. I don't need you to talk this out. I don't need you to give me your powers. Whatever I want...I can take."

Haris lowered his head, eyes to the floor, and the conduits above them reverberated with the unearthly growl that shook the air around them.

Suddenly, Sam's head snapped back against the wall, and he groaned through gritted teeth. His chest began to heave with stifled screams. Blood trickled and then ran freely from his nose, forcing him to open his mouth in order to breathe. As the blood flowed over his lip, he tilted his head reflexively to smear it across the shoulder of his jacket. When he lifted it once more, the whites of both eyes had gone red as well.

Haris grinned. "C'mon, Sammy boy. You got all that power. Why don't you make me stop?"

Granted a moment's reprieve, Sam drew in a few deeper breaths of air and blinked through cloudy, red tears.

The Demon seemed downright giddy by then, the coppery scent that was now pungent in the air acting as a pheromone for his blood lust. "Oh, that's right. You haven't figured that part out yet," he sneered. "I forgot. Ain't that a bitch?"

Dean watched Sam sway against the wall as blood streamed from his tear ducts and ran around his lips like river tributaries at an ocean delta. Unwilling to accept being sidelined for a moment longer, he lunged free of his father's restraining grasp and leapt to his brother's aid.

He managed to cover several yards of the divide, but before he could get within arm's length of Sam, he was flung back into the corner. His head snapped against the concrete and rendered him dazed to the point of being unable to stand on his own.

"Ooh," Haris grimaced mockingly. "That hadda hurt."

He turned back to Sam, his gaze locked in determination. "As I was saying. You don't have to give me the powers. I can take them." He held a hand beneath Sam's chin, caught several drops of flowing blood, and raised his bloody fingers for Sam to inspect before he licked them clean, eyes rolling in bliss. "But you won't survive the stripping ritual, I'm afraid. And, of course, if you force me to go that route, I'll have no use for Daddy, Dean, or Sarah anymore. All bets are off then. Unless you wanna reconsider that deal."

John helped Dean to his feet slowly, noting the pained glaze in his eyes, and kept his body between his son and the Demon as he listened intently. Dean surprised him when he yelled out from his protected niche. "Don't listen to him, Sammy," his older son instructed, voice trembling like his knees. "He's gonna kill us either way."

Desperate, Sam twisted his head from side to side in an effort to force his shoulders loose, but made no progress. Exhausted, he sagged back against it with a sigh, glaring at Haris with his blood-red eyes.

"Mmm, a quiet one," Haris noted contemplatively. "Guess I shouldn't really be surprised." He moved closer to Sam and tilted his head sideways with a quirk of his eyebrows in an almost amicable expression as though he were only going to brush his hair back from his forehead. "You know who else was really quiet?" He said. "Mary." He grinned and stepped back, pleased as Sam's eyes narrowed in anger. "Oh, well, she really didn't have a choice. I was squeezing her so tightly that she couldn't even whimper, really. I couldn't take the chance on her screaming, what,

with Daddy downstairs and Golden Boy asleep down the hall. That one did sneak out, though, and mmm, it was so sweet."

Haris threw his head back, blinking lazily, as though savoring a delicious sentimental moment with children at Christmas. "Too bad. I woulda liked to hear her scream more. She woulda sang so pretty. Sounded like bells..."

John and Dean both lunged forward this time only to find themselves tossed bonelessly back into the corner, both grunting between trembling jaws as their eyes darkened with fury.

Haris didn't even blink, just continued his monologue as though the elder Winchesters were nothing more than flies.

"Jess, on the other hand," he continued. "She was a screamer." He laughed gleefully. "I thought she'd never stop. I just let her go on and on...coulda listened to that siren sing forever. See, I figured if she kept it up, then maybe you'd hear and show yourself, Sam. Thought you'd play hero and come rushing in to save the day. But no, you didn't. You missed the entire show. 'Cuz you weren't there, were you? A real shame. It was a helluva finale." He turned to Sarah, gazing at her as if only just discovering a hidden flower amongst dandelions. "But hey, you don't wanna take the deal...I can arrange for a repeat performance."

Sarah's chest rose and fell more deeply for a moment, as though the grip around her had loosened enough for her to breathe once more. Then, as though pulled by her shoulders, she was dragged higher up the wall. Sam found his head released from the grip of his nemesis and turned it to watch in horror as Sarah began to scream in agony.

A tearing sound crackled through the air, and the demonic growling commenced, decibels louder than it had been previously. First there was only one slash, a harmless-looking slip in the silk fabric of her tailored, white blouse that became foreboding as the red outline spread and seeped across her stomach. Her screams became louder and more broken, until they were just one continuous keening wail as the slash marks spread upwards along her torso. Her deep brown eyes were dark with pain and pleading.

"STOP!" Sam shouted, unable to take anymore. "STOP! Whatever you want, I'll do it."

"Sammy!" Dean shouted. "Sam, no!" But his cries fell on deaf ears.

"I'll do it," Sam whispered, spent.

Haris grinned as Sarah's screams subsided to hitched whimpers and moans, her body sliding slowly to the floor. "I thought you'd see things my way," he sneered. "So be it."

Sam tumbled to the floor, arms and legs tingling from lack of circulation. He struggled against the stabbing of the pins and needles, dragging himself to a half-stand and staggering toward Sarah. He was nearly at her side when a dark-clad figure emerged from the shadows.

A single blow to the back of the head left Sam blissfully unconscious on the hard concrete.

Two more figures emerged, and Haris nodded to his fallen captive. Obediently, the newcomers lifted the slack Winchester and began to drag him toward the exit.

"Sammy!" Dean and John shouted simultaneously. Both lunged forward, desperate to intervene, but were met instead with a wall of dark-clad interlopers. The henchmen seemed to come out of the woodwork, all clad in black but looking, in all their stocky, long-haired, tattooed glory, like Hell's Angels on a ninja kick.

"Oh," Haris said, putting a hand to his chin thoughtfully. "I think I promised Sam I'd let you live." He glanced at the unconscious figure being dragged across the floor. "Well, what he don't know won't hurt him."

"John, Dean," he said. "These are my boys. Wish I could stay for the show, but well, I've never been one to overstay my welcome." Haris turned, hands clasped

behind his back decisively, and strode after his prize. As he reached the doorway, he raised one hand and snapped his fingers.

In an instant, the wall of dark soldiers descended.

John and Dean unconsciously backed up, the eldest Winchester noting his son's still faltering gait as they recoiled from their foes. Dean had taken quite a knock, and even though John was certain he would try and fight, the father was also sure his son would not emerge victorious.

But then, with the amount of opposition they faced, it was pretty much a certainty that neither would live to see another dawn, regardless.

"Where are you taking my brother, you sons of bitches?" The question was spat out with such venom Dean almost reminded himself of the "snake girl" he had once been so entranced by. Right now, he almost wished he had the use of her gift in this fight, as he swayed precariously on knees that didn't seem to want to carry his weight.

The lead bad guy grunted, his thick-set frame and Nordic features contorting with a bemused grin. "Not something you need to know, little one." The voice was cavernous, taunting - the depth of his tones almost sinking below a normal human's vocal range. And yet, this was no demon. No darkness tainted his eyes.

"Little one?" Dean's head tipped to the side in feigned shock and he forced a smirk. "Dude, just because I'm not as tall as my brother doesn't mean I can't kick all your asses and have some steel toe left to take out your buddy Harry." The hunter blinked, trying not to show that his vision was still swimming in and out of focus from the demon's attack.

Deception was the only game they could play now, and damned if Dean wasn't getting good at it after spending so much time in the presence of demons and their familiars.

"Dean..." John shot a warning glance at his eldest, knowing Dean would attack the growing mob before them, going on instinct alone. Sometimes his son's ill-conceived bravado paid off, but not here, not now. There was a time to fight and a time to reason. "You think because you follow that thing it'll give you immortality, riches, power?" The experienced hunter put his attention on the blond behemoth who seemed to be the leader of Haris' cohorts. "Trust me, all you'll get is a quick death."

The thug laughed, taking the time to turn and nod knowingly at his comrades in arms. When he turned back, he pulled out a small curved blade with serrated notches along one edge. He flashed it through the still cascading light in the center of the room. "Death," he acknowledged, pursing his lips, "is our ultimate goal. These mere mortal suits we call bodies have too many limitations..."

Dean straightened from his crouched, fighting stance, a look of sudden realization spreading across his face as he waved his arms almost dismissively. "Dude, I never thought of that. You just might have a point there. Let's see," he taunted, placing a hand to his chin as though deep in thought, "Quick death and possible resurrection as a mindless zombie or a life of getting your ass beat down fighting the good fight against an undying legion? Hmm?" A beat. "You know, I'm getting kinda tired of getting my ass handed to me, and yeah, this whole situation is looking pretty grim, so I'm thinking I might like to join the winning team for a change. What exactly do I gotta do to get into the Harry Cary club? I mean, is there some kind of initiation?"

As he talked, Dean took a small, casual step forward. He was scrutinizing every part of the group before him. Their number, their positions, their readiness to fight. From what he could tell, only the blond leader appeared to be armed, although under the dark, almost robe-like clothing they could have a plethora of hidden artillery.

The hunter paused, his eyes zeroing in on a small tattoo that ran along one of the bad guys' hands. The colorful sigil brought back a memory from an earlier gig in Louisiana, and the realization finally hit home that he had fought members of this group before. *These are the bastards that stole my necklace! Why would they want the amulet?*

Dean licked his lips. "Whoa, nice tattoo, man. That the 'get in the country club free' logo? I'm thinking I need one of those. Is there a party involved? Like, do we get to sit around, play truth or dare maybe, paint pictures on each other, and braid our hair?"

The goons were obviously not used to being taunted. If they'd been bluffing, then it would've just been called. But why bluff when you had the winning hand? They stood their ground, unflinching as Dean eyeballed them through pain-glazed eyes.

Dean used the moment's hesitation and stole a quick glance to the mill's cold concrete floor. Sarah had curled into a ball, clutching at the heinous wounds inflicted by Haris to try and stem the blood flow. Still, the scarlet liquid ebbed from her body and seeped through her fingers until it pooled, just like his own had back at the cabin in Missouri.

The hunter flinched, instantly feeling the pain Sarah was enduring as if it were his own. Once, not so long ago, it had been.

The blond leader followed his gaze and seemed to understand the brother's thinking. Perhaps Haris had informed his "toy soldiers" about the Winchesters, or perhaps it was simply intuition. Either way, the stocky disciple decided he wanted a show of his authority. *Enough with the grandstanding already.*

Killing John and Dean for his master would, undoubtedly, be easy with so many of the cult members at his disposal, but killing the girl first and letting his people soak in his sacrificial offering would be much sweeter- especially if the Winchester boys were made to watch. After all, what was a sacrifice with no one to mourn the price?

"I think it's time to put your brother's play thing out of her misery, don't you? I can see her pitiful moaning is bringing back bad memories for you, little one." He made the blade in his hand cut a slicing motion near his own neck and then grinned. "I'd hate for you to have any unpleasant thoughts of our master. It is our job to defend his honor, after all...better to slit the bitch's throat now and end both your torments..."

Dean's eyes flashed to his father's, and this time John let his head tip just enough for his son to see his acknowledgement. They were outnumbered four-to-one. There was no chance of escape, but if they were going to die, it would be fighting to save Sarah from anymore suffering. The blood of innocents wasn't a price they paid often or willingly. That was the Winchester way.

The blond leviathan stooped, grabbing a handful of Sarah's hair and tugging at it until her head was yanked pitilessly from the concrete where it had rested. She screamed in pain and fear, but the cry was half-muted by the blood rising in her throat.

Sensing, needing, wanting the kill, the dark-clad mob began to chant in some unknown dialect. Some flicked back their cloaks to reveal hideously sharpened weapons which they clanked together over their heads in some malevolent salute to both leader and demonic master.

The show of intrinsic evil was all the catalyst Dean and John needed.

Both Winchesters dived for the leader, knowing if they could take him as a hostage they might hold off the rest of the group.

While Dean concentrated on acquiring the knife, John attempted to subdue their quarry with a swift and painful right jab to his mouth. "You talk too much, just like the thing you serve!"

Neither the blow nor the jibe seemed to faze the thug, and, instead, he licked the small glob of blood that formed on his bottom lip as if it were candy, savoring the taste of iron with glee.

"Kill them!" The leader's bass tones echoed through the mill, and any hesitation his group felt dissolved at his command.

The mob moved forward as John punched their commander again in an effort to force his submission, but the man was just too strong. In all his time fighting the ungodly, the elder hunter had never come across anyone without demonic powers who could withstand such punishment without flinching. "Who the hell are you?" He

gasped down a breath and dared to steal a fleeting look at the throng gathering around him.

"Or maybe *what* the hell are you?" Dean offered, finally prying the curved knife from his captive's fingers with a determined tug. "Maybe Harry gave you a little extra something to keep your followers under your thumb, huh?"

Dean pressed the blade to his foe's throat until it dented the flesh but didn't quite draw blood. "Back off or your man here gets his wish to join ol' Harry in hell." He addressed the cult members as if they might actually care.

A figure stepped from the mob. Small, yet intimidating like his master. He sported the same tattooed sigil as the rest, although he wore no robe. In his left hand, he carried an axe that reminded Dean of the one Mordachai Murdock had used. "We don't bargain. We kill."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say. You freaks are kinda redundant with your dialogue. Guess you caught that from Harry, too." Dean pushed the leader harshly to the ground and made a dash for Sarah.

John did much the same, and between father and son they managed to lift the girl to her feet. She groaned in protest as her body was yanked swiftly from what she had assumed would be her last resting place. "Leave...me," she pleaded. "You can't fight them off and carry me."

"Sweetheart, I'm not leaving you anywhere." Dean winked, needing to keep Sarah awake, even if he had to be a sarcastic rogue to do it. "Hell, I told Sammy to marry you. Can't just go and leave you here, now can I?" He paused, turning sharply to toss the knife he'd acquired after their pursuers.

The blade zipped past "axe man's" head and bounced off the nearby wall, clattering to the concrete with a metallic clank.

"You need to practice your...knife throwing skills," Sarah panted, slightly impressed with the fact they had evaded capture for a minute. Even if it was a minute her failing body couldn't afford.

"She has a point, son." John's eyes twinkled briefly, and he let go of Sarah's arm, frantically tugging at a rusty door handle that appeared to be their only escape route.

Dean huffed, not believing his abilities were being questioned, given their current situation. "Bite me," he retorted, "See how your aim is when you're seeing everything in triplicate. And how do you know I didn't mean to miss him?" He said, grabbing a small hunk of steel he'd spotted on the floor with his free hand and whirling it in the face of the nearest thug.

The steel bounced off the man's nasal bone, leaving it squashed and bloodied, but he still kept coming, managing to land a fist in Dean's face before he had time to dodge the punch.

Dean staggered back, losing his tenuous grip on Sarah as the blow made his ears ring. *So gotta stop getting tossed around by bad guys today...*

John caught Sarah before she could hit the ground and gave up on opening the door. It was either locked or barricaded from the other side. That meant they were now backed into a corner by Haris' goons with no way out. *I can't die here, not while that bastard demon has my son...*

Dean retrieved his steel bludgeon and spun it around like a band leader's baton, taking position between the lead bad guy and his father, who now cradled the failing Sarah in his arms. "I'm gonna kick your ass," he addressed "axe man." "And then I'm gonna kick your ass..." The hunter pointed his makeshift weapon at the blond leader, letting him know he and his father would never surrender. *Gotta get out of here, for Sammy's sake...*

The gang stopped advancing, their leader pushing through their masses until he was nose to nose with Dean. A hand-to-hand fight, suited him just fine.

He waved a hand, signaling for the mob to back up just enough to make room for his little "arena." "Ah, little one. Time for me to snap your neck like a turkey's before Thanksgiving."

"Yeah?" Dean's eyebrow rose cockily. and he continued to twist his metal baton. "Dude, lotta people tried, lotta people died." *At least they don't have guns...*

"Am I supposed to be impressed?" The leader unexpectedly grabbed one of his own people from the crowd and wrapped a brawny arm around the man's neck. Without remorse or guilt, he squeezed until a grating crunch signaled the snapping of the man's vertebrae.

Unfazed, the leader let his cohort's body slump from his grasp and then stepped over it towards Dean. If the Winchesters had ever doubted his strength, they didn't now.

Shit! Dean didn't wait to feel his own neck being crushed by the demon's advocate. He swung back with the bar, fully intending to slam it into the arrogant jerk's face until he backed off or fell down. Hand-to-hand was only fair if the odds weren't stacked in the other guy's favor, and right now, Dean was sure they were.

The steel bar reached halfway to its destination before its intended target caught it with one hand, stopping its motion mid-flight.

Dean looked on incredulously as Haris' pawn tore the rod from his grip and tossed it aside with a shrug. "Turkey time, little one." He smiled, beckoning for Dean to come forward and accept his fate.

"Yeah, well no offence, dude, but I'm a steak man myself...I don't hear any gobble, gobble." Dean backed up until he was level with John and Sarah. He glanced at the girl who was almost unconscious now and wanted to tell her he was sorry. Sorry he'd encouraged Sam to see her. Sorry he'd let her get involved when all the women in their family ended up dead.

Dean turned his attention to John, unsure if he even had time for words. If this was to be their final swan song, there should be something said between them. Something, *anything* to bridge the gap caused by the demon and make them a real family before it was too late. "Dad..."

"Don't," John said sadly. If anyone should have been mending fences at that moment, it was John, and he knew it. His own words failed him, but he'd be damned if he'd let his son spend his last moments accepting any of the responsibility for what their relationship had become.

John's eyes spoke volumes that Dean could read even in the failing light, but his mouth never got the chance to speak the words.

The side wall of the mill seemed to collapse in on itself as debris and plaster burst into the air like the mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion. Cult members scattered in confusion and panic, some believing the intrusion was actually a police raid.

John put a hand protectively across his face and was the first to realize what had happened. Amidst the bricks and rubble was a familiar black shape, bent and contorted from the impact, but still growling like a vehicular tiger.

"Sonofabitch!" Finally, Dean recognized the Chevy too, along with the very scared priest at its wheel. "Hell, I just fixed that freakin' hood from last time!" The hunter's face reddened, but he scurried to the rear door and tugged it open before the bad guys realized what was happening. With the help of his dad, he carefully bundled Sarah onto the back seat and then dived in the front, amazed the dented door actually still opened. "Moses, you better hope for a miracle after what you did to my car, dude."

Kyle's pupils widened as he actually considered what Dean Winchester might do to him once they escaped. "...I didn't know how else to get you out." He stammered out the meek response and then yanked the column shift into reverse, gunning the gas until the Impala emerged from the mill like a dust-covered projectile.

* * * *

**Hospital ER
Trauma Room One**

"Any word on the girl we brought in, yet?" Dean asked. He hissed into his chest, his head tipped forward while the intern put in the last of the sutures he'd earned on one of his many unplanned flights across the steel mill.

"Not yet," the intern stated flatly, patting him on the shoulder. "Kay, got the last one. You can sit back here..."

Not waiting for the rest of his instructions, Dean hopped down off the exam table, certain they'd already wasted too much time tending to his trivial injuries while Sam was somewhere unprotected and alone. After landing solidly on both feet, he remembered exactly why it was that his father had insisted that he get himself checked out while they waited for word on Sarah. His knees buckled, and he barely managed to catch hold of the paper-covered table in time to save himself from faceplanting on the linoleum.

"Mr. Tyler..." the med student reprimanded, quickly wrapping her arm around his waist to balance him and almost dropping him anyway once he grunted from the incidental contact she made with his bruised back. "Mr. Tyler," she repeated. Sighing, she softened her voice. "Steven, you took quite a hit to the head. Now we can't force you to stay for the CAT scan we scheduled you for, but as long as you're within our department, you are going to stay still."

Dean smirked. "Oh baby, if you want me to lie back down, all you gotta do is climb up here with me." He patted the paper suggestively. The petite brunette with the long, thick ponytail draped down her back, blushed a deep shade of red. "C'mon, don't get all shy on me. I'm sure there's a reason they put locks on these doors," Dean teased. He was actually quite surprised that she got so flustered. Pretty girl like that should've been getting hit on all the time. On the other hand, she was probably a book worm, like Sam. Dean would never understand how his baby brother had landed a hot babe like Jess, let alone Sarah.

Sarah.

He remembered with a start that he was only still here until they received word on the injured girl's condition. No time for chit-chat or being injured himself. They were only waiting until they knew she was going to be okay. Dropping a dying girl off at an ER and ditching her would've been more than a little suspicious, but their time was drawing short. Adjusting his position more carefully this time, he eased down off the table and did his best to ignore the spinning of the room.

As the intern – Stacy, her badge indicated – attempted to reprimand him once more, he raised his hand so that the front of it was all she saw. "Sorry, hon. Steven Tyler never offers more than once. Shoulda taken me up on it when you had the chance." He opened the door, strode out defiantly, and abruptly headed into the nearest restroom to throw up as silently as possible before wiping his mouth, spitting, and striding out defiantly once more to where his father and Kyle waited.

John stood hastily as Dean weaved, his wobbly knees defying even his Winchester stubbornness, through the waiting room. Dean eyed him suspiciously but didn't hesitate to take his father's chair, muffling a sigh as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"So, do we know anything, yet?" Dean huffed, not opening his eyes.

"Looks like Sarah's going to be okay," John said. "Seems like our friend," he turned to Kyle questioningly, "Haris, did you say it was called?" Kyle nodded. "Our friend Haris was just toying with her. The cuts were pretty shallow, mostly for show. She still needed a few units of blood and some heavy antibiotics to ward off infection. They're patching her up."

Dean started to snicker but stopped himself as the tremors pained his head. He scowled instead, wishing his eyelids were thick enough to keep out every last trace of the torturous fluorescent light. "So Haris was just fronting for us," he breathed. "Seems to be a lot of that going around."

Even after months of separation, John easily recognized the accusation in his son's tone. He supposed he did have a lot to account for. "Dean..."

Dean held up his hand, cutting someone off with the gesture for the second time in less than five minutes. "Not now," Dean dismissed. "I don't have time to listen to your righteous explanations of how whatever that crap was back there with the fake bullet and leaving us high and dry AGAIN was for our own good. Sam doesn't have time for it. So blah, blah, friggin' blah. Agree to disagree, for now, and I'll kick your ass later when balancing on one leg doesn't seem like an act out of Cirque du Soleil."

John sighed heavily. The Dean he'd left in New Orleans two years ago would never have talked to him like that. The Dean he'd met in Salvation a year ago had been downright shocked at himself for raising his voice to his father. The Dean he'd seen through his own possessed eyes, raising a gun against him, had questioned the fact that John had ever been proud of him and still saved his life. He didn't deserve this Dean, but he sure wanted to get to know him, to prove to him that he always had his sons' best interests at heart. But Dean was right. Not now.

"Agreed," John said without argument.

Dean was surprised enough by the response to open one eyelid and quirk a questioning brow at his father before closing it once more and putting a hand to his head with a grimace. "Good." After a second the pained expression faded from his face and he opened his eyes and slowly sat up in the chair. "Moses, dude, gimme a paper and pencil."

Kyle reached for the thick book he'd let fall into the empty seat beside him after spending a good portion of the last hour attempting to pass the time by researching anything that might lead them to discover where Sam had been taken. They were working under the pretense that Haris and his cohorts would wait until after dark to fulfill the agreement Sam had made with them. That didn't give them much time, but they let themselves believe that the cultists would at least keep Sam alive until then. They weren't rushing off half-cocked like they had earlier.

Kyle pulled a folded paper out from between the pages and plucked the pen he had hooked onto his collar off brusquely, clicking it once to extend the writing point as he handed both items to Dean.

Dean smoothed the paper over his knee a few times, then huffed and grabbed Kyle's book as well, making himself a writing table. He worked the pen over the paper for several minutes, stopping now and again to put a hand to his forehead, pressing into his eye sockets as though trying to recall something locked deep in his memory. John and Kyle leaned toward the paper inquisitively but hung back to give Dean room to accomplish whatever it was he was attempting to do.

After several long moments, Dean sat back, held the paper up for final inspection and, seeming satisfied, handed it to John. "That's the tattoo those demon gang bangers were sporting on their hands. And I've seen it before."

John looked at him in disbelief. "The same one?" He asked.

What? Is my speech slurred now, too? Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought. The biting remark died behind his lips. Though he would've said exactly that to Sam, if he were there, Dean couldn't let himself talk to his father that way. Not now. The man had just used the last bullet to save him, after all. He'd cut him some slack until after this was over.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Uh, yes, sir," he answered. Sam was his top priority, and Dean and John had been one bad-assed team once. They needed to be again. At least for now.

"Look," Dean said a few seconds later. "There were a whole lot of those dudes back there, and the ones I got a look at all had this tattoo. I'm thinking that it's connected to the Demon, somehow, probably a sigil or something," he said indicating the drawing. "Now, unless they all got the same prize in their box of Cracker Jacks, they probably had the same tattoo artist. I mean, they looked pretty professional, not your typical prison block handiwork."

"And a town this small can't have more than a few tattoo parlors..." John concluded, following Dean's logic with a pleased grin. "I'll check the phone book," he offered, striding over to the block of payphones at the corner of the lobby.

Dean sighed, pleased, and leaned back in the chair again. Noticing that Kyle was feverishly flipping through his book, he rolled his head in the priest's direction, wincing as the bumps in the plaster made contact with his freshly stitched gash. "You find Waldo, yet, Moses?" He asked.

Kyle looked at him, not amused, but not angry either. "Well, Waldo, no," he explained, "But I think I may have the sigil pinpointed."

Dean didn't bother to sit up again. His stomach was starting to protest the rocking motion, and he didn't care to see anymore of that sandwich he'd scarfed down earlier. He held out his hands, palms up and fingers wiggling expectantly, as he indicated for Kyle to hand him the book. "Lemme see."

Kyle obliged him, laying the book in his outstretched hands and pointing to the diagram he'd discovered. Dean let just his eyes move and looked down his nose at the open book, squinting slightly at the glare off the ancient pages.

"Um, it's not an exact match," Kyle explained, placing Dean's drawing next to it. "There are a few extra lines, here, and here," he indicated, pointing out the discrepancies. "But I'm pretty sure it's a Sumerian sigil used to summon the demon, Azazel."

Dean missed the explanation. "Whattya mean it's not an exact match?"

"Well, you probably just remembered it incorrectly," Kyle speculated. "I'm sure this is the correct one, however. It's only off a bit..."

Dean misinterpreted the priest's theory as an accusation. "Let's see how well you draw with a concussion, Moses," he snapped bitterly, closing his eyes against the vibration of his own voice. "I'm telling you that's the tattoo," he argued, pointing to his drawing.

"Look, it doesn't matter," Kyle assuaged. "The two are close enough, and Azazel is another of the names for Haris that I mentioned earlier. It all fits."

"Whatever, dude." Dean huffed. "I'm gonna take your word for it, just because Sam trusts you, but if you steer us wrong on this, and it turns out there's another sigil that matches the one I drew EXACTLY, then I'm gonna kick your ass, dog collar or no."

Kyle gulped slightly. "Understood," he replied meekly. "But I'm sure on this."

"Yeah," Dean said. "So am I."

"Three," John said, striding up, phone book in hand. When Kyle and Dean looked at him with furrowed brows, he explained. "Three tattoo parlors in this town." He paused for a second. "I talked to the doctor, and Sarah's being moved into a room. She's gonna be out of it for the rest of the night, so we should get moving on this ASAP. I can take my truck and get the first two..."

Dean leaned forward to stand, but rested his hands on his knees with his eyes focused on the floor as the room spun around him momentarily. To cover his moment of weakness, he gestured a hand toward Kyle without looking up. "Moses, here, says the tattoo matches the sigil for our boy, Haris. So, the obvious question, besides what the hell do they see in that bastard, is what does a demon need with a bunch of demon wannabes?"

John rubbed his left hand across the back of his neck as he jotted down the address of the third tattoo parlor. "Can't say for sure. They probably do his dirty work, just grunts, I think."

"Dirty work, like steal my necklace?" Dean asked, finally lifting his head to gaze inquisitively at his father.

"They did what?"

"Stole my necklace," Dean repeated. "Remember, I told you I lost it, and you sent us to see that Mann dude? Turned out it wasn't lost but stolen, and the two freaks

who arranged the whole thing were a little cleaner cut than our guys from today, but they had the same tattoo."

John's face paled slightly, but quickly regained its color as he pretended to study the address on the page intently. "You're sure?" He asked, almost indifferently.

"Well, sure I'm sure," Dean retorted, face pinching with hurt disbelief. "Dad, these are the guys that have my brother. I wouldn't be throwing this out here if I didn't think it was important."

"I believe you, Dean," John conceded, meeting his son's gaze. "And I think you're right that maybe there's more to these guys than a tattoo and an 'I Love Haris' campaign button. But we'll have to fill in the blanks later, after we get Sam back."

Dean looked away again, unable to meet his father's gaze. "How do you..." A beat. "How do you know we're not too late already?" He lifted his eyes expectantly, having forced the dreaded words past his mouth, and waited for the answer.

John looked down, handed him the paper with the address copied onto it, and closed the phone book loudly. "I just know."

* * * *

Commune, Outskirts of Town Sunset

Sam's head snapped up reflexively after lolling to the side far enough to painfully stretch the muscles in his neck and rouse him slightly from his drugged haze. The sudden jerk brought him back to consciousness for a moment, eyelids fluttering wearily beneath the weight of the narcotic stupor he dwelled helplessly within.

A small groan escaped from his lips before he could muster the presence of mind to stifle it. A shudder wracked his body as he sat propped against damp concrete, wearing nothing but his t-shirt and blue jeans, hands bound behind him. His jacket, as well as his shoes and socks had been stripped from him, and a cold like a glacial stream clawed its way into his marrow.

He twitched again, losing the battle to keep his heavy, pounding head held upright.

"It's alive!" A voice mocked from some less dark corner of his lidded field of vision. The taunt had a distinctly juvenile timbre to it and was answered by a chorus of childish giggles. *Kids?*

Sam shook his head, slowly becoming aware of a tingling sensation in his flesh that blossomed to out-and-out unbearable itchiness under the smears of blood on his face. His feet kicked out involuntarily as he tried to find a way to rub at the stickiness, but they met solid resistance in every direction, including up. Wherever he was, it was damned close quarters, no more than five by five from the feel of it. With his hands bound, he could do nothing to relieve his torment but thrash around weakly until his burning face met the rough concrete of the wall.

For several seconds, he just slouched against the cool masonry and let the dampness put out the fire of the itch. That immediate distraction quelled, he coughed out a stagnant lungful of air and forced one eye to open.

"Geez!" He slammed his head back and into the concrete in horrified surprise as his one open eye met another that peered at him inquisitively through a whole in the cell wall.

"Ha, ha, he's a big one all right," a childlike voice cackled as the lone eye crinkled in amusement. "Think I scared him."

An older-sounding, though still juvenile, voice echoed from somewhere farther outside of his concrete barriers. "Don't be messing with the Chosen, Baker. The master says we can look but not touch."

Chosen? Choose? Chose? Chose what? Sam's head spun as he tried to assess his situation and how exactly it was that he'd come to be in it.

"Take the deal..."

"Aaahhh!" Blood, and screams, and pain.

"They'll never be safe, Samuel. I will always find you."

"Stop!"

Chosen. Sam remembered. He was chosen, had always been chosen, yet had never had the luxury of making the choice. Not until now. He slouched back against the wall. Hell, if this was how they treated a guy who agreed to their terms, Sam would hate to see what happened to the ones who got in the way. But then, that was the problem. He had seen.

Mary, Jess, Sarah, Dean...

Sam chose them. So, why did he still feel like a selfish bastard? *Time to end this. I can end it. For them...For me.* His head sagged against his chest.

"No, Sammy. Don't do it."

He'd stood by Dean when his brother had insisted that their father was possessed. Why? Because he was Dean. He'd heeded his brother's pleas to spare the Demon if it meant saving their father. Because Dean had asked. But this... He'd made the deal. Dean had known it was a mistake, but Sam had taken it anyway. He'd had no other choice at the time, but did that make it the right choice? Could he still change his mind? Did he want to?

Selfish bastard. He wanted the powers gone. There was no point in denying it. He'd wanted them gone since they'd surfaced. How could he go back to normal when he was anything but? What was he gonna do the first time he had a vision at law school? Call Dean or Dad and send them into the line of fire while he prepared depositions for mock trials and wondered if he'd sent them to their deaths? He wanted the visions gone.

And the rest of his "gifts," whatever there was of them, only taunted him with their come-and-go nature. He couldn't count on them, couldn't count on himself to save anyone in the clutch, because he couldn't tell from one minute to the next what he could or couldn't do. His life had spun so out of control. There was no way to study for the tests he'd encountered since picking up this torch, no bell curve for him to throw out of whack with his tenacious conviction and attention to detail. Nothing but surprises and feartormentdread around every corner now. Because he was special. *Some gift.*

But it wasn't all bad. And that was the clinker. He'd saved Alice, saved Dean, saved Rosie. Had he really saved Rosie, though? He'd been saved the same way, once, and now look where he was. He couldn't help but wonder if, twenty years down the line, when Haris came for Rosie, would it be Sam's powers the demon wielded against her? *Selfish bastard.* His head slumped against his chest.

"Chosen?" The bubbly, young voice repeated from outside the box. "Like one of THE Chosen?" Baker asked.

"The first one," the elder grunted distractedly.

"Well, who choosed him?"

"The master. He chose all of them," came the muffled reply.

"Why?"

Sam's head lifted slightly. *Yeah, kid, I wanna know why...*

* * * *

Main Street- same time

Dean folded his phone and slid it into his coat pocket, eyes closed beneath his sunglasses, despite the fact that the sun was low on the horizon and dim. "First tattoo parlor was a bust," he explained as Kyle looked over questioningly from the driver's seat.

Dean looked out the window and pointed to a colorful storefront in the middle of the block on the right side of the quiet main street. "Here's our stop," he said.

The car rumbled to a stop several parking spaces up from the front of the store, right blinker clicking like a metronome. "Oh, God, shoot me now," Dean heaved, throwing his hands up impatiently. "My brother's being held hostage by a bunch of crazed demon worshippers, and you're parallel parking?" He snapped. "Dude, there's an empty spot right there. You can drive right in."

"There's a fire hydrant there," Kyle protested weakly.

Actually, there were three fire hydrants there. It was the fact that it had taken Dean three separate, clumsy tries to grasp the door handle on the car that had landed Kyle in the driver's seat in the first place. John had insisted. Apparently, his father valued the lives of the people on the sidewalk who were in mortal danger with his concussed son behind the wheel. Dean, on the other hand, could not believe that his dad had even suggested allowing Kyle to drive after the priest had rammed his baby through the wall of the steel mill. In the end, though, Dean had consented with his usual, "Yes, sir," and had slid begrudgingly into the passenger seat.

"Yeah, well we're not gonna be in there long enough to get a ticket. Just park it already." Kyle sighed and headed for the illegal space. "You drive like a grandma, you know that?"

Kyle nodded. "Well, my grandmother did teach me..."

Dean glared at him over the top of his sunglasses. He wasn't even going to justify that with a response. "Never mind, dude. Let's just get this over with," Dean dismissed, stepping slowly out onto the curb. He straightened like a geriatric giraffe with an arthritic neck and took in the full storefront display.

Tidal Wave Tattoos was colorfully decorated with sample tattoo designs that had been painted on, of all things, surf boards. It would have looked perfectly ordinary in Cocoa Beach or Malibu. Last Dean checked, though, this was South Dakota. "Oh, this just keeps getting better," he grunted with one eyebrow cocked.

The inside of the store looked pretty much the same as the outside, only with magazines and chairs. There was no one at the desk.

Dean leaned heavily against the counter and smirked sheepishly as he picked up a gag pen with a girl in a hula skirt submersed in water inside of it. He turned the pen upside down, handed it to Kyle nonchalantly, and snickered at the way the priest's ears turned red after only a quick glimpse of the now-nude hula girl in all her god-given glory. He had to give the guy credit, though. Kyle quickly covered his surprise and set the pen back neatly on the counter where Dean had taken it from.

Ooookay. Dean quirked his eyebrows and was about to ring what looked like a lifeguard tower bell for service when a dark, bushy-haired head popped out of the closed off studio. "Be right with ya, dudes." The man went to duck back behind the door, accidentally caught his ears in the too-small space, and let the door twang back open, revealing some poor girl draped over a cushioned table with a fairly large part of her backside exposed and freshly tattooed.

The parlor owner raised his eyebrows sheepishly. "Oops. Don't worry. She passed out about five minutes in." He glanced back at the unconscious posterior and rubbed his neck as though he'd spent the day working a construction job. "Aw, hell," he said. "She'll wait. What can I do you for?" He asked, and Dean couldn't help but think that he looked an awful lot like Keanu Reeves' character from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. At any rate, Malibu Ted looked about as far out of his element as he could get.

Dean leaned over the counter, sunglasses in hand, and passed the attendant - Scuba Joe, according to the sign on the desk - the sketch he'd drawn earlier. Joe took the paper absently and said, "Dude, what are you on, and where can I get some?"

"Huh?"

"Your eyes are totally, like, glassy, man."

Dean put on his biggest, falsest, most condescending grin. Normally, he'd have fun with a guy like Joe, but he was kinda in a hurry. He lifted the sketch again and slapped it down on the desk. "Love to stand here and trade brownie recipes with ya, MAN," he returned sarcastically. "But I need your undivided attention right here." He waved his finger around in front of the man's eyes, as though Joe were a kitten and Dean's finger the elusive piece of string, and then jammed it down in the center of the paper. "I had a run-in with some dudes that had a tattoo that looked something like that. You ever seen it before?"

Joe blanched beneath his South Dakota/Malibu tan.

* * * *

Commune

Sam leaned closer to the lone hole in the concrete in anticipation of the answer. As he did so, his muddy brain picked up on a sliding background noise, a strange combination of slip, and catch, and crackle, and pop, like breakfast cereal in milk. He cocked his head slightly so that his ear was closer to the hole. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't grasp how. What he really wanted to hear was in the foreground, not the back. *Why?*

"Ts complicated," the older child answered.

"I ain't dumb," Baker returned.

There was a brief pause. "Well, it's like when someone else has something, and you don't. You don't know you want it, until they have it, but as soon as you see it, then you want it, too."

"Oh." A beat. "So, if he's Chosen, how come he can't get hisself outta there?"

"Dunno. Prolly cuz he's all doped up."

"Why's he doped up?" More scraping, something wet, and a sound like peeling grapes.

"Cuz it ain't time, yet. It's a big night. Lotta big nights ahead, after this. Lotta work to do before we need him."

"They gonna need all these, too? For the ceremeony?" A thump, like fish tossed into a cooler.

What the hell are they doing?

"Mm-hmm," the elder said distractedly. "Lot more, too."

Lot more what?

"Bring me that other knife."

Knife?

His curiosity piqued, Sam wiggled around, stifling a grunt as his shoulders pressed into the concrete and wrenched his wrists awkwardly beneath him. He pressed one blood-red eye to the hole in the wall, squinting against the glare from the one bare light bulb that swung from the ceiling of the cellar.

As his eyes adjusted to the moving shadows, he realized there were more than just the two kids down there. At least five more were working diligently at a table beneath the swinging bulb.

"This one?" A girl of about eight, with a long dark braid down her back, held up what looked to be a fillet knife, the likes of which he'd handled himself many times by the time he was that age. That, in itself was suspicious. *So, Baker's a girl.* He wondered what children were doing working in a cellar with large knives and no apparent adult supervision.

"Yeah. Thanks, Baker, now go finish yours," the other familiar voice answered. From the way the boy put his hand on the girl's shoulder and turned her gently around to her own work station, Sam thought he could tell that they were brother and sister. He watched as the boy's eyes followed the girl back to the other side of the table. There was no mistaking a dark sadness and protectiveness in the gaze that

reminded Sam of Dean. He wondered how often his own brother had looked at him that way, all the while feigning nonchalance and confidence.

Sam felt a twinge as his Dean-instilled "noble protector of innocents" mechanism sparked to life somewhere within his drugged fog. He wiggled closer to the tiny portal and considered trying to get the boy's attention. Sam knew he'd never get out alone, but maybe if he could convince the kid that he'd take the boy and his sister, too...

As he was about to turn his eye from the hole and place his mouth close enough to shout through it, one of the silent children stood up from the table and moved away, allowing Sam his first glimpse at what the children were working on.

His stomach jolted violently and forced a surprised gasp from his mouth as he clamped his jaw shut around the surge of rising bile.

Apparently, there was some truth to the old saying: There really was more than one way to skin a cat.

* * * * *

Commune, Cellar

Baker had apparently never completely taken her attention from Sam, and his startled reaction to the realization that the children were skinning cats in preparation for some demonic ceremony drew her attention immediately. She turned so that Sam could see her for the first time, and any passing thoughts he'd harbored about the children being innocents faded with the sight of her blood-smeared face, twinkling with wonder and something that passed for anticipation. Whether or not her older brother knew what they were doing was wrong and sick, Baker apparently had no idea herself.

The little girl approached the boxed Winchester slowly yet confidently, taunting him the way a spider would a trapped fly. No hurry, he wasn't going anywhere. Sam had a niggling feeling that he should probably scoot away to the far corner of his prison and feign sleep, but he couldn't tear his shocked gaze from her piercing brown eyes.

He lost sight of her momentarily as she passed directly between him and the lone light bulb, casting her shadow across him so darkly that he could have sworn it had a corporeal substance of its own. He blinked uncertainly as she moved toward him, the swinging bulb hypnotizing him as she moved in and out of its beams. Light, dark, light, dark - like the strobe of some techno dance club.

Suddenly she disappeared altogether, and the light burned his confused retina. He had almost blinked his vision clear when, "Ah! Gotcha!" A tiny finger poked through the hole swiftly and jabbed him in the eye with enough force to cause both to tear up involuntarily. He heaved himself backward out of her reach, and felt his already throbbing head connect solidly with the far wall of his box.

By the time his vision cleared again from the fog of pain, drugs, and tears of irritation, there was something else poking through the hole. He didn't realize what it was until he felt the stabbing prick and the warmth that spread out from the point of penetration.

"Sleepy time, Chosen."

Dart gun. Archaic much? Sam slipped off into a tranquilized sleep, only vaguely aware that his last chance at escape had come and gone.

* * * * *

Tidal Wave Tattoos

"M-maybe," Joe stammered, eyes ducking away. "Whattya want to know about it?"

Dean softened. He hadn't expected the man to blanch like a wet noodle, but it was obvious the guy knew something, and sometimes Sam's softer approach worked better with these hyper-sensitive types.

"So you do know something," he observed forcing himself to smile gratefully and step back a few inches to give the man some breathing room. He placed both his hands flat on the countertop in the most non-menacing gesture he could muster without letting go of the support altogether. "That's great, just great," he blubbered, wanting to jam his finger down his throat at the sickening sweet timbre of his own voice. "I was starting to think we'd never catch a break. You don't know how much it would mean to me if you could tell me what you know about this tattoo and the dudes that are wearing it. Anything you know, man. It would mean a lot." And God, how did Sam do this? If Dean didn't know better he would've passed off the rising wave of nausea that swept over him as just his concussion talking.

Apparently, channeling Sam was the way to go in this instance. Scuba Joe straightened right up, and fresh color sprang into his cheeks. "Ah, sure, dude. Yeah, I did those. A whole raft of 'em actually. First there was like one or two dudes a month wanted 'em. Lately it's been one or two a week."

"You don't say," Dean said. "And do you know who these people are that are getting 'em?"

Joe's eyes took on a contemplative glint as he shrugged noncommittally. "Can't say for sure who they are. Most of 'em come in looking like poster children for middle America. I do their tats, and the next time I see 'em they look like some freaky goth version of Hell's Angels."

"So," Dean thought aloud, "if you see 'em more than once, they must hang around town here somewhere then, right?"

"Right on, dude," Joe agreed, pleased that he was being understood. "Got themselves a whole complex just outside the city limits. It's like David Koresh-land or something. Living like they're their own friggin' country or something. Hell, they even bring the kids in for tats when they get a certain age."

"Kids?" Dean asked, surprised. Worshipping demons was one thing. Corrupting the lives of children was something else entirely. Having had his own childhood tainted by Netherworld influences, Dean had a special loathing for people who willingly subjected their children to the darkness.

"Yeah, women, children, old peeps," Joe expounded. "They're all in it together, like some kind of cult or something. I keep expecting the Feds to show up, but I think they're still trying to cover their asses after the whole Waco fiasco."

"Any idea what kind of cult they are?" Dean asked. "Like 'peace, trust, and love' types, or 'waiting for the end of the world' types?"

"Don't know. Don't wanna know," Joe answered sternly, clearly having put some thought into that question on his own time. "If I had to say, based on the way they act, I'd say they're 'bringing on the end of the world' types." He paused thoughtfully and shook his head. "All I know is that I don't take no chances."

"Whattya mean?" Dean asked, curious.

"Well, I don't know what that symbol is supposed to mean, or what kind of mojo they think is attached to it, but I ain't having no mojo endowing bad karma float my way."

"How so?"

Joe put his finger on the sigil carefully. "This isn't exactly what they ask for when they come in here. I added a couple lines, here and here," he said, pointing to the exact lines Kyle had noted were erroneous from their earlier comparison. "I don't think they've noticed yet, but if they think they're getting an evil juice off that thing, they got another think coming. I may have a business to run, but I ain't selling my soul to do it."

Dean turned his head slowly to Kyle and squinted at him with his best, "question my memory again, dog boy," look. So, he had been right, after all. Well, they both

had. The picture he'd drawn was an exact replica of the tattoo, but the tattoo was, in fact, not an exact duplicate of the Azazel sigil, as Kyle had discovered. Between the two of them, they had a pretty good eye for detail. Almost as good a team as Dean and Sam, except that Dean didn't think he'd want to trust Kyle to get his back in a throwdown the way he did Sam.

"I gotta hand it to you," Dean said with a congratulatory tone, "most people don't put enough stock in this stuff to think twice about it. I think your little ploy here has to be about the closest I've seen anyone come to having their cake and eating it too."

Joe smirked a little sheepishly but became serious again. "It ain't really like that," he mused. "It's just, well this was my Daddy's business, and he was a real believer in the whole idea of reaping what you sow. After he died, and I had to come back from Cali to take over the store, I learned to appreciate a lot of the things he tried to teach me that I never paid much attention to."

"Like what?" Dean asked.

"Oh, you know. We never wanna listen to our parents growing up."

No, actually, Dean didn't know, but he did know someone else who had that particular problem.

"Dad tried to get me into the business from the time I could doodle a decent sketch, but I swore I wanted bigger things, to make my own way, ya know?" Dean nodded. "So, I went to Cali, got my own shop, and painted surf boards for a living. Then when he died, I dragged my feet all the way back here, thinking I'd lost my chance to be my own man, live my own life. But when I actually settled in, painting bodies turned out to be not all that different from painting boards. I guess I just realized, I never really hated the business, just wanted the chance to choose it for myself." He rubbed his hand through his bushy hair like a kid enduring an "aw, shucks, I hate it when you're right," moment.

Snapping back to reality, Joe straightened up. "Besides," he cocked his head toward the slightly ajar studio door suggestively, "painting bodies does have a few perks that painting boards didn't." He chuckled. "Well, I better get back to work. Her Hiney awaits. You won't have any trouble tracking those dudes down," he added, pointing to the sketch. "Just head outta town on the main drag, hang the first left. They own just about everything from here to the county line."

"Thanks," Dean said, and this time his smile was genuine.

As they made their way back to the car, Kyle said thoughtfully, "I think I liked that man. He seemed very wise, I mean, all things considered."

Dean grinned and quirked an eyebrow. "Yeah, me too, Moses."

As they reached the car, Kyle's hand paused on the door handle, and he hesitated, catching Dean's gaze over the top of the car. "Do you think he knows that Scuba and Surfing are two different things?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he does," Dean snickered. "But hey, this is South Dakota. Who the hell cares?"

Before getting into the car, Dean pulled out his phone and quickly dialed his father's number to relay the information they'd gotten. When all he got was the voicemail service, his brow furrowed thoughtfully, a tinge of worry painting his features. He left a brief message, and snapped the phone shut with a frown. "Dad's not answering," he explained, placing his arms on the roof of the car as he gazed indecisively at the last hints of sunlight sinking below the horizon. "And I don't think we have time to wait on this, Padre."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'm saying it's you, me, and God on this one. Sam doesn't have all night to wait for us to get our acts together."

"But what do you expect me to do?"

"Just like last time. You're gonna be my backup. Don't get your flannels in a bunch. I'll do the work. You just keep your eyes open." He looked at the car with a

sigh of dismay. "And don't even think about using my car as a weapon again. I got a shotgun full of rock salt in the trunk with your name on it."

Kyle shook his head vehemently. "No," he stammered. "No, no, I-I couldn't. Not a gun. I cannot take another man's life. That is for God alone..."

"Don't worry, Moses," Dean said, sliding into the car, "Rock salt won't kill anyone." He rubbed his hand absently across his chest, stifling a sympathetic phantom groan. "It'll just hurt like hell."

Falling silent, Kyle nodded slowly, knowing that Sam's life was at stake, despite the demon's promise to let him live. Vows were just laws, after all, and those were open to interpretation. He supposed he could stretch the rules just this once. He slid behind the steering wheel and turned the ignition key as the engine rumbled to life.

Neither one noticed the parking ticket flutter away as they pulled out and headed down the street.

* * * *

Commune Grounds

A little after sunset

Dean sifted carefully through the Impala's trunk until he found the shotgun he was looking for. The brothers had at least five different variants in the Chevy at any one time, but tonight he wanted this specific weapon. It was the smallest and least likely to put out the priest's shoulder when the rookie shooter fired it.

He turned the shotgun in his hand and began sliding in cartridges. "Stupid question, but you fired a gun before? Like, ever?"

Kyle winced apologetically, and his eyes shifted to the thing in Dean's hand. "Only at the fairground..." He hesitated and decided not to add "when I was twelve." That admission would freak the hunter for sure.

"Geez..." Dean didn't finish the slightly crude comment that had weaved its way into his head, and instead tugged out a spare box of shells. Better not to offend the priest too much in one day, even if he was a wonderful source of amusement. "Okay, let me show you how to load and aim this puppy. Then we're all set to go kick some cult ass."

Dean offered up the box of ammo, and Kyle took it shakily, his trembling fingers struggling to fumble inside and draw out a cartridge. "...I'm still not sure I can do this." He gulped, looking over his glasses at the hunter with an expression of despair that bordered on suicidal.

Dean noted the priest's anxiety, and his voice softened just a touch. "Hey, Moses, you're a priest, not a marshmallow. No going soft on me until we get Sammy out, okay?" He grinned a little, and his companion's stiff shoulders relaxed enough so that he at least no longer looked like the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Everyone warmed to Dean in the end.

"I...I'll try." Kyle carefully slid two cartridges into the shotgun and Dean nodded his approval when the weapon proved full to capacity. The priest looked up, expecting some kind of lesson on what to do next, but none came.

Dean had already silently sauntered away, back to the rear of the Impala.

The Chevy was parked on a small incline that looked down on the commune, its bulky, damaged frame hidden by rough foliage and two overhanging trees that defied description.

Dean took a glance at the nearest branch as he brushed by it and wondered if it too wasn't some kind of demonic offshoot. *What is this thing, a freakin' Triffid?*

The hunter kneeled as he reached the edge of their camouflage, squinting in the dull light to get a sharper view of what was going on below the knoll where he was perched. Behind, he heard a scuffling as Williams decided to clumsily join him, shotgun reluctantly in hand.

"What do you think they're doing?" Kyle dropped down until he was level with Dean and took in the scene below with a muffled sigh. It looked like at least ten adult cult members were building something from recently chopped wood and kindling.

Each man or woman placed their sections with precise accuracy, reminding Dean of the huge "Wicker Man" built in the movies. He shuddered. *No Edward Woodward or Nic Cage here.*

As the adults worked, several children stood around in a circle in what appeared to be awed silence. Each one had a small, bloodied sack at their side. Kyle wasn't sure he wanted to see what the burlap contained.

"Well it sure as hell ain't the Fourth of July, Padre," Dean finally answered through gritted teeth. *Pyre plus something bloody? In a place like this?* "I'm thinking old Harry's boys are cookin' up a ceremonial sacrifice, and I'm not talking about Turkey and a few fireworks, even if these guys do have a fixation with that particular bird..."

Kyle gulped down hard, feeling the saliva in his throat suddenly refuse to be swallowed. He hated the sensation. His palms were sweaty, his stomach nauseous, and his head felt like it was going to explode. Adrenaline for some might be a rush, but for this unsung hero, it was not a blessing.

"You think..?"

"Yeah, I *think*," Dean concluded acerbically without actually finishing the sentence. It was too much to say he thought Sam was going to be the night's offering, even if he believed it. *Dumbass had to go give himself up.. What was he thinking?* Despite the scolding attitude, Dean was more worried than angry. He turned to Kyle, suddenly needing to know their foe's reasoning, even if the priest didn't have the answer. "Why?" He asked bluntly. "Why Sammy? Why you?"

It was a frank question, and Kyle wished he knew how to respond to make the fearful brother feel some solace, but his almost clairvoyant ability hadn't made him privy to those particular details.

"Why were we given the gifts? Why does Haris want them?" The priest shrugged. "I can only guess that we are all some precursor to a main event. There are many children like your brother and I, and it would be foolish to assume we've been placed on God's earth by accident. The gifts have a purpose, and Haris, I assume, wishes to thwart that purpose." Kyle's eyes dropped to the floor and his face became saddened. "Or," he added dolefully. "We are here to thwart *his* purpose, *his* goal, and he means to stop us. Whatever we are meant to do, I fear it will be a thankless task, and a dangerous one."

Dean patted his forty-five in his palm as if some deep thought still niggled him. He agreed with the priest's perceptions- and yet, what if there was another reason for the gifted children?

Kyle's practiced "confessional" expertise kicked in, and he pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose from where they'd slipped as he'd crouched.

"Something else is bothering you?"

Dean wanted to tell the priest to cut the condescending "church can cure all" crap, but he couldn't. The priest who hated guns and liked to wreck classic Chevys had somehow hooked and reeled him in without the hunter even knowing it. "What if the kids, what if they're not...not what we think..."

Kyle nodded slowly, understanding the implication. "What if Sam and I, and all the others are somehow connected to the Demon? What if we've been part of his grand plan all along? *Connected to him, even...*"

Dean's head bobbed, but he couldn't stare his new friend in the eye. He had all but accused the priest and his own brother of being corrupted by something ungodly at birth. Not that he thought either would follow Haris' calling, no matter how they'd been tainted, but their abilities *had* come from somewhere, and the Demon was a viable source who had almost intimated the gifts should be his back at the mill. "I mean, he said he was only getting what was 'his'. What exactly does he consider to be his? The freaky mojo stuff? And by what right?"

Kyle shook his head confidently and dared to rest a hand on the elder Winchester's forearm. "I cannot ever believe that. I'm a man of God, whether I can ever be part of the church again or not. I'll never worship a false idol, and I'll never bow down to one. I haven't known your brother very long, but trust me. I know he feels the same. We're on the right side of this, Dean. I just know."

Dean's eyes widened at the priest's sudden show of self-belief. Usually, the man could barely string a sentence together without stuttering or faltering with his words, and yet here he was, so sure in his convictions about something he couldn't possibly know for sure- could he?

"You're right," Dean admitted, breaking the intense moment with a grin. "Sammy is way too geeky to ever want to get involved in all those kinda wild, naked occult parties I've heard about..."

There was a brief pause and the hunter's brow cocked, suggesting the "wild and naked" part of the idea suddenly didn't sound all that bad. Kyle's face reddened to a deep scarlet and Dean punched him playfully. "Gotcha, Moses," he winked and then jerked his weapon down to the commune. "So are you ready for round two in the turkey shoot?"

Kyle looked down at the glinting shotgun in his hands and thought he was, even if he hadn't met the infamous cult boss who liked to break necks yet.

* * * *

The commune grounds were just as big as Joe had suggested. The land on which the large ranch-type building was situated on ran for miles- a vast expanse of open prairie that, during the day, was a feast to the eye of any conservationist.

Tonight, the open vista was not exactly what Dean had hoped for. The extensive building constructed of timber sat at the edge of at least an acre of open ground. The only things between it and the base of the hillock they'd just descended were two rusting truck hulks that had probably nestled here long before the ranch even had.

Dean pointed to the first truck's remains with his shotgun and whispered. "I'll cover you. Make for the truck, Moses, and keep low."

Kyle stole a glance towards the circle of children and their adult companions and then took a deep breath. The pyre was being lit as he watched. There was very little time left. This was it. This was the moment he had to prove his worth before the Winchesters, but most of all, before God.

The still-nervous priest nodded his affirmation and stealthily dodged across the dew-covered grass towards the rotting carcass of the truck.

Halfway to the priest's destination, Dean realized his mistake. The people at the commune were from the same cult as the girl back in Louisiana and the dudes who had kidnapped Matt Ismay in Wisconsin. They not only knew their weapons, but they also knew how to lay a booby trap as well as a Viet Cong soldier.

As Dean painfully watched, Kyle stumbled mid-stride as his left leg seemingly slipped through the ground into some nothingness below. *Well, better that booby than this one.*

The priest had fallen into the first of probably many traps set around the commune's perimeter, and no matter how he justified it, it was Dean's fault. Without hesitating, Dean raced to Kyle's rescue, totally ignoring the cult members who had already paused at the priest's pained cry.

"Dude, you so gotta look where you're putting your feet if you're gonna work gigs!" Dean hooked an arm under Kyle's and tugged hard, spinning around as he hauled the priest up.

Behind them, the "workers" still gaped as they stood before the already blazing fire, but several guards with weapons were already pouring from the commune's main entrance.

“Shit!” Dean winced as he noted their enemies were all armed, and unlike the weapons he and Kyle carried, he had no doubt their guns contained real ammo.

“Must you use that language?” Kyle teetered as he pulled his leg from the recently dug hole in the ground, and he almost tumbled, grabbing his savior’s arm for support again at the last minute.

Dean scowled as he took stock of their situation. “Hell, yes! Especially when I’m about to get my ass shot off. C’mon.” He tugged harder, dragging the priest behind the Freightliner, still under protest. “Well, Moses, you totally ruined the whole gatecrashing deal. Can you get anything right?”

Kyle peered above the corroded hood of the truck as five titanic sized cult members barreled towards them. “I’m pretty good with a sermon,” he offered, somewhat humbly.

“Sermon, huh?” Dean couldn’t even think of a suitably sarcastic response. “Guess you better start praying right about now, then.” He bobbed up alongside Kyle and realized his last suggestion probably wasn’t a bad idea. Heaven only knew how many more bad guys a ranch the size of the commune could hold.

CRUNCH!

Something hard and metallic tore into the aging truck’s hood, sending tiny shards of steel skyward. One of the mini projectiles caught the priest alongside his right eye, making a small but very sore nick in his flesh.

Kyle rubbed at it absentmindedly, his eyes abruptly wide with shock and recognition as a thin film of blood came away on his fingers. “They’re shooting at us with *real* bullets,” he gaped.

Dean bobbed up, pulling back on his Remington’s trigger until both barrels had been emptied into the approaching crowd, causing suitable chaos. “You don’t say, Moses. What did you expect, water pistols? Now will you gimme some return fire, here?” The hunter raised a brow suggestively whilst ramming in two more shells to his own weapon.

Kyle reluctantly nodded and dared to duck from behind the refuge of the truck. He pulled at the pump action shotgun’s trigger twice in quick succession with no regard for positioning or aim.

Both blasts completely missed their targets, but the priest was blown back and off his feet with the kickback from the gun.

Dean rolled his eyes and quickly shot out a hand, grabbing Kyle’s collar and tugging him back behind the relative safety of the Freightliner. “Dude, you shoot like a girl...”

Kyle nodded meekly. “That’s what the guy at the fairground said, too.” He looked at the shotgun and then apologetically at Dean. “I’m afraid I may not be much help.”

A shower of bullets made the priest flinch, and he reflexively dropped onto his stomach, believing the lower position would afford him more cover. Dean remained near the front end of the truck, but his expression changed from desperate to grim.

“Jeez, automatic rifles.” Dean hunched forward and slightly to the right of the truck’s hood, stealing another glance towards the ranch. “From what I can tell, maybe a couple of M16’s and two or three HK416’s. Man, they’re a regular little occult army. I guess old Harry doesn’t just rely on ancient powers to get what he wants...”

“HK what?” Kyle struggled to stuff more cartridges into his weapon, despite the fact it still held several. Guns were not his thing. No kind of violence was.

“Let’s just say they kick ass, and it will be our asses in their sights if we don’t haul ‘em outta here and find Sammy.” Another volley of machine gun fire tore into the truck, ripping up the hood like it had a small clump of C4 under it. Dean recoiled slightly and wondered if there was even anywhere to actually haul ass to.

The other hulk of a truck was only a short distance away, but it was far enough for him to get killed a million times trying to reach it, especially with the rookie priest in tow. Besides, they’d simply be trading one frail refuge for another. *I can’t die here. Not until I know Sammy is safe.*

“Moses, think you can make it to the next truck if I cover you?”

Kyle blinked beneath his glasses, the smoke from the raging fire beyond already stinging his eyes until they were watering. “I...I’ll try...”

Dean shook his head, not accepting the answer. “Don’t try, preacher, DO!”

Preacher... Kyle’s mind flashed momentarily back to the seminary. To the demon that had taken so many lives. The demon that had stolen his career, his reason to exist. It had taunted him that night, and now Dean’s words brought the scene back in vivid clarity.

With a rush of bravado he never would have thought possible, Kyle Williams grabbed his weapon and made an all-out charge towards the second truck, palms sweating as he held the gun far too tightly to his shoulder.

Halfway across the open grassland, he slowed and turned, letting off three shots at the men who were attempting to take his life. This time, he didn’t miss, and his gait neither wavered nor faltered. It was as if the priest had been given courage from an outside source- a source that wanted the righteous to win and Sam Winchester to live.

Dean looked on incredulously for a moment, and then gave the priest the covering fire he had promised. As Kyle finally ducked down behind the decrepit remains of the Ford pick-up, he couldn’t help but shake his head and murmur, “Well I’ll be damned. Moses got some brass ones after all...”

Kyle settled the pump actions barrel on the Ford’s tailgate and let off another shot of rock salt. The stinging shell downed yet another cult member, and the priest beckoned with his free hand for Dean to join him.

The hunter nodded, sparing the time to glance across to the commune. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

Somehow, a stray ember from the blazing pyre had landed on the ranch, and against all odds had found some combustible material to cling to. The cinder had quickly turned from a hot glowing spark to something much more ominous.

As Dean watched, transfixed with fear from some earlier fiery moment in his life, the commune’s roof began to burn.

The hunter’s psyche swam with visions of a burning home in Lawrence, of a mother pinned to her son’s bedroom ceiling, and finally of Sam trapped in a room with the blazing body of his dead girlfriend. *Not gonna let Sammy burn, not ever. Not like this...not any way...*

“Dean!” Kyle’s voice brought the young hunter to his senses and he looked up to see the priest gesturing behind him.

Dean realized almost too late his mistake. Entranced by his past, he had forgotten the present and its dangers. He whirled on one foot, bringing up his weapon to get off a shot, but he was too close to his assailant. The cult member was upon him as he turned, and it was all Dean could do to get the shotgun between himself and his attacker to stop the knife blow headed his way. *I know I’m a choice cut, but this is ridiculous.*

“And I thought I taught you better...”

Dean dodged a punch from the tattooed bad guy, and just had time to cock his head to see John before the elder hunter slammed his forty-five over the thug’s skull, knocking him out.

There was barely time for greetings as another round of staccato gun fire erupted from the closest HK416, and both men found themselves diving for cover once again behind the now bullet-riddled Freightliner.

“Dad...I have to get in there fast. The place is lit up like a torch, and somehow I don’t think these guys will stick around to play fireman when they realize it.” Dean jerked a grimy thumb to the ranch’s rooftop, noting the bright orange flames were already licking high into the night sky as a gentle breeze fanned their progress.

John’s normally emotionless face took in the scene, but his voice remained deep and stoic- as unfathomable as ever. “You’re sure Sam’s in there?”

Dean faltered. He and Kyle had no solid evidence that he was. Just because these people had helped Haris, didn't mean Sam had been brought here. And yet, Dean just knew. Maybe it was some psychic brotherly bond, sixth sense, intuition, or just plain hunch, but Dean knew Sam was in the burning ranch as surely as he knew he would die if he were not rescued. "I'm sure," he eventually coughed out, giving no reason behind his certainty.

John took the answer on face value and simply nodded. "Looks like some of Haris's people aren't so loyal when the chips are down." He watched as several cult members made a dash for the only road out of the commune in two beat up pick-ups. "I'm guessing even those who are devoted won't stick around once the cops and Fire Department get out here..."

Dean frowned. The commune was in the middle of nowhere. It might take hours for someone to see the smoke and flames out here and call it in. "Dad, we may as well be on the moon. Who the hell is gonna be out here to call in the cavalry?"

John smiled ever-so-slightly and drew a small cell phone from his long overcoat pocket. "They'll be here," he assured in his usual bottomless tones. "Now go get your brother while I cover you and babysit your priest friend."

Dean reloaded the Remington again ready for his full frontal assault and then checked out the frontage of the building. The cult members with the automatic weapons had suddenly vanished leaving a clear run at the porch.

Another glance at the ranch told the hunter why. The roof was now engulfed in a mass of writhing red flames that billowed immense plumes of dirty black smoke into the Dakota night. Now though, the roof wasn't the only thing ablaze.

As he watched, fiery tendrils licked around the doorframe of the ranch, beckoning him to enter what now looked like the mouth of hell. *Is this what Haris wanted all along? Is this his true realm I'm about to walk into?* More thoughts of Lawrence returned, but Dean ignored them.

Hell or not, Sam was in trouble, and he would traverse the gates of Hades if that was what it took to get his brother back.

Taking one long, deep breath, the hunter pushed away from the eviscerated truck and took a dive towards the ranch, gun poised for action. As he pushed his leg muscles to work harder than they ever had before towards the crackling flames, his ears picked up on one last message from his father- a message he wasn't even sure he was meant to hear.

"Be careful, son..."

As he reached the porch, the rest of the words were lost, drowned in a sea of emotion and more, because something huge now stood between Dean and his brother's life. A something or someone that liked to break necks, just for the hell of it. Dean's gait didn't slow. If he paused now, Sammy might succumb to the eternal flames of hell just like so many around him already had. No, Dean wouldn't stop. Not until he was dead, and even that hadn't been able to pin him down yet.

From the expression on his enemy's face, they were in for a standoff.

Dying right now, though, was not an option Dean could afford to even consider. *Guess that means this just isn't Bubba's lucky day.* The hunter pulled back on his Remington's trigger twice as he continued onward at full throttle, and the tall, blond leader fell back, taking the rock salt midsection.

Once the gun's ammo was expended, Dean tossed it to one side and pulled out his silver forty-five. He didn't want to have to use it, but if that was what it took to save Sam, then so be it. *For you or Dad, the things I'm willin' to do or kill...*

Dean barged through the smoking door frame and cast a glance where the cult leader had landed; he was on the floor in a fetal position, grasping at his stomach as if he'd been kicked by a horse. Dean winced, remembering what it had felt like back in Roosevelt Asylum. He also recalled just how long he'd been incapacitated when the chips had been down. Mr. Cult Leader wasn't likely to be distracted for too long, especially when he knew what failing Haris was bound to mean.

Stepping past the wounded behemoth, Dean checked out the rest of the room and soon realized it was one of the few sections of building not already totally engulfed by the fire.

Smoke billowed from beneath two adjoining doors, and the hunter suspected that should he try to open either he would be met by a very deadly backdraft. *C'mon, Sammy, you gotta be here somewhere. I know I'm not wrong on this one. I can't be or...*

Dean put his free hand to his mouth as he began to hack from the acrid fumes that permeated the building. The place looked old, and had probably been constructed with materials long ago outlawed because of their flammable or toxic nature.

"Sammy! Sammy! C'mon, Sammy, you gotta hear me!" Dean wretched as the smoke began to tickle the back of his throat and burn his lungs, but there was still no evidence that Sam was, or ever had been at the ranch. "C'mon, psychic boy! Use some of those damn gifts of yours, and gimme a sign here!"

Still nothing.

Dean frowned, shaking his head at the terrible possibility that Sam was already dead. Maybe the demon had already taken what was his? Maybe the pyre and planned ceremony were simply part of a celebration in honor of what had already occurred.

Pain seared through Dean's chest, forcing a bout of nausea as his heart clenched. He'd never accept that Sam was gone, and yet, he couldn't save him if he couldn't find him.

Dean coughed more, and he realized he was only moments away from succumbing to the suffocating fumes. He'd die for Sam in a heartbeat, but he couldn't save his brother if he was already dead himself. Taking one last glance behind him, he lunged back to the smoldering doorframe and hungrily gulped down as many lungfuls of air as his body could take.

He panted for a while and then turned to go back inside, his starving system appeased, at least, for now.

"Dean! Wait!" It was Kyle's voice, and despite his earlier show of courage, he sounded panicked.

Dean paused, torn between dashing back into the inferno and trusting his own instincts. Kyle could just be trying to talk him out of going back into the building, but...

He whirled, eyes searching the smoke-filled night for the holy man.

"Dean, you have to look to the floor! Look under the floor!" Kyle's voice rang out across the open grassland, and at last, Dean was able to latch onto him through the smog and gloom.

The priest was waving frantically back to the house, his amazing and unexpected instructions quite clear.

He sees things...He knows...

Dean didn't waste time with an acknowledgement. Spinning on one boot he plunged himself back into the ranch and began scouring the floor for any signs of a trap door, cellar, or hidden room.

Smoke filled his eyes until he squinted, impairing his vision and making tiny streams of liquid ebb from his tear ducts until he had to rub at them just to see a blur.

"Sammy!"

Still there was no reply, and Dean had to admit to himself that even if Sam was below the floor, he may well have already been unconscious from inhaling the noxious vapors within. *Unconscious, not dead...Smoke rises. He's not dead.*

Something stirred in the corner, and through the haze and flames Dean realized it was the not-so-friendly cult boss from earlier. He raised his weapon, taking aim through the smog and intense heat that seemed to be building to a crescendo.

"Dude, don't make me shoot your fugly, demon worshipping ass." The elder Winchester narrowed his eyes, attempting to refocus through the involuntary tears

streaming down his face. "C'mon, I shoot you, you're only gonna end up in Hell, and I can guarantee you don't wanna be there right now after the way you screwed up here tonight..."

The blond wavered, uncertain as to whether he should die attempting another final kill for his master, run, or simply allow Dean to shoot him, and end his misery on earth.

While the goon made his choice, precious seconds ticked away like hours of grueling agony to Dean. While he wasted time with this hellion, Sam remained in danger.

"I will die with honor for the master!"

Dean cocked his head, his aim ever-steady. "Yeah, well you took your sweet time deciding. Guess you're not into the old Hary Cary as much as you thought, huh?"

The leader let out a wail as if he were already in hell and then charged towards Dean, still carrying the serrated blade.

Dean didn't hesitate. There was no time to ponder. No time to think of a better way.

Pulling back on his forty-five's trigger just once, Dean downed his opponent.

The bad guy stumbled, one leg suddenly crumpling beneath him as if he'd fallen into the same trap Kyle had only minutes previously. His eyes widened in shock and disbelief, and he grabbed at the hole that had startlingly appeared in his leg just below the knee.

Dean ignored his foe and instantly resumed his search for Sam. The guy still had time to crawl out if he had sense. Sam had no such luxury.

The hunter pulled an old handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth and nose, but the cloth provided little protection from the ever-thickening fog within the room.

If Dean didn't find the underground chamber soon, he never would.

He focused harder, trying to imagine the best place for such a secret cavity, and eventually his eyes settled on a now smoldering carpet beneath a tiny dining table.

Dean crossed the room in just three wide strides, quickly stuffing his automatic back into his belt before tearing at the thread-worn rug to remove it.

The worn and dirty carpeting yielded to his command easily, and with one yank it was tossed aside to reveal a trap door with two metal handles and a seedy looking peep hole. At one edge, the door was carefully secured with a mammoth sized padlock that suggested a rhino dwelled the other side.

"Sammy!" There was still no response, but Dean was certain now that his brother lay beyond in some evil confined space. Some space where the demon no doubt imagined he would go stir crazy and become helpless in the face of its desires.

Bastard...

Dean stooped, placing a streaming eye to the peep hole, and what he saw beyond made his heart leap with fear. Sam was, indeed, in the secured space, hands tied behind his back, eyes red and bloodied from Haris' earlier assault on his body. For all intents and purposes, it looked like he was peacefully sleeping. *Or dead...*

No!

Dean's mind screamed out and he jerked back from the peep hole, abruptly needing to drag his brother from the dark hell into which he'd been placed. Refusing to believe Sam was anything but unconscious, the hunter retrieved his forty-five and backed up.

Steadying his sights on the huge lock, he mouthed a silent prayer to whatever God might be listening and fired.

The metallic fastener exploded like a mortar shell, shards of it embedding in the wooden floor like tiny spears as it disintegrated.

On any other day, Dean would have grinned at his handiwork, but not tonight. Instead, the hunter simply grabbed at the trap door, ignoring the searing sensation as his hands burned from the temperature of the handles.

The door swung open reluctantly, his grasp faltering as heroism finally gave in to pain and he pulled away. Flesh from his palms remained behind on the metal clasps as he jerked back.

The timber door clattered on to the bare floor with no more resistance, and Dean quickly clambered into the cavity beyond. Defying the agony in his hands, he slipped a finger to his brother's neck and sighed with relief as a dull throb greeted his raw flesh.

"C'mon, Sleeping Beauty, time to leave the ball." Dean grabbed Sam's arm, dragging it over his shoulder and tugging hard until his brother's huge frame was hauled from its tiny resting place.

Once Sam was clear of the chamber, Dean quickly lugged his limp body over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. *I take it back; I so don't wanna be a fireman. Not unless I get some tiny blonde chick over my shoulder next time...*

"Dude, you eat all that health food crap and you still feel like you weigh as much as some freakin' Sumo wrestler..." Dean continued to grouse as he teetered towards the blazing doorway, his brother's dead weight encumbering his pace.

As he neared the entrance, he began to cough again, and the hacking motion almost made him lose his tenuous grip on Sam. Dean carefully repositioned his brother's mass, slowly striding over the now unconscious cult leader in order to make good their escape.

As he mercifully reached the threshold to the porch, Dean was so relieved he never noticed his bout of coughing had forced his brother from his drug and smoke induced stupor just enough to groggily open his eyes.

Sam blearily lifted his head, blinking back into the burning building, and what he saw made him wish he had remained peacefully oblivious to what was going on.

The room was a literal inferno behind them, a blazing chamber of pure death to anyone who should enter it now. And yet, standing within the licking flames as if he were standing in the Garden of Eden, stood Haris.

The demon's eyes flashed with amusement, and he smiled, his tailored black suit remaining perfectly trim despite the fact that it should be burning like the rest of the room's material contents.

Sam blinked, certain that the drugs he had been fed were playing tricks on his still half-woozy mind, but in the end, he knew that wasn't so. Haris had brought him here for a reason. The question was why was he now letting Sam escape without a fight?

Haris seemed to read the young hunter's thoughts and offered up a hand, beckoning. At the look of horror on Sam's face, he burst into a fit of laughter before turning and walking further into the scorching flames.

Just when Sam thought the demon would vanish, the bastard turned, still smiling.

"*Alea iacta est, Samuel.*" And then, in a wisp of dark-grey smoke, he was gone.

Sam recognized the phrase even though it was spoken in Latin, but then Haris had known he would. The demon was giving him a message, and it was a clear one. *No...I didn't give in to him. I didn't play a part in any ritual or rites...*

But in truth, as Sam's head lolled back onto Dean and he retreated back into unconsciousness, he really wasn't sure what he had done whilst under the influence of the contents of the archaic dart gun.

Dean burst from the ranch like a speeding locomotive, never realizing what his brother had seen. Only when he was sure he and Sam were clear of any danger did he slow his pace. Taking a deep breath, he headed straight for the Ford pickup that Kyle and John had continued to use as cover, and once he was behind its feeble protection he dropped Sam to the ground.

Red-faced and breathless from exertion, he looked to John first as emergency service sirens blared ever nearer. "Take care of him. There's something I have to do." Without giving more of an explanation, the weary hunter began to jog back to the roaring flames he had just vacated.

“Dean!” John’s authoritative voice boomed across the night, but his son never looked back. “Dean, dammit, get back here.”

The order fell on deaf ears.

“He has something to do. Something personal,” Kyle offered, carefully loosening Sam’s collar and untying his bonds.

“Personal my ass,” John tossed his own gun down and stole a glance to the ranch porch as Dean once again emerged from the building with a figure over his shoulder. “The guy worships a devil, kidnaps Sam, and tries to kill all of us, and my son risks his life to save the son of a bitch.” He shook his head, not quite knowing whose morals were warped more: his own, or Dean’s.

Kyle smiled, not reading the thoughts behind John’s expression quite as they had been intended. “Despite his air of arrogance, Dean is truly a son to be proud of, Mr. Winchester. Both your sons are. I wish I could have shown my parents such courage and conviction before they died.”

John rubbed a hand across his beard as he looked down on Sam’s prone form. Sam shouldn’t have been put through what he had, and neither should Dean. Yes, they were both kids to be proud of, but they shouldn’t need to be proving their courage and conviction by chasing ghosts and demons across the country. They should be living normal lives, having families, but instead, they were here, fighting a crusade that was ultimately his and his alone.

True, the demon would always want Sammy, but that simply meant John should be the fighter, the protector. He should be the one to finish the damn thing before it took his son. He should never have trained them and let them harbor the hatred he had, that should have been his burden alone.

John watched as Dean dropped the cult leader to the ground and began to hastily make his way back to the Ford. Now was not the time for discussion or regrouping, and that was what the boys would want. There would be arguments because they would want to carry on the war as a team, as a family, and right now, John knew there was something he had to do alone.

Coming to the commune had been about saving Sam, but in hindsight, it had been much more. John had been given the chance to come into contact with so many of Haris’ disciples, and some of them had very loose tongues once threatened with the right kind of persuasion. One such follower had provided some very insightful information about certain plans concocted by the demon.

Plans John was very interested in thwarting.

The eldest Winchester stuffed his hands in his long overcoat pockets and took one last look at his youngest child. Sam had smudges of black soot across his face from the fire, and smears of dried blood from his previous encounter with the demon, but he would live and be safe in the protective charge of his big brother.

The father’s eyes began to well, and he turned away. It was time to leave, before he once again let emotion cloud his judgment.

Kyle watched as John Winchester quickly vanished into the night, and for all his gifts, he couldn’t even begin to imagine what the haunted parent was going through. There was a deep and unyielding love for his family in the man’s eyes, but also a dark, burning hatred that one day would consume him if he refused to acknowledge it.

“Where’s Dad?” Dean breathlessly jogged to join the priest and quickly kneeled, checking on his, still unresponsive, brother.

Kyle winced apologetically and shook his head, not really knowing how to explain the feelings he had sensed as John had departed. “I...I think he must have gone for help..”

The negativity in the answer told Dean all he needed to know. John was gone-again, and one of these times, Dean feared it would be the last.

* * * *

Sam opened one eye meekly and wished he hadn't. The bright lights built into the ambulance's roof made him wince and quickly squint. The darkness of his underground tomb had been all he'd known for hours, and now, any kind of illumination was more than his weary retinas could handle.

Sam groaned and put a hand to his face to break the bright glow that was accosting him from every angle. *How did I get here? Dean..?*

Dean!

The younger Winchester tried to pull himself from the gurney he'd been placed on, but soon found his head was still swimming in a drug-and-smoke-induced quagmire. He slouched back reluctantly and took a deep breath, closing his eyes and wishing the bells in his head would stop chiming as if he were actually located in the damn bell tower.

"Sweetheart, you wrap that much tighter and I'll think I'm somebody's birthday present. You gonna stick a bow on top here when you're done?"

The voice was unmistakably Dean's, and it was close.

Sam ventured to peel back an eyelid once more and noted his brother was standing just outside the rig's rear doors while a rather cute paramedic wrapped his hands. The smile on Dean's face suggested that, despite the pain from his burnt palms and the slightly glazed look in his eyes, the girl's appealing looks had not gone unnoticed. *Jeez...does he ever think with his upstairs brain?*

"Dean?" Sam coughed to break up the pair before his brother tried some new pick-up line and soon realized that his throat was pretty raw from the fumes he'd inhaled. He sounded like an old man rather than his usual boyish self.

Dean turned, offering the paramedic his quirky grin as she finally placed the last piece of tape in place to hold his dressings. Wishing he didn't have to pull away from her ministrations quite so soon, he nodded gratefully and clambered into the back of the ambulance.

"I thought you were going to sleep all night. Dude, much longer and those guys were thinking of charging rent." Dean jerked a thumb towards the girl who'd wrapped his hands, and found his eyes lingering on her just a little too long.

Sam threw a feeble mock punch his brother's way and then sank into another round of hacking. When the coughs subsided he frowned. "Where's Dad? Isn't he with you? I thought I heard his voice earlier..."

Dean's head dropped, and he ran a finger over his recently acquired bandages, wondering just how to explain their father's recent departure. In the end, his silence told Sam all he needed to know.

"He's gone again, hasn't he? Without even so much as an explanation as to why he kept that damn bullet and left us with a dud." Sam's face reddened and he swung both legs over the side of the gurney to sit up. Giddy or not, it didn't stop him getting angry. "And the lies...you heard what the demon said, right?"

Dean's own face flushed. He'd heard, but that didn't mean any of it was true. It didn't mean their dad had kept things from them just because the Demon said so. "Demon's lie, Sam..."

Sam's eyes widened in fury. "Yeah? Well maybe dads lie too! You ever considered that?"

Of course, Dean had. He'd spent more time hunting with John than anyone. He knew the man's mood swings, the annoyance that always erupted when his good little soldier, Dean, failed to follow an order. But still, everyone kept secrets, didn't they? "And you're any different?" He finally challenged, needing, wanting to defend his father even though he knew John was in the wrong. "What about Jess, Sam? The nightmares? You kept that from me and Dad didn't you? Anything else you'd care to share?"

Sam opened his mouth and immediately clamped it shut again. Dean was right. He *did* keep secrets, but only because he wanted to protect those he loved. *Some*

good that did Jess... What was worse, now he had a new dilemma, and this time, just like before, he didn't know how to handle it.

The demon's voice mocked him, and Sam couldn't help but put a hand on either side of his head to try and stop the words repeating over and over in his subconscious like a skipping CD. "*Alea iacta est, Samuel.*"

"Alea iacta est, Samuel."

"Dude, are you okay? You look like..." Dean's voice instantly changed from confrontational to worried, and he placed a hand carefully on Sam's forearm, letting his sibling know he was there if needed. "Maybe I should get my new buddy, Lucy, to check you over again..."

"Just a headache from the drugs those guys gave me." Sam shrugged off the concern, but the taunting voice remained inside his skull. Haris had let them go for a reason, and his last, enigmatic comment burned into Sam's psyche far worse than the physical injuries to his brother's hands.

"They been drugging me." In hindsight, Sam knew that had been the Demon talking back in Jefferson City, but still, it was true. And somewhere in that drug-induced haze John had slept in, Haris had gained entry. "*Alea iacta est, Samuel.*"

Sam swallowed, trying not to let his torment show. "What about you?" He asked quietly, looking at the carefully wrapped bandages around Dean's palms.

"It's nothing." Dean shrugged and moved to jump back out of the ambulance, swaying slightly and settling for easing out slowly, face flushed with embarrassment. He hated it when he got some minor injury saving his brother's ass and then had to explain. "You know what they say? You play with fire you're bound to get burned." He winked roguishly and began scouring the crowd for Lucy.

Sam followed his brother's lead, shakily climbing from the rig before either paramedic returned and dragged him back inside.

At the smell of damp, still smoldering wood, he looked up to see fire crews still dousing the flames from the commune. "You pulled me out of there, didn't you?" He shook his head derisively. "Didn't you once stop me and tell me how stupid it was to try running into a burning building?" The question was followed by a slight huff, because Sam already knew the rules. It was okay for Dean to get Gung Ho, but not his little brother.

Dean shrugged and shot a small smirk through the crowds of milling rescue personnel. "Yeah, but this time there was something worth risking my neck for." The comment was completed with a trademark wink, and Dean began to saunter back towards the Impala's resting place, wondering just how he was going to pluck the ignition keys from his pocket with his throbbing palms. *Maybe Lucy would care to lend a hand...*

"I'm not worth dying for..."

Dean let out a deep sigh and turned back to Sam. How did he explain that his little brother would always be worth dying for without it coming across as a very bad chick flick moment? "Sam..."

"Everyone dies for me, Dean. Every time I so much as look at a girl..." Tears began to form in Sam's eyes, and not from the smog that still filled the night air. He had tried to save Sarah from the Demon; he had tried so hard, but in the end it was always the same. "*Alea iacta est, Samuel.*" "I tried to tell Sarah when we first met, but she just didn't understand..."

Dean rolled his eyes and quickly widened his stride to his brother's side. He winced as he grabbed Sam's arm and tugged him towards the beat-up Chevy. "Jeez, will you spare me the self-pity? Dude, Sarah's gonna be alright. I was with her at the hospital. You're not any kind of bad luck. You're just a big, goofy geek boy who just happens to hunt evil things, okay? And sometimes evil things bite back."

A brief expression of calmness crossed Sam's features and he gave in to his brother's tugging. "Sarah's going to be okay?" He questioned, just to hear Dean's voice confirm the unthinkable, the amazing, once again.

Dean nodded, clambering up the incline at his best pace back to his beloved classic. "Uh huh, the doc said she lost a lot of blood, but she'll be fine. Now will you quit moping and get in the car before the cops round us up with all the other weirdoes around here."

Sam scowled, taking a fleeting look back to his recent prison. There was very little left of the ranch now, and he was glad of it. Hopefully the police would take the kids he'd seen and put them in some care facility well away from the cult's grasp. But then again, would they ever be away from the Demon's grip now that they had served him? *Will I?*

"Well I'll be damned!" Dean slipped his weary, scorched body behind the Impala's wheel and gently plucked a hastily scrawled note from the dash where it had been tacked with an old piece of disgustingly sticky gum. "Dad left us a note."

Sam's gangly frame joined his brother's, and he raised a brow, unsure about what to make of their father's new habit. In the old days, they were lucky to get a few co-ordinates, and he had never answered his phone. Just lately, he had managed the odd call, and now a note. *Is it lack of trust, or is he protecting us still from some information too awful to know? About me...*"And?" Sam eventually asked.

"And, he got some information from one of the cult guys. Something big is gonna go down with the Demon and some other hunters. Dad says he'll check it out and let us know once he's sure it's legit."

"Or," Sam offered sarcastically, "he'll check it out and go solo again." He shook his head and realized it made him feel nauseous. Maybe he was thinking entirely too much so soon after being hauled from a burning building in a drugged-induced haze. "Speaking of other hunters, what happened to Kyle? He's okay, right?"

Dean's slightly blank expression changed abruptly to one of extreme annoyance. "See that fender?" He opened the door with a creak and pointed painfully to just one of many crushed panels on his baby. "Kyle's head is gonna have a dent that size when I catch up with him. Moses drives like a freakin' Grandma!" The hunter thought about it. "No, wait, I take that back, he drives like you!"

Sam let his aching head fall onto the back of the Chevy's seat and groaned as he closed his eyes. "Can we have some music? Preferably the loudest you own?"

"Huh?" Dean's brow furrowed, and he waited patiently for the punch line. "You *want* rock?"

Sam nodded. "Anything, and I mean *anything* rather than hear you starting to gripe about me hitting that tree in Missouri again..."

Dean watched as his brother slowly rubbed at his temple, the pain from what he had been through, and what he had seen too much for him to bear.

"Alea iacta est, Samuel."

Even though Dean had no clue about the demon's goading, he turned the Impala's ignition key, leaving both the radio and CD player off. Sometimes being a brother was about more than just playing pranks or taking shots of Sammy with a spoon in his mouth. Sometimes, being a brother was being there when no one else cared.

"C'mon," he softly offered. "Let's go find Moses so I can kick his saintly ass..."

* * * *

Hospital Parking Lot The Next Evening

Sam cast a glance at where the Impala was parked and began to fidget. When the doctors had said Sarah could go home, Kyle had convinced Dean to wait in the car with him, stating that Sam needed some time to speak with Sarah alone. The problem was, Sam was worried that the pair might come to blows after he'd seen the condition of the Chevy in daylight. Kyle had really done a number on it, and Dean's comparing it to what he'd done back in Missouri wasn't such a bad description.

That's not really why I'm nervous, though is it? I'm scared to talk to Sarah alone. Scared to even be on the same side of the sidewalk after what I caused...

Sam shuffled along the path with his head hung low. Just what could he say after what Sarah had been through because of him?

"Sam?"

Sam forced his head up from its downward gaze and was met with a smile. Whatever guilt or hurt he felt, was obviously one-sided. "Hey..."

Sarah slipped an arm through his, feeling his pain even though she didn't mention it. He'd once told her how he felt about getting close to anyone, and it was quite clear that that particular guilt complex had surfaced again. How could it not have done so after what he'd had to watch? "Want to show me that smile of yours," she appealed. "It's been a long time, and I'm not sure I like the scowl that's replaced it..."

Sam struggled to force his usual dimple-filled grin, but it was still a half-hearted attempt.

He wanted to hold her, to tell her how he'd wanted to give in after he thought she was dead. How he'd never felt this way about anyone since Jess. But in the end, all of that was impossible to express anywhere outside his mind.

"Alea iacta est, Samuel."

The Demon had made it clear the fight had only just begun, and that maybe Sam's fate was inevitable. If that was so, then maybe the fate of those who loved him was sealed too. Sam couldn't allow that. If it meant pushing Sarah away, then he would do it. Anything so that she could live.

"Sarah..." He turned to face her, placing a hand on her forearm as if she needed bracing for what he was about to say. "Sarah, you can't go home. You're a weakness the demon will exploit if it knows how to find you..."

Sarah cocked her head, slightly amused by the idea that Sam believed she hadn't already guessed that fact. "I've already called Dad and made an excuse about why I've been missing. He didn't take too kindly to my just taking off, but he accepted it in the end."

"You knew I'd ask you not to go home?" Sam questioned in surprise.

"I'm a girl, Sam. That doesn't automatically make me oblivious to what's going on around me." Sarah pulled on his arm, tugging him down to sit beside her on a small wooden bench close to the Impala. "I know what you're thinking, but I don't want it to be that way..." She entwined her fingers through his and squeezed.

Sam shook his head, suddenly finding he couldn't look the art dealer's daughter in the eyes. Yes, she knew about his past, and yes, she had a right to make her own choices, but ultimately, so did he. Sam could live with the sight of many things, but Sarah pinned to a wall, tortured at the hands of Haris just because of him was not one of them.

Just the thought of the moment made him draw in a deep breath.

"I can't be with you, Sarah..." Sam's voice was low, apologetic, but unyielding. "Maybe someday if this is ever over..."

"Can it ever be over?" Sarah cocked a brow. "Can you even kill that thing?" Sam might believe he could, but after what she had seen, it was hard for her to believe. But then, after being kidnapped by one demon, and tortured by another, maybe anything was possible. A stark memory of the black-eyed thing that had taken her came to mind, its voice so like John Winchester's she was unsure she could face the man without an involuntary shiver.

Sam shook his head, but his answer was non-committal. "Honestly? We don't know, but we're going to try, and I don't want you caught in the crossfire ever again."

"So I'm supposed to hide away all my life, God-knows-where with Kyle, some priest, or rather, would-be priest I don't even know?" Sarah pulled her hand away, angry that he was giving her so few options with what was ultimately her future. "Will I ever even see you again?"

Sam inhaled. It was his time to decide, his time to choose between letting everything the Demon brought down on them rest squarely and solely on his shoulders or letting Sarah make the final decision herself.

"Do you want to, knowing what you know now?"

Sarah stared at Sam as if her eyes were delving into his thoughts. Eventually, she retook his hand and gently pulled him from the bench. "What do you think?" She smiled, and as they reached the Impala, she tugged open the squeaky rear door and climbed in.

Sam followed, and was instantly greeted with Dean's grinning face as his brother leaned over from the front of the car, CD player screaming *Gimme Some Lovin'*.

"Dean! Will you cut that out!"

Sarah smiled, finding the cocky ghost hunter's music far more amusing than his brother.

Dean shrugged and leaned back, flicking off the player. "So, you two love birds all set?"

Sam squirmed but nodded. "We'll drop Sarah and Kyle off at his friend's church in the next town and then see if we can find Dad."

Dean inhaled and leaned forward to start the Chevy. "Sounds like a plan." His fingers touched the keys and then he recoiled, looking at Kyle in the passenger seat beside him.

The priest was fumbling in his jacket pocket so hard it looked like he'd lost several hundred dollar bills to some bottomless void. Kyle eventually noticed the hunter's gaze and pulled out a crumpled envelope. "Before you drop us off at my fellow priest's for a little um, sanctuary...I wanted to give you this. Consider it an apology. My sister tells me the man is quite good with cars..."

Dean's brow furrowed, but he grabbed the envelope, instantly intrigued. With one quick tear he was inside and looking at an address he already knew quite well. "Dude, 'quite good with cars' is kinda an understatement. Barris Kustom is freakin' automobile heaven and then some!" The hunter's eyes narrowed. "No offense, Moses, but no way can I afford to take the Impala to this guy. He's strictly for stars and their cars."

Kyle shook his head with a smile, not really understanding Dean's reluctance to take the Chevy to the best. "Oh, I don't expect you to pay for damage that I and my meager driving skills inflicted. I'll cover any repair costs..."

Dean couldn't stifle his first bout of full-on laughter in months. Demons he got, but priests who thought God's word could buy anything were just too funny. "Dude, I may have been half dead, but I saw that hunk of junk Ford you drive. No way that thing has ever been near Barris Kustom or any other decent body shop."

"Because a priest doesn't need anything more than something to get him from A to B. We don't crave hotrods."

"Okay," Dean was getting frustrated, and he tapped the address until the paper folded over in his bandaged hand. "See this place, they want real dollars, thousands of them, and right now, you have no job, and no way of supporting yourself, other than your fellow preacher's charity. Capiche?"

Kyle smiled. "Oh, my sister is paying. She'll credit the garage for any repair cost, and she's already made arrangements to send money for Sarah's and my lodgings at Father Morrison's on a weekly basis."

Dean rolled his eyes. No way could there be two people as whacked out as Kyle Williams. "Your sister?"

"Well, technically..." Kyle pulled out another item from his pocket and briefly offered a quick view of it to everyone in the car. "I was adopted after my parents died in a car crash when I was only two weeks old, although I kept the name Williams from my birth certificate. That's why the demon never came for me as a baby..."

"No birth mother to kill," Sam muttered under his breath.

Dean's eyes widened, and he snatched the picture rather rudely from Kyle's grip. His eyes darted from the photo to the priest and back again before he asked incredulously, "You're sister is Sophie Isabella? Heir to the Isabella Aviation millions? You're a friggin' millionaire, and you gave it up to be a priest?" Dean didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the revelation that someone could pass up a fortune.

Kyle nodded quite amicably and patted the Chevy's dash. "Please, just get your car fixed? I will take care of Sarah. Helping is my vocation in life, not attaining financial affluence. I've known that since the nightmares began." He turned in his seat to look at Sam, his fellow "visionary." "It's our calling to end this thing someday, and I know when that time comes those like us will all play a part."

"Someday?" Dean queried, starting the Impala with a grunt of disbelief that he was sitting next to a real life millionaire who didn't actual spend anything on himself.

"Someday," Kyle nodded, "but until then all we can do is..." The priest slid a hand down the side of the Impala's seat and retrieved a small gift wrapped parcel that looked suspiciously the size of a CD jewel case.

Dean groaned but took what he was offered. Not really wanting to see what was within, he tore off the glittery and very "girlie" paper and flipped the case over. When he read the contents he felt quite nauseous. Sam's techno music was an assault on the ears, but dear old Moses had committed the ultimate defilement of the Impala. "Chopin's etude no 3 in what?" He mouthed sarcastically.

Kyle plucked the CD back from Dean's grasp, and despite the hunter's protests, removed the current disc and slipped his offering in.

Dean slapped a hand to his head, wanting to kick the priest from the car. When no piano music materialized, he frowned and waited. Eventually, the disc began to play and the car was suddenly filled with *Bon Jovi's* gravelly, appealing tones as "Keep The Faith" began to reverberate through the speakers.

Kyle grinned and repositioned the dog collar he had once again decided to wear. "As I told you once before, I'm a priest, not a cave dweller," he announced without reserve, causing much-needed laughter from the rear of the car.

Dean turned up the volume and smirked. Damn if he didn't like the rich-ass priest, even if he couldn't drive a scooter. "Whatever you say, Moses...whatever you say..."

The End