

**End Game – Episode Ten
Bt Kittsbud & BurstynOut**

**Cardinal Seminary Library
Dakota
10:57p.m.**

Kyle Williams gently teased the aged page over, being careful not to tug at the ancient paper too much for fear it might tear. The book, like all those he now had laid out on the library table, was hundreds of years old. It held secrets and rituals that anyone outside the church- and some inside- might scoff at; secrets that many in today's society would call nothing more than fairy tales. Kyle didn't think that way, of course. He knew far too much and had seen too many unexplainable things to claim such blissful ignorance.

The would-be priest had been searching for months for information after his encounter with the Winchester brothers, and now, at last, he believed he'd found exactly that which he'd been seeking. It had taken a lot of persuasion on his part to get access to certain records, not to mention a few white lies to explain his requests, but it appeared his little transgression had been worthwhile. At least the good he hoped would come of it should justify the means.

At last, with the help of church resources, he had found what the Winchesters could not. The Catholic Church, after all, was as powerful in its own right as any army or military think tank on the planet. Pastor Jim's Protestant ties could never have tapped the resources to which Kyle was privy.

These early texts, to which he'd somewhat laboriously gained access, told of something that roamed the earth thousands of years before man; an ancient enemy born not of flesh, but fire, smokeless fire. The description fit perfectly with what Kyle knew about the demon that filled his hellish nightmares.

Kyle's hands began to shake as he realized the implications. Finding the demon's true identity was as much a curse as it was a blessing, not unlike being burdened with the sins of the world with no power to absolve them. Now that he had the information, there was little he could do with it. A name and a description meant nothing without some mention of the method required to destroy or exorcise the creature, and the rotting Islamic manuscript he now held so delicately gave up no such secret.

The trainee priest sighed and tugged off his glasses, setting them down on the table while he pinched the bridge of his nose. He had a dull ache behind his eyes, and he knew if he didn't retire to his room soon it would turn into a full-blown headache. Then again, a nightmare could exacerbate it as well. Talk about your Catch 22 situation.

Still, Kyle refused to leave his task until he had checked over his research one more time. He needed to be confident of his theories before he made the all-important phone call.

If he truly had found "the demon," then it was time to properly introduce himself to Sam Winchester. The young ghost hunter had inspired Kyle all those months ago, had made him see that his gifts could serve an important purpose. What he'd considered a curse could quite possibly be a calling, and now Kyle was anxious to give something back for the confidence Sam had helped him find in himself.

Only time would tell if the Winchesters could use what Kyle had found, but he was sure in his heart that they were the only ones he could entrust with the information. After leaving St. Mary's Health Center himself, he had kept a close watch on the brothers, albeit from a distance, and he had been relieved when Dean had made a full recovery.

They had barely met. He'd been able to give Dean just a glance over his shoulder, a lingering look into the rear-view as the older brother had lain, bleeding on his

backseat, and yet Kyle felt an uncanny bond with the elder Winchester. In some way, he held a gift as powerful as Sam's, although Kyle could not control his own gift well enough to reach out and distinguish what that power was. Not that it mattered. Dean was as pure of heart as Sam deep down, even if the rogue in him hid it sometimes. Kyle didn't need his visions to see that.

He checked his watch and raised an eyebrow in surprise. It was later than he had thought. He replaced his glasses and tried to focus on the aged manuscript, running a finger along the faded letters and numbers as he translated them. There would be time to unravel the mystery that was Dean, and if he was right, he'd get the chance to meet the wayward Winchester sooner rather than later. Hopefully this time they'd actually get to have a real conversation.

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Bishop's Office
Cardinal Seminary
10:57p.m.

Harold Morgan tapped a pen absent-mindedly on his desk as he checked over his speech. He was young to be a bishop, and as such, he tended to feel more eyes upon him, watching and waiting for him to prove unworthy of his title. Perhaps Morgan was paranoid, but it always paid to err on the side of caution.

The next day would see the opening of a new wing of the seminary that had been paid for by a local businessman. Morgan wanted the little ceremony to run without a hitch, and that meant he needed to memorize his speech word for word. Truth be told, he hated giving any kind of oratory, and he hated writing them even more. As always, Cynthia, his loyal secretary had prepared the very religious sounding sermon and had stayed back with him until she was sure he had it down pat. *Gracious, Cynthia, I'm opening a new wing, not introducing the Pope...*

Footsteps resounded on the polished oak floor and Morgan couldn't help but look up, expecting Cynthia to walk in and chide him for leaving things until the last minute as always. Instead, the bishop saw a smartly dressed young woman with a strange expression on her face. Although he was sure they'd never met, she seemed eerily familiar.

"Can I help you, Miss?" Morgan stood from his leather-bound seat out of courtesy, offering the newcomer a questioning but polite look. *How did she get in here past Cynthia? No one is allowed access to the church office at this time of night.*

The woman either didn't hear his question, or chose to ignore it. She blinked, and Morgan was sure he saw her eyes flood with pure glistening black in the half light of his room. He dismissed it and cocked his head, a sudden memory returning from some nether region of his mind. He had seen the woman before in a TV news bulletin.

"You're the doctor that vanished without a trace in Missouri. The police are still looking for you..." Morgan mistook her presence as a plea for help. "If you've come here for sanctuary, my dear, I'm not sure it's something I can offer..."

Helen Fletcher smiled and slowly stepped back, allowing the holy man to see through his doorway into the room beyond.

Slumped back in her chair, arms splayed out lifelessly, sat Cynthia. Her eyes bulged, and her features held an expression of utter shock and terror. Blood pooled beneath her where it had dripped from the wound that gaped where her throat should have been and ran down the sleeve of her blouse.

Morgan balked. He stumbled backwards, almost falling over his own chair as Cynthia's dire condition registered in his mind. The bishop sensed the blood draining from his features, and as he tried to reason with the killer, abruptly realized his throat was so dry no words would come from it.

Helen nodded knowingly and brought her left hand into view. Her fingers were wrapped so tightly around a small, but obviously very effective blade that her knuckles had turned white. "Where is your God now, your eminence?" She let the words hang in the air.

Her prey simply stared at her wide-eyed. Morgan had backed himself into a corner and was muttering in Latin under his breath. He remembered now just what the black, oily eyes could mean and only wished he had paid more attention to the *Rituale Romanum* instead of dismissing demons as folklore.

"It only works if you know all the words, Bishop." Helen worked her way across the room until she stood before the quivering bishop. She noted with pleasure that he dared not even look her in the eye, and instead kept his gaze to the floor. "Say hello to God for me, won't you?"

Helen raised the knife with a quick flick and savored the moment she felt it meet the bishop's flesh. As he fell back, grasping frantically at the mortal wound that bisected his carotid artery, blood oozed through his tightly clasped fingers. He wheezed, straining to grab one last, desperate breath, but instead of drawing in precious air, blood bubbled from his throat and seeped onto his lips and beyond.

With a thud, Morgan fell forward, landing stone-dead at Fletcher's feet. She pursed her lips. *One holy man down, one to go.*

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Cardinal Seminary Library
Dakota
11:17p.m.

Kyle let the text finally fall from his fingers onto the desk and leaned back in his chair to stretch. He rubbed at the bottom of his beard out of habit, and then checked the time yet again, wondering if it was too late to call the Winchesters.

"Something tells me those boys aren't early sleepers," he muttered to no one in particular and fumbled in his jacket for his cell phone. He didn't know how, but he always seemed to lose the tiny Nokia in his pocket. It was as if some black void ate the thing every time he tucked it inside.

"Talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity, or so they say..."

Kyle looked up in surprise. The library floor was polished wood, and he hadn't heard anyone walk across it in hours. "I, um, appear to have lost my phone," he offered, still fumbling for the Nokia. "Can I help you?"

Helen watched the priest struggle with his jacket pocket in amusement. "You don't remember me, do you?" she asked, wanting, needing the holy man to recognize her.

Kyle stopped his search and focused in on the young woman with bleary, fatigued eyes. He squinted, just a hint of recollection playing across his features. "You were there, at the hospital. You were Dean Winchester's doctor after..." The priest's words petered out. He had left the medical center before Helen had become possessed, and had no clue as to why she might be here now.

"After my father almost killed him," Helen finished and moved closer. Her newly established proximity allowed him to see the blood spattered blade she had used to kill Morgan and the deep set darkness of her eyes. "Everything would have fallen into place that night if it hadn't been for your meddling. But now, now it's payback time."

Kyle's gaze fell on the blade. Just who had the doctor, or whatever she was now, used it on? *They know I know...*

Unlike his bishop, Kyle didn't back up or show any sign of fear toward the creature that stood mocking him. He had been preparing for this day for months, and ready or not he would fight this black-eyed, lesser demon until he had no breath left in him. "Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei..."

Fletcher's smile suddenly broke into a scowl. Morgan may have been a bumbling bishop who no longer believed in the old ways, but this one was dangerous. She flicked out her free hand in angry retribution, sending a bolt of demonic energy straight at Kyle's chest.

The priest felt the impact as if he'd been punched by a heavyweight boxer and instantly found his body being carried back by some ungodly force. He slammed into a bookshelf and remained there, arms outstretched and pinned by an invisible energy that kept his feet dangling several inches from the floor.

He hacked harshly as the breath was knocked from him, and then gulped down air before attempting to half-cough out the rest of his exorcism. "...Sancti, ut descedas ab hoc plasmate Dei..."

Helen joined him at the bookshelf, spikes of pain beginning to show on her normally pleasant features. "There's no protective circle to keep me bound here, as was the case with my unfortunate little sister. I can leave before you ever get the chance to finish your pathetic ritual." She gripped her hands until her nails almost bit into her own flesh, the sting from the priest's words was so great. "Before I leave, though, I want to give you a small gift..."

The doctor let go of the blade in her hand and it turned in midair, suspended by some unseen hellish power. It stopped just two inches from Kyle's face and then abruptly shot into the palm of his hand, hilt first.

Kyle looked down, afraid to see what damage the knife had made, and was stunned when he realized the demon was forcing him to actually hold the weapon, not stab him with it. He shook his head in incomprehension and his eyes darted between his attacker and the knife.

Helen found the reaction entertaining. "Thought I was going to kill you? Oh, I couldn't make it that easy. I'm going to take away something much more important to you than your measly life, Preacher. You'll see soon enough." She began to chuckle as she walked away, leaving her foe helpless against the bookcase.

Kyle struggled, pushing every muscle to try and release the grip the evil creature had on him, but no matter how hard he tried he remained trapped, his fingers refusing to release the hellish weapon.

"Why? Why?" Kyle's pleas filled the normally silent library, but he received no answer. He had literally been crucified against the shelf, and could not understand why he had been spared.

The answer, however, would come soon enough.

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Sheraton Hotel Texas

The lobby restaurant of the Sheraton Hotel was not the Winchesters' idea of a typical lunchtime haunt, but they had a paying client who was footing the bill, and they weren't fools. Their own money had to be made to stretch to exponential proportions. Other people's money had no elastic as far as they were concerned. It wasn't taking advantage so much as it was just getting their fair share for all the times they were forced to make do.

Sam sat at a table in the corner of the bistro, feigning patience as he waited for his brother to join him. It was that awkward time of the morning when all that remained of the breakfast crowd was a few lowly businessmen who thumbed through stacks of paperwork in preparation for the day ahead.

Sam was one of the first lunchgoers to trickle in, and he noticed with amusement that the few others ordering off the lunch menu looked like they'd missed breakfast too. Most of them had the tired, glazed look of college students after an all night binge, so they'd probably been out at least as late as he and Dean had. He was

pretty sure, however, that none of them had been dispatching a ginormous water wraith from the local water bottling plant. Sam figured someone had to pay the price for the kind of blissful ignorance those other patrons enjoyed, and today it was one Todd Henry, owner of Just As Pure Water.

Dean slunk through the swinging doors that led out of the kitchen and slid into his chair, one hand tucked conspicuously into his trademark leather jacket. He eyed his younger brother with a knowing glance as Sam fingered the linen napkin beside his place setting.

"What're you smirking about, little brother?" Dean asked as he scooped his chair up to the table. "Must've been some dream you had last night, eh?" He leaned closer, turning his ear toward Sam, "C'mon, you can tell your big brother, Sammy. Was it kinky? I bet it was," he hinted, raising his eyebrows suggestively. He punched his brother on the shoulder lightly. "Give me the PG-13 version. Maybe I can give you some pointers. That *is* what big brothers are for, right?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Actually, I was just thinking how ironic it is that people are paying two dollars a bottle for this water when it's pretty much the same thing they'd get with a faucet and a filter you can get at any Wal-Mart," he lied, looking down at the table nervously.

"I see that didn't stop you from buying some," Dean said, pointing to the bottle beside his brother's silverware.

"Not my money," Sam grinned, raising his eyebrows in an identical gesture to his brother's earlier expression.

Dean picked up the bottle and looked at it with feigned interest. "You know, maybe we should put one of those tulpa symbols on the bottle. Whattya think? They take off the cap and get whatever they want out of it. It's all about the marketing anyway. They could put toilet water in these bottles for all we know. That's why I prefer beer myself. The alcohol kinda masks the toxic waste and kills the bugs without the chlorine aftertaste."

Dean grinned lopsidedly like he always did when laughing at his own jokes. "Honestly, though," he continued, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What are you really trying to hide? There's no glue in my napkin or anything is there?" He looked at Sam through half-closed eyelashes, and like most women Dean encountered, Sam could never help but grin when his brother did that.

Dean caught sight of a waiter balancing a heavy tray coming toward them. "Oh God, I wasn't gone that long, was I? Don't tell me, this will probably be my last meal in a decent restaurant for who knows how long, and you ordered me healthy crap. What'd I tell you about ordering for me?"

Sam smiled broadly, obviously pleased with himself as a plate of very lean chicken breast and steamed green vegetables was placed in front of his protesting brother. Dean took one look at the offending cuisine and turned away with a grimace.

"Geez, Sammy, you didn't even order any potatoes. . ."

"Because if I did you'd smother them in butter and sour cream and completely defeat the purpose," Sam stated, diving into his own plate of food with fervor. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until the smell had hit him, and now he was suddenly starving.

"Thanks Mom, but I can feed myself from now on." Dean's grimace melted into a devilish grin, and he pulled his hand out of his jacket, pulling with it a brown paper sack with huge grease stains leaking through it. "Or shall I say, the sweet Martina, who works in the kitchen, can feed me."

Sam eyed the sack with disdain. "You didn't. . ."

Dean opened the package and pulled out a warm sausage and cheese kolache. Pausing briefly to eye it hungrily, he stuffed the whole thing into his mouth and was forced to chew with his lips parted because the treat was too large to close them. He couldn't suppress a small laugh at Sam's look of feigned disgust, and a few crumbs sprayed out onto his bland-looking chicken. Finally, he swallowed, throat stretching

convulsively around the bolus. "Yup, I did," he smiled. "Since you took forever in the shower and made me miss the continental breakfast, I got the ever-so-lovely Miss Martina, with all-hours access to the kitchen, to save me some kolaches."

"And did she give you a tour of the supply closet while you were back there?" Sam asked knowingly.

"Oh, you know she did, Sammy boy," he nodded, scarfing down another kolache.

Sam shook his head. "Dude, the stuff you put in your body. . . You're a walking heart attack waiting to happen. What? You weren't impressed with the first one, so you thought you'd try to get one the old-fashioned way? That's like those women who have two or three kids and then decide they want to have one without the epidural just to get the whole experience. They always cave, of course." Sam took another bite of chicken.

"Epi-what?"

"Epidural," Sam repeated, "Like a nerve block they give women during childbirth so they don't feel the pain as much."

"And you know about this how?" Dean asked, eyes wide.

"The Learning Channel," Sam said matter-of-factly. "Come eight o'clock Monday nights, you couldn't drag Jess away from it. Nothing but babies being delivered all night long."

"And I'm sure she hogtied you and made you watch it with her," Dean suggested, cringing slightly at the idea.

"No, I watched it willingly," Sam stated, amused with his brother's reaction. "It couldn't hurt to know a thing or two about what to expect, you know, cuz I might be a dad someday."

Dean looked unimpressed and went back to eating his chicken. He decided, with a quirk of his head, that it wasn't half-bad. Wasn't exactly finger-lickin' good, but he supposed that's why they provided a knife and fork. Chicken that you eat with a knife and fork, that was just wrong.

"C'mon, man," Sam said, "I could be a father someday, and so could you." When Dean still didn't respond, he continued. "Tell me you don't wonder if you'd be a good dad," he prodded.

"Nope," Dean said flatly, face honest.

Sam looked at his plate, suddenly saddened. It bothered him to think that Dean really never thought of having a family of his own someday. He wanted Dean to think about the future. Hell, he wanted Dean to have a future.

"I don't have to wonder," Dean added, interrupting Sam's newly begun brood. "You turned out okay. . ."

Sam looked up at his brother incredulously, and Dean just kept on eating as though he'd asked the kid to pass the salt. Dean and his damned loaded statements. Sam shook his head. The older brother didn't quite have Sam's vocabulary, but sometimes Dean said so much in so few words that it was Sam who was left speechless. God, he hated that. Sam ducked his eyes, glaringly aware that he had blushed with embarrassment and reluctant pride. "Yeah. . . I guess so. . . Jerk."

"Bitch," Dean retorted distractedly, making eyes at a girl across the room who Sam thought might be the infamous Martina.

Before they could settle into comfortable silence, the phone rang. Dean pulled it out of his pocket, glanced at the screen, and tossed it to Sam. "Speaking of the future," he observed, "looks like we just got our next job."

Sam picked it up and glanced at it. "Coordinates," he pouted. "I can't believe he's still sending us coordinates. Would it really be so much trouble just to tell us where he wants us to go and why? Now we gotta spend all morning researching."

Dean grinned cockily and pushed his chair out from the table. "No, *you* get to spend all morning researching, dude." He picked up the brown bag and unabashedly leered at the tall brunette he'd been flirting with across the room. "I'm getting a little low on kolaches."

"Dean!" Sam protested weakly. He knew it was no use, but he wouldn't give his brother the satisfaction of passing the buck without receiving some sort of complaint. In reality, Sam was glad to see the old Dean make an appearance. There'd been a bit of a Dean drought of late in which the older brother had only appeared in a misty sprinkling of his former self, and Sam was beginning to thirst for that familiar Deanity. *Damn that snake girl for messing with his heart.*

Dean bent over the table and forked a couple of bites of vegetables into his mouth. "Thanks, Mom," he snarked. As Sam shook his head with a grin that was probably more pleased than the situation warranted, Dean slipped back into the kitchen.

Since they'd already checked out of their room, Sam got his laptop from the car and went back to the hotel computer room to check out the coordinates. He noted with some relief that they related to a small town in South Dakota. Small towns usually didn't have a lot of news, so it shouldn't be too hard to figure out why their father would be sending them there.

After only about fifteen minutes of searching he came across a newspaper article that got his attention. The headline itself wasn't too startling, but the picture of a familiar face plastered on the front page caused Sam's hackles to rise immediately. He printed out the article and began checking for any police records. He just couldn't believe the story was true.

* * * *

"So, what'd you find?" Dean asked, leaning over the hood of the Impala as though he'd been waiting there all day.

Sam tossed him the printout of the newspaper article, which Dean only glanced at before tossing back. "What?" Dean asked. "You expect me to read it myself? What do I have you for, geek boy?"

Sam caught the paper before it blew away in the breeze and slapped it down on the hood of the car as though he could pin it there with just his finger.

"Dude!" Dean protested. "What is it with you and abusing my poor car? Jealous much?"

"Just read it," Sam sighed, and Dean did, rolling his eyes to feign exasperation.

"I hate to say it, Sam, but priests getting arrested is kinda old hat these days, and homicide is not supernatural."

Sam looked confused for a moment, then came to a realization. "Oh, I guess you probably wouldn't recognize the picture. I mean, you were pretty out of it that night. .."

"Whatever, dude, just spill already before I get tan lines around my sunglasses. What's the deal?"

"Dean, that priest is Kyle Williams. He's the one who got us out of the car after the accident and drove us to the hospital," Sam explained.

"The same one who pointed us toward the hospital in Wisconsin?" Dean extrapolated, pursing his lips in understanding. "So, what? He's really a psycho killer?" He asked, glancing at the headline. "Says here he murdered two people, and the police have a murder weapon covered in his prints."

Sam leaned over the article and pointed to a certain paragraph, brushing shoulders with Dean in his haste to explain. "Yeah, but it also says that he maintains his innocence." he reported.

"And that's supposed to be surprising? C'mon Sammy, no one kills people and then just admits to it. The world is full of greasy lawyers who can get just about anyone off, so why confess?"

Sam elbowed his brother in the arm, not missing the barely masked jab at his once chosen career path. "That's beside the point. But check this out." He pulled out the notes he'd taken on the police files he'd hacked into. "Both victims had their throats cut, and not just slashed, we're talking about imminent decapitation. It took some serious strength to do that, not to mention it's classic demon methodology. Or do I have to remind you about Pastor Jim and Caleb?"

"No, Sam, you do not have to remind me about that, but thanks for doing it anyway, dumbass. I was having a pretty good morning up 'til now." Dean scowled.

"Well playtime's over, man," Sam said, straightening up. "We gotta haul ass to South Dakota and get him outta there."

"And how do you intend to do that, Sam?" Dean asked, putting on his sunglasses as he stepped toward the driver's side door. "Somehow I don't think we can waltz in there and say, 'Release that man, he's being framed by a demon,'" Dean deepening his voice theatrically.

"I'll think of something," Sam insisted. "I did study pre-Law. There's bound to be a technicality or something I can find to at least get him released pending trial."

"And while you're sorting through mountains of law journals and red tape, the guy's a sitting duck. A man of the cloth's gonna be real popular in prison, Sam, and not because the inmates are all lookin' for salvation," Dean pointed out seriously. "The sooner we get him out, the better it will be for everyone."

"So what are you suggesting?" Sam asked, almost afraid of what the answer would be.

Dean raised his eyebrows and grinned suggestively.

"No way, man," Sam argued. "We're not breaking him out of there. First of all, we get caught, and we're all gonna be in jail. Second, the fugitive lifestyle sucks, in case you haven't noticed. Not only will he be living on the run, but it would destroy his career, if it isn't already shot to hell."

"So, he gets a regular job and becomes a televangelist or online pastor. He'll get over it, Sam. Dead is something he won't get over," Dean stated, sliding into the car.

"Still, let's try it my way first," Sam beseeched. "If it doesn't work, we'll go with Plan B."

"As long as Plan A doesn't involve any of your stupid costumes," Dean glared over his shades.

"Dude, I'm Plan A, you're Plan B. Plan A picks the costumes, Plan B shuts his cakehole."

"Oh, God, kill me now." Dean sighed, leaning his head back against the headrest. He turned the key, bringing the Impala to life, and they pulled out of the parking lot.

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Clark County Sheriff's Office South Dakota

Sam looked through the Impala's window at the small Sheriff's office they were parked outside and wondered if they could actually pull off their little subterfuge. It was a modern structure, bristling with activity-not at all the kind of place he'd envisaged as he'd researched the town on their trip from Texas. But then, nothing about this gig was turning out to be what it seemed.

Sam had hacked into every scrap of evidence and pulled every string he could, but so far, there was no way to get Kyle released except to break him out. The priest had been caught red handed with the murder weapon, and he had no excuse for what had happened. In fact, Kyle had refused to say anything to the police about the incident at all, therefore sealing his own fate in the eyes of the law.

"Told you all those law books wouldn't do you or your Plan A one bit of good, geek boy." Dean ignored the two deputies milling around outside and began rifling through his box of fake I.D.'s. "Think I should go with a Fed or just a regular cop?"

Sam winced. Dean's window was down, and it was quite probable the two deputies could hear their conversation. Nevertheless, Dean was being his usual brash self. "I'd go with the regular cop," he offered in a somewhat more subdued voice than his brother. "Small town Sheriff's Departments tend to get a little irked if they think the Feds are treading on their toes."

Dean nodded in agreement, selecting a Dakota State Police badge from the plethora he'd drummed up earlier. He grinned roguishly as he flashed the I.D. at his sibling. "Officer Hetfield is a pretty handsome fella, don't you think?"

"Officer Hetfield is a jerk." Sam rolled his eyes. "You're going to walk in there, flash that thing, and hope you get away with it? Dude, some day someone is going to call you on all the names you steal for I.D.'s."

Dean instantly thought of his lone trip to Burkitsville when a local man had, indeed, called him on his fake identity. He wasn't about to divulge that little incident to Sam, however. The less he remembered about that "scarecrow" town the better. "Hey, you could always go in there and do the rescuing. This guy is *your* buddy. I don't even know him."

"Dean, he saved your life back in Missouri. I think the least we can do is return the favor." Sam watched the two deputies climb into their cruiser and drive off towards the center of town. He let out a breath, relieved that two less cops would be anywhere near the building while Dean was in there lying his ass off. "Besides, he knows things, things I don't even know..."

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture, little brother. I just hope this guy has better taste in food than you if I've gotta spend time in a motel room with him." Dean pushed open the weighty Chevy door and climbed out, thankful there was at least no costume involved. He straightened his jacket and then leaned low to have the last word through the window. "He's not a health food nut is he? Because no way can I stand two of you."

Sam plucked an empty sandwich wrapper from the floor that had contained lunch only an hour earlier and tossed it across the car at his brother.

Dean expertly dodged the projectile and wiggled his eyebrows cheekily. "You never could aim worth a p..."

"Dean! Will you just go already?" Sam stretched over to the driver's side and hastily wound up the Impala's window to avoid further discussion. Most days he could put up with Dean's audacity, but today he was scared it would land them all in jail. Or worse.

After all, if the two murder victims had been killed by a demon to set up their friend Kyle, then that could also mean the Winchesters were walking into a trap. Kyle was special, as was Sam, and what was happening here was no coincidence. *Just get in and out fast, Dean.*

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Dean swaggered into the Sheriff's office using an intentionally slow gait. While Sam might want to race in, grab Kyle and haul ass, Dean appreciated the fact that that kind of behavior drew unwanted attention. It wasn't that Sam didn't use caution, but on this occasion Dean had already noted his judgment was slightly clouded by past events.

Sam liked the priest. Heck, Sam thought the guy was special and had saved their lives. The latter Dean didn't deny, but was Father Williams being set up, or had his gifts sent him over the edge and made him a killer like Max? It was a thought that had crossed the elder Winchester's mind a couple of times on the journey here, and it was something he wouldn't be able to answer until he met Williams face to face, without Sam in the room.

"Can I help you, sir?" A young Deputy appeared seemingly out of nowhere, and Dean was disappointed to note that it was a guy. It was so much more fun when the small town cops were chicks to flirt with.

"I'm Officer Hetfield. I'm here to pick up a prisoner." Dean flashed his phony badge so fast that the Deputy would have missed the motion if he had blinked. "I'm supposed to transfer Kyle Williams to Watertown P.D. for further questioning."

The Deputy pulled a clipboard from an adjacent desk and swiftly rifled through an abundance of paperwork. As he read the last sheet, he shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't have anything here to confirm any kind of transfer for Williams. Do you have the relevant documents from Watertown?"

Dean had expected as much, and, as always, had come prepared. It was amazing what could be achieved on the brothers' laptop graphics program if you had a flair for such manipulations.

"Right here." Dean tapped his pocket and then stuck a hand in, pulling out several sheets of somewhat crumpled transfer papers. Now for a little name dropping, and hopefully all would be well. "Look, I'm already running late and taxiing this killer priest is not my idea of a fun shift. Maybe you should just call my superior and get this straightened out?"

The Deputy looked uncertainly at the documents he'd been given. While they did seem in order, it was against procedure to make a move without the duplicate documents at this end. On the other hand, the Sheriff might be irked if he spent all day ringing Watertown to confirm what was already in black and white in front of him.

"You need to speak to Captain Halling," Dean pushed, knowing that, if the cop checked, there was, indeed, such an officer. "Or you could go right to the Chief. Jo and I go way back. Sweet lady, I can tell you." Dean winked mischievously, even though he actually had no clue what the Watertown police chief looked like.

"I...um, I think I better okay this with the Sheriff first." It was obvious the Deputy was still pretty green. He was nervous and yet eager to please his superior.

Dean crossed his arms and looked around the walls as if he had all day. "Sure, I understand. Your Chief here probably knows Jo too. Maybe he'll call her up. Busy lady, though..."

The young cop gulped. "Just a second. I'll be right back." Dean grinned as the rookie scooted to his desk and checked the names he'd dropped on his computer. Within a minute, the Deputy returned. "I'll need some signatures on the release forms. Sorry about the formalities, but normally the Deputy Sheriff deals with all this."

Dean nodded knowingly. It was unfortunate, or rather, very coincidental, that said Deputy Sheriff had been called to a drunken and pretty violent brawl at a local bar not ten minutes previously. Of course, when he and the other cops arrived and found no scuffle, they'd be right back. So, even as he acted casually, Dean really couldn't waste too much time.

"No problem." Dean smiled and signed the forms that were offered up. It was actually quite amusing to be using one of his idols' signatures, especially right under the rookie's nose. *People today just have no taste in music!*

"If you'd just like to wait here, I'll have Williams brought through from the cells." The Deputy smiled now, thinking his boss would be pleased with how he'd handled the situation during his superior's absence.

"Excuse me, did I hear the name correctly?" A tall, rather lean man in a dark suit appeared through the front double glass doors. He wore small, wiry glasses, and his deep, beady eyes darted from the Deputy and back to Dean. When no one answered immediately, he set a tan briefcase on the Deputy's desk and introduced himself. "I'm Ian Blis, Kyle Williams's lawyer. Why was I not informed of his transfer? I was supposed to have a meeting with him this morning."

"We only just received word, sir. All the paperwork seems in order." The rookie's voice quivered ever so slightly as he addressed the imposing character before him.

Dean was less intimidated. "Your client broke the law, and now he's gonna pay for it. If these small town boys can't get a confession out of him, we will in Watertown." He turned to the Deputy, knowing he had to get things moving. "Can we get Williams brought through? I'm on a schedule here."

The Deputy gulped and nodded, still not taking his eyes from Blis. "I'll get right on it." He took a last look at the lawyer and then disappeared through a security door.

Dean shot Blis a glance. "So, you're planning on getting Williams off the hook?" He scrutinized the lawyer as he spoke, some inner voice yelling that all was not right with the interloper. Dean rarely misjudged a character, and he didn't like what he was seeing in front of him.

Blis appeared to hold the elder Winchester with a similar contempt. "I'm sure my client is innocent and that the truth will prevail, yes."

Dean huffed, shaking his head. "You really don't have any kind of case, and you know it. What's the matter? Did the Church offer you a big payoff just to keep the whole thing low key?"

A small smirk crossed Blis's features for just a second. He apparently found something in Dean's words amusing, although he didn't offer an explanation. "I'll be speaking with your superiors about your attitude, Detective. Until then, good day."

And Dean didn't have to use an ounce of intuition to know that the sentiment was a false one. He fought the urge to make a rather unprofessional hand gesture as the lawyer glanced away smugly. *Smartass.*

Blis reclaimed his briefcase and strutted from the Sheriff's office like a peacock. As he slammed the door closed, the young Deputy reappeared with his charge in tow.

Kyle shuffled along beside the cop with his head inclined towards the floor, servile and deflated. He seemed to be a man whose whole purpose in life had been taken away. He no longer cared whether he lived or died. If he was to be convicted of murder, then so be it. Perhaps he would even receive the death penalty, so heinous were his supposed crimes. At least that would give him release from the torment of his visions, a final pardon from his life sentence.

"Aren't priests meant to save people 'stead of killing 'em?" Dean watched Williams carefully for a reaction. Kyle met his gaze. His eyes instantly showed recognition and something more-hope.

"I like to think I did help save a life, once." Kyle kept his voice neutral. He'd guessed why Dean was there, and like it or not he had to play along. "I'm just sorry I never got to speak with the man after he recovered."

"Maybe you'll get your chance some day." Dean winked while the Deputy was busy un-cuffing Kyle. "Right now, though, your murdering ass is going to jail." The Deputy offered the open cuff to Dean, and he clipped it closed over his wrist. "C'mon, Judas, time for a ride." He tugged slightly, and the priest obediently followed.

"Hey!" As they reached the door, the young Deputy called them back. Dean turned, poised to run, while outwardly remaining calm. *Not now. Not when we're so friggin' close to the door.* The cop tapped the paperwork with a grin on his face. "You know the lead vocalist of Metallica's name is James Hetfield too. You guys wouldn't be related would you?"

Dean exhaled with relief and couldn't resist one last lie. "Distant cousin on Mom's side." The infamous lopsided grin appeared, and he quickly jerked an open-mouthed Kyle through the door with just one yank on the cuffs.

"Did you really need to tell that last lie?" Kyle stumbled after his captor as Dean quickened his pace back to the Impala. While he appreciated being rescued, he wasn't so sure he could condone the method.

Dean on the other hand, was very sure. He grinned again as he pulled open the Chevy's rear door and unceremoniously stuffed Kyle inside. "Hell, yes," he teased.

* * * *

Ten miles down the road from the Sheriff's station, Dean found a dirt road and pulled the Chevy off the main highway. Steering the classic over a rutted section of ground until its suspension groaned in protest, he guided the car to a halt behind a large section of undergrowth.

Dean killed the ignition and then turned to his guest in the rear of the car. "So, my trusting brother here thinks you're innocent, Judas. How about spilling the story now that we've saved your ass?" It was blunt and to the point, but that was Dean all over.

Kyle looked to Sam first. Sam was the one he had spoken to back in Missouri. Sam was the one whose eyes he had seen through all those months ago. Sam was the one he would trust with his life even though they'd only met once before. "I...I didn't need rescuing. Not like this. My life in the church will be over now. I had so much to do, so much with which to help others like us."

Dean scoffed. "Dude, your ass would have been grass if you'd been transferred to a real prison instead of that Sheriff's holding cell. This isn't a game or a movie. It's not friggin' *Prison Break*. Real life doesn't work that way." He slapped the steering wheel, exasperated that the priest didn't see the bigger picture.

Williams cleared his throat and let his eyes fall to the Impala's dusty floor. He knew what real life was like, and he knew of the evil that walked among men. "I know," he said in a low, unassuming voice. "It's just that, as a wanted man, I'll never be able to continue my work for the church; work that I know was for the greater good, not only my own, but that of humanity as a whole."

Dean took in the words. He decided he liked the little priest, even if he sounded way too much like Sammy sometimes and appeared to have some delusions of grandeur about his place in the world. He definitely needed to lighten up. "Dude, get over it. You're not gonna get to be a priest. It's not the end of the world."

"No, but it could be..." This time Kyle's words came out as nothing more than a mumble as he rubbed his hands together nervously, but both brothers heard anyway.

"You think this thing we're involved in is that big?" Sam instantly recalled the remarks Bobby had made when they'd visited him before the accident. *The storm's coming, and you boys, your Daddy – you are smack in the middle of it.*

Kyle nodded solemnly. "I know it is. We're fighting an ancient enemy; one so old that it walked this earth before man." He kept his gaze fixed on Sam. "After I left Missouri, I returned to my seminary with every intention of discovering what kind of creature we were dealing with. The thing in my dreams, your dreams-the thing we must destroy."

Dean raised a brow. "Wait a minute, Judas, you're telling us you know what killed our Mom? You know what it is we've been hunting all this time?" There was a hint of excitement to his timbre, and the meek little priest suddenly had all his attention. "Do you know how to kill the freaky sonofabitch, too?"

Kyle slowly shook his head. "I was still in the middle of my research when the demon killed the bishop and his secretary. It knew I was close to finding the truth and ready to tell you. It's my guess it set me up to get us all together like this, and then kill us." He fidgeted with his glasses while he paused to think. "What I don't understand is who the demon chose to possess." He raised a brow questioningly and looked at Dean. "It was a young woman-your doctor?"

Sam nodded. It was a long story, but Kyle didn't know anything about Fletcher and the huge confrontation at the hospital. "After you left me the note and vanished, let's just say the doc was possessed and decided to do a little extra work on my brother."

Dean winced at the memory. "Yeah, but she didn't count on the fact that I'm too stubborn to die like that. She got a nice flask full of holy water in the face for her trouble and took a hike. If she's back and killed your people, then that means you're right. You're getting close to something."

"Can we see your research?" Sam rummaged in a hold-all he'd had at his feet and pulled a change of clothes out for the priest while they talked. Right now, he needed to look less like a priest and more like a regular guy if they were going to make good their escape.

Kyle looked back apologetically. "I'm afraid everything I had on the subject is still at the seminary, and I can't go back. It's the first place the police will look for me. I

had no time to hide or remove it. And besides, some of the texts are not allowed outside of the church's boundaries. They're quite ancient."

"Gee, well I guess we're gonna upset the Pope then, dude, because like it or not, Sammy and I are gonna need to grab those documents." Dean twisted back around to restart the Impala but suddenly felt a pang of guilt. Here he was talking to a priest as if he was some shmuck off the street. What was worse, the guy had actually saved his life. He turned back, abruptly feeling uncomfortable. "Look, I um...I guess I never thanked you for what you did..."

Sam watched his brother struggle to thank the priest and was both proud and amused at the same time. He knew it would be killing Dean to cut out the quips and be so serious. Sam stifled a grin and had to look out of the window so Dean couldn't see his smile.

"There's no need for thanks. Anyone would have done the same." Kyle offered a hand, and Dean shook it. "Although, I suspect the Lord has plans for you that didn't include your death, even without my intervention." The priest wiped his glasses on a piece of old tissue. "There is just one thing I would ask of you..."

"Name it," Dean scowled as he said the words, realizing he may now have to pay a penance he really didn't want. *Ten to one Sammy got this dude to insist I turn off the rock.*

"Please don't call me Judas," Kyle beseeched. "It infers I am something I'm not."

Dean exhaled and cranked the Impala to life. It was time to head back to the seminary to find Kyle's all-important research. "Tell me something, do you like music?"

Sam's eyes flashed with despair, and he put his head in his hands, realizing what Dean was about to do.

"Of course," Kyle said innocently, "I'm a priest, not a cave dweller."

Dean smirked. "I was hoping you were going to say that, Moses." He checked the rear view and noted Kyle roll his eyes at his new title. Next came the music.

Dean flicked the cassette deck to "on" and slid in Judas Priest with an ear to ear grin. As "Riding on the Wind" began to assault their senses, he couldn't suppress a chuckle and began to sing along with the track. "Nothing like a little mullet rock, huh, Sammy?"

Sam shrank back into his seat and dared not look over his shoulder to Kyle. Dean had just reached a new level of embarrassing, and Sammy didn't want to be a part of it.

* * * *

Cardinal Seminary South Dakota Two Hours Later

Kyle watched as the two brothers entered what used to be his home. The seminary was out of bounds to him now and probably always would be, but that didn't stop the deep burning desire in his heart to still become a priest.

He felt cheated somehow by the forces of darkness, and only the Winchesters had pulled him back from the brink of despair. If Sam and Dean could instill hope in him, then Kyle would fight onward, as they did. Right now, he wished he could be entering the crime scene with them to help them find their goal.

The would-be priest fidgeted on the back seat of the Impala, wringing his hands continuously with worry. He was still sure this was some kind of demonic trap, and he had no desire to see Dean or Sam hurt again so soon after the "truck" incident. They were good people, and even though Dean constantly ribbed him, Kyle was already seeing the other side of his tormentor.

Dean had the softest, kindest of hearts that any man could possess. He would die for his family, die for a cause he thought was just, and all that selfless honor was hidden beneath a cheeky, brash exterior that was simply a façade to ward off all but his closest allies.

Kyle squirmed again at the thought, moving restlessly to the Chevy's window to look impatiently towards the seminary. *Hurry, my friends...please hurry...*

* * * *

"So, we're just going to walk in and hope the cops haven't left anyone on duty?" Sam glanced sideways, checking the road for traffic as they crossed. "I mean, what are the odds the texts will still be where Kyle left them, anyway? Won't they have been bagged and tagged as evidence by now?"

Dean ignored a station wagon that was heading his way and jogged over the road. "If we're unlucky, yeah. The books will have been bagged and tagged, and they'll have a cop waiting for us. Jeez, Sammy do you always have to be so negative?"

"Realistic' is more the word I'd use." Sam pushed open the heavy oak door to reveal a small vestibule. In the corner, a petite, aged woman with graying hair sat, typing at her desk. She looked at least a hundred years old, like some character from a Bronte novel. "Excuse me, Ma'am; we're from the police crime scene unit. Could you point us in the direction of the library?" He flashed a badge he'd made not ten minutes previously and was thankful he'd done the creating himself this time.

"You don't look a bit like the people on TV, young man." The woman looked over small, wire-rimmed spectacles as if the two brothers were specimens to be examined. "I watch your boss every week."

Dean pursed his lips. "You do, huh?"

"Oh yes," She ushered them through a door to her left with a smile. "Grissom is good, but my favorite is Horatio Caine. He's so handsome..."

Sam let a small smile play across his features and was tempted to tell the sweet, old lady that C.S.I. was just a show. In the end, seeing Dean's expression of 'what am I ground meat?' he decided against it. It was actually quite funny to see the old dear innocently irk his brother.

"The library is this way. Take a left and then the second door to your right, young man. There's a police officer already down there in the corridor. You can't miss it." The woman turned tail but not before eyeing both brothers again with a smile and muttering under her breath as she scurried away. "Wait until I tell Martha at the bridge club that the C.S.I. people have been here...maybe I should have gotten an autograph..."

Dean frowned as the door closed behind her. "Horatio Caine is better looking than me? Dude, working for the church for so long must have warped her mind." His brow furrowed as Sam shot him an exasperated look. "What?"

"Not every person of the female persuasion is going to find you attractive, dork. Now can we get on with what we're here for?" Sam pointed ahead. "She said there's a cop down here, and I doubt he'll go for our fake I.D.'s as easily as she did."

"Maybe I should have made them," Dean snarked with a grin.

"Yeah, right. There's a real need for a bikini inspector in a place like this." Sam turned where he'd been directed and was surprised to find no cop on duty outside the library entrance. "Funny." Sam's brow creased. "Maybe the guy needed to take a leak..."

Dean poked his head into the corridor. "Or, maybe something's up." He slowly retrieved a forty-five from the back of his belt and cocked it. "I'm not liking this, Sammy."

Sam agreed. As he took tentative footsteps towards the library door, he spotted a small, unmistakable blood trail leading to a closet at the bottom of the passageway. He put a finger to his lips and then gestured to the blood.

Dean nodded, grasping his weapon tightly in front of his chest as he approached the built-in cupboard. When he reached the door, he intimated he'd cover Sam while the younger Winchester investigated what was within.

Sam licked his lips, grasping the doorknob and twisting slowly to avoid any noise. As the carved door swung silently open, a mangled and bloodied cop's body tumbled from its perch inside the storage area.

Dean knelt, quickly checked for a pulse, and then shook his head. "Looks like his neck's broken. Not exactly your classic demon M.O. This guy's been beaten to a pulp, but his throat's intact."

Sam glanced back to the library door, wondering if the killer was lying in wait for them or was simply there for the texts. Whatever the reason, if they wanted the ancient manuscripts it looked like they had a fight on their hands. "You ready to find out why?"

Dean waved his forty-five in the air, signaling that he was more than ready, and then stood from his crouched position. He set his aim at the library door, and at his side Sam pulled out a similar weapon of his own and did much the same.

As they neared, Sam took position to the left of the doorframe and nodded. Dean moved back just a little and let his weapon drop to his side, enabling him to blast a running kick at the door unhindered.

The oak didn't give easily to the sole of his boot, and Dean found he needed two more follow-up lunges to gain the required response.

The latch caved with his final blow, and the door swung open laboriously. Before it stopped moving, Dean and Sam were inside, guns poised for action.

Sam reaffirmed his grip on his Glock as he swung it around in an arc, scanning the room for interlopers. As far as he could see, they were alone, but then, in a library this size, there were a wealth of hiding places should anyone choose to conceal themselves.

"See anything, little brother?" Dean stepped cautiously around a large bookshelf, wary of being tossed into it as he had on so many past occasions. It was as if spooks got a kick out of hurling his ass into the damned things, and he wasn't going for a record-breaking attempt.

Sam shook his head, honing in on the section of the library where Kyle had been working. It had been clearly marked out by yellow police tape, and there were still dried bloodstains on the polished floor where the coagulating crimson liquid had dripped from the knife blade.

"Looks like we missed what we came for." Sam indicated the empty desktop.

Dean agreed, moving forward slowly to examine the priest's work area more closely. "Yeah, question is, did the cops take it, or the cop killer?"

As if in response to his question, something clattered to the floor behind them and both brothers whirled, eyes dancing over every inch of the room. Sam's gaze settled first, and he pointed silently with his Glock to a small, leather-bound book that now sat at the base of one of the larger shelves.

The book had obviously been dislodged from its perch by something on the other side of the ledge-something, or someone.

Every muscle in Dean's body tensed. They were here in search of a way to destroy the demon. What if it had found them first? The thing he had hunted all his life could be before him, and for the first time, he feared it with gut-clenching intensity. Half-forgotten nightmares that he'd tried to erase came flooding back of the fateful night in the cabin. Was it really the demon he feared, or simply the fact that it had been his father it had inhabited? Was he ready to face either again?

Dean blinked, feeling the thudding of his heart in his chest, just as he had that night, only this time it was he himself who had set it racing, not the demon's claws or taunts. He swallowed, letting his finger caress the trigger of his forty-five just a little too tightly.

"Show yourself," he commanded, and despite the forceful timbre of his voice, he hoped to God that he got no answer.

Nothing moved.

Sam ducked down, peering low under the shelving for evidence that they were not alone. He bobbed back up two seconds later and grimaced at his brother. Someone was indeed behind the rack, wearing at least size fourteen biker boots, complete with huge steel toe caps. If whoever it was happened to be possessed by a demon, it was going to be like fighting a Terminator.

Dean scowled in miscomprehension, his expression screaming "what the hell," while Sam, however, never got a chance to explain what had brought about his concern as the killer decided it was high time he emerged from his hiding place, and both Winchesters got a full frontal assault from what looked like a seven-foot-tall enraged bull.

The man was bald, save for just a little hair over each ear. He wore a dark, studded leather jacket and had a small goatee beard. He snarled as he came forward, but both eyes appeared baby-blue, alerting the brothers that it was at least no demon.

"Damn!" Dean cursed, realizing that his weapon couldn't be used unless the situation became life-or-death. Then again, when did they find themselves in a situation that wasn't? Still, he stuffed the gun back under his belt, and deciding that the best defense was a good offense, took a pre-emptive dive at his foe. *This dude better have what we came for...*

Dean took a swing at "the bull" and his fist met a jaw that may as well have been made of steel. The impact sent an electric jarring sensation all the way down to his elbow, but the man kept coming, and all the elder Winchester could do was fall back, cringing wide-eyed at his welted knuckles.

The towering killer leered, revealing gaps where two of his front teeth should have been, and swatted Dean with the back of his hand. The blow was harsh, and it was all Dean could do to keep his eyes in focus as his ears began to ring from the jolt.

As the giant hand swung back for another punch, Dean's bleary vision just managed to latch onto something familiar. On the back of his attacker's balled fist was a small tattoo. Its design registered somewhere in the back of Dean's slightly concussed mind, but thoughts of self-preservation pushed it away again as quickly as it had surfaced.

Dean ducked, narrowly missing the second punch, only to find the giant grabbing him by the front of his jacket and lifting him from the floor. He felt the sideways motion and knew what was going to come next. *Not again...not the bookcase...*

"Dean!" Sam's voice did little to dissuade the killer, but his actions had much more of an effect.

Sam spun the Glock in his hand like a card shark dealing a deck. Instead of gripping the weapon with its butt, he held the barrel in his palm and wielded it like a small bludgeon. Using his own height and position as an advantage, he brought the weapon down hard over the back of his enemy's skull, anxiously trying to use enough force to knock out his opponent without causing permanent damage.

The first blow wasn't nearly hard enough. In his caution, all that Sam had managed to do was enrage his foe further.

The killer loosened his grasp on Dean with a growl, letting the elder Winchester's shirt slip through his fingers until Dean dropped unceremoniously to the floor with a grunt.

Sam swung the gun harder, not wanting to feel the man's aggression should his second blow not have the desired effect. The Glock's butt caught the killer's temple at just the right angle as he turned, and the towering Goliath's knees instantly buckled as his eyes rolled back under their lids.

Sam kneeled, carefully checking to make sure their assailant wasn't in any danger, while still keeping his gun trained on the man. Satisfied he hadn't damaged

the killer too much, Sam turned his attention to Dean who was still sitting on the floor looking dazed.

"You alright?" Sam stood from his crouched position and moved to offer his brother a hand up.

Dean waved him away and clambered up under his own steam, eager to prove a point. "Yeah, I was just admiring the view down there," he snarked, pulling his disheveled jacket back into shape. "So, Terminator dude wasn't a demon. I was right."

"Which begs the question, why is he here?" Sam moved back over their fallen foe and took a closer look at his prone form.

Something bulged under the left side of the biker's jacket, and when Sam carefully teased the leather back he discovered what they had come here for, or at least part of it. "I think these are what Kyle was working on." He plucked the battered manuscripts from where they had been roughly stuffed, careful not to cause more harm.

"Well that tells us why he was here, but not who he was working for. I mean, he doesn't look like an ancient manuscript collector to me." Dean felt the urge to nudge the man with his boot, just to confirm he wasn't faking, but thought better of it. Sammy didn't really go for the good cop/bad cop routine, and he doubted the guy would buy it anyway, even if he had been conscious. "So, we got what we came for, plus this jerk as an added bonus. Now what?"

Sam took a long breath, taking a moment to think before answering. "Hell's Angels types don't usually raid churches. This guy has to be working for the demon somehow..." He glanced at the man on the floor, knowing what he was suggesting made their fight twice as hard.

Dean's face screwed up at the thought. "Like some vampire's familiar?"

"Yeah..." Sam's voice lowered an octave as his mind went into overdrive. "Maybe we should wait till he wakes and ask him a few questions?"

"No offense, Sammy, but there's a dead cop back there, and this creep did it with his bare hands. I'm not sure I want to go another round with this guy." He jerked a thumb to the door. "And somehow I don't think Miss Marple will take too long to figure out we're not C.S.I.'s finest. I think we should hightail it outta here before we end up in a jail cell like Moses did."

Reluctantly, Sam agreed. He knew staying to quiz the man would be risky, but he couldn't help the deep seated desire for answers. The man had killed for the demon, stolen the manuscripts for the demon; what had he been promised in return? Were there more followers like him?

Sam took one last look at the killer, and in his mind, he once again saw Jess's helpless, burning form on the ceiling. How could anyone work for a creature who could commit such atrocities? *What price could be so high as to cause someone to sell their soul..?*

"C'mon, Sam," Dean quickly produced two cable ties and fastened the killer's hands behind his back. "We can call the police to come arrest this guy once we're outside."

Sam stirred and painstakingly rolled the scripts he'd retrieved, careful to protect them from any more damage. There were already several tears that he was sure were fresh, and one small corner piece had totally disintegrated during the scuffle they'd been put through. "Just make sure they know what they're facing when you make the call."

Dean patted the still unconscious killer's leather jacket and nodded. "Don't worry. I'll make sure to tell them to bring an animal cage with double thick bars for this monster." He looked up, watching as Sam slid the rolled papers under his shirt. "You ready?"

Sam let his head bob up and down, but underneath he wasn't sure he'd ever be ready again. The game was getting harder and harder, and the term "to the death"

had become all in a days work. With no end in sight, how could one family fight a whole army of darkness? In chess, they would already have had their "checkmate." In reality, it was only a matter of time.

"I'm ready. Let's go." Sam didn't tell Dean his thoughts. Dean already shouldered too many personal demons without adding more real ones. Sam could only hope Kyle Williams had the answers that would give them the upper hand in a game that's ultimate conclusion could hold the balance of nature for all humanity.

* * * *

Cheap Motel, Clark County South Dakota

Dean bounced down on his bed so hard the springs almost gave way with a twang. He ignored the metallic groaning and stuffed in a sandwich as if he hadn't eaten for days. Better to eat quickly before the two "health freaks" spotted him and dissuaded him from his objectionable lifestyle.

"So," he questioned, still munching a mouthful of food, "Now that we have the manuscripts, you can tell us how to kill the demon, right?"

Kyle fumbled with his glasses, almost dropping them as he slid them atop his nose. He was nervous, almost afraid to tell the Winchesters his thoughts lest they ridiculed him. Much of his theory was sheer conjecture, after all.

"I ... I don't know," he stuttered, his hand shaking as he pulled out the first wrinkled text. "First, let me explain my assumptions from what I have translated. Perhaps then we can move on to finding a way to kill the creature. That is, should there be a way to kill it."

Sam dropped down onto a chair across from the priest, his expression uncertain. "Should there be? Are you telling us that this thing might be unstoppable?" He shook his head, not accepting that their quest was over. Nothing was unstoppable, was it?

Sam abruptly found he couldn't take his eyes from Williams. He wanted to hear every word, every syllable that the priest translated so that he could discover what the holy man could not. The demon had to have a weak spot, and he would find it for his Mom, for Jess, for his family.

Kyle sensed his young friend's thoughts and wished he could be of more help, but from what he already knew, their foe was a formidable one. "You have to understand, the thing that the thing spoken of in these texts has walked the earth for thousands of years. It is a creature of fire, not true substance, and it can be extremely manipulative..."

"You don't say, Moses." Dean sat upright on the bed, tossing the remnants of his sandwich onto a small set of drawers because he couldn't spot a trash can.

"Thousands of years, huh? Are we talking Zoroastrian again?"

Kyle's brow scrunched uncomprehendingly, but he didn't ask the elder hunter for an explanation. He had enough talking to do as it was. "No," he simply offered, "the facts I have uncovered center more on the Islamic religion, like these texts." He tapped the flimsy material. "They speak of beings called shaidan, or sometimes Djinn. They reside in a universe parallel to the human world, while maintaining the ability to interact in both realms. Their purpose is to tempt and possess humans by creating illusions that familiarize mankind with the eternal fire of hell... They wish to corrupt innocents and prove them unworthy of any fate other than eternal damnation."

"And you think, because of the fire connection, that it was one of these things that killed Mom?" Sam prompted, still not buying into what he was being told.

"I know it sounds improbable." Kyle sat forward, suddenly losing his timidity now that the chips were down and he had to prove himself. "But there's more. According to the Qur'an, shaidan were created by God, and they had a leader, some even say

he was their father, and they, his children. He was cast down from Heaven after defying God and proclaiming he was superior to humans because he was made from fire, not earth like man. These beings of smokeless fire are said to be able to tempt a human simply by whispering falsehoods in his ear or by making false suggestions..."

Sam's face instantly changed. "The truck, everything I saw at the hospital..."

Kyle nodded. "Even without possession, shaidan can influence a human in so many ways."

"And you think the thing we're after is the father of these things, the first one?" Kyle now had Dean's full attention. "So, all those freaky black-eyed bastards are this thing's family? Jeez, no wonder it wasn't fazed when I killed a couple of 'em."

"Correct," Kyle stated. "According to the texts, the shaidan can be killed, but as long as their father lives, there will be more. Kill their father, and they will all die."

Sam rubbed his temple in thought. He'd heard some of the names Kyle had mentioned, and it suddenly bothered him that he'd not looked more deeply into them himself. "In some religions, the being you're talking about is the devil, isn't it? That's why you said it might not be possible to destroy it." There was a hint of defeat to his voice.

"Yes," Kyle nodded reluctantly. "It's true, some believe the creature to be the devil. Others, however, differentiate between the two and say it is actually Satan's right hand man. At this point, it all boils down to what religious doctrines you actually adhere to. The thing even has a multitude of names. Shay'tan, from which the word Satan was derived, Shaitan, Shaitaan, Azazil, Azazel, Haris, I could go on..."

Dean stood from his bed and began to pace in agitation. After a moment, he whirled to look at Sam. "Dude, when I told that thing back at Bobby's that I'd march into hell after it, I didn't know it would get this literal." His gaze shifted to Kyle. "Are you sure about this? The thing we've been hunting our whole lives might call itself *Harry*?" He shook his head in incredulous amusement.

Kyle winced ruefully. "Haris, yes, I'm afraid so. There's so much more in the texts, however. So much more than what you might be able to find on the internet."

"Kinda gives new meaning to the term hary-cary, then doesn't it?" Dean scoffed bitterly. Then he caught the last of what Kyle had added. "Wait. Some of this information is readily available?" Dean looked surprised and turned to Sam in disbelief. "Why didn't we pick up on this? I thought that between you, me, and Dad, we'd looked up every demon or entity known to man that was connected to fire?"

"We did." Sam shot an annoyed glance back at his brother. "I've been through every creature there is that's remotely connected to fire or flames; from Flereous to Ukobach and Xaphan."

"And this one managed to get by us, how? Oh, lemme guess, it was his brilliant alias...Harry." Dean threw his hands up in the air and felt his chest tighten as he spoke, his scars suddenly aching at the memory of the torment he'd endured.

"Because every scrap of information I found about these things sounded like something from a fairy tale, Dean, not like burning bodies splayed out on a ceiling, nothing that symbolic. Aside from being created from fire, they have no set M.O. as far as I've ever been able to make out." Sam sensed his brother's abrupt and possibly uncalled for rage, and he began to go into defense mode. "Do you know these things are actually what Genies in a bottle were named after? Does that sound like what killed Mom and Jess to you? 'Cuz Barbara Eden kinda ruined the whole "instrument of death and destruction" allusion for me."

Dean turned to face the wall rather than look Sam in the eye. They were having one of their sibling tiffs that often got out of hand, and now wasn't the time for such behavior, even if Sam definitely deserved Nair in his shampoo again for this one.

"Dude, the only Genie in a bottle I want around me is the Christina Aguilera kind." Dean smirked and turned back to face his obviously upset brother and a fidgeting Kyle. "You two really think this could be the real deal?"

"It's true the shaidan are perceived now in western culture as genies, but I assure you there is far more to it than that." Kyle answered for both himself and Sam. "If you'll allow me to finish translating the texts, you'll see the true extent of their capabilities and perhaps a way to repel them too."

Sam swallowed hard, a sudden chill coursing through his veins as a vast number of possibilities hit home. "If you're right, then why does it want us? Why are we burdened with those damn nightmares...why?"

Sam's questions were the one thing Kyle could not find answers to in the aged manuscripts, and the only ones he coveted for what he knowingly admitted were selfish reasons. "I don't know," he answered solemnly, turning back to his texts in defeat.

Sam put his elbows on his knees, lowered his head, and fisted his hair in preparation for some serious and well-deserved brooding. "Of course not," he huffed. "Satan himself, or at the very least, his commander-in-chief wants us, ruins our lives, kills the people we care about, and forces us to live like friggin' outcasts, but we don't know why. That's just wonderful. Perfect." He ran his fingers through his mop of hair roughly, fingertips trembling with barely controlled frustration. "And it couldn't be just a demon, either, could it?" He continued. "Couldn't be just one of the legion?" He looked up, jaw clenched angrily beneath glassy eyes. "No, the thing we're after, the thing that's after us, just happens to be the one that created the legion."

Sam swallowed hard and lowered his head again, pressing the heels of both hands to the ridge of his brow just over each eye. He knew he was the sensitive one, the one who didn't hold back tears, but dammit, he was trying to be angry here, and he didn't want any damned tears belying how terrified he suddenly felt.

After what had happened in Missouri, he'd been driven to find answers, to gain the power he needed to keep those terrifying events from happening again. Ever. He'd gritted his teeth, set his jaw in determination, and pressed forward, ready and willing to accept only one outcome: the demon gone and his family safe. So how come nothing ever seemed to work out the way he planned?

Stanford had been his plan for "normal". Instead, it had been the thing that separated him from his family, the thing that had led the demon to Jess. Salvation had been his plan for revenge. Instead, he'd almost thrown himself into the fire. If it hadn't been for Dean...Dean, who had no plans at all, except to live through the day, maybe the next one, maybe together, hopefully not alone...God, they were so screwed.

Despite the angry outburst that still hung in the air between the brothers, Dean recognized the desperate hopelessness that had flooded over Sam and threatened to swallow him whole. Dean had never been able to just sit by and watch his brother drown, no matter how deep he was in himself.

"Look, Sam..." Dean started. "You're right, okay. This sucks out loud, but you can't seriously be surprised. I mean, we already knew this thing didn't play by the rules." He stood decisively and paced around the room as he gathered his thoughts. "Holy water had no effect on it. One of its bastard kids marched right onto holy ground and friggin' slaughtered Pastor Jim..." He grabbed their father's journal off the end table and tossed it onto the bed beside Sam. "Twenty-three years of research, and not a single mention of what kind of thing can do that, play by its own rules like that. It's not like we were expecting smoke, mirrors, and some tiny man with a microphone at the end of this yellow brick road." He cocked his head then, accompanied by a small shoulder shrug. "Well, maybe smoke..."

Sam looked up at him through lowered eyelids, chin tucked defiantly into his chest, unable to believe Dean was actually making *Wizard of Oz* references at a time like this and expecting Sam to be amused.

"Ah, c'mon, Sammy..." Dean said, deflated. Seeing his brother slink more deeply into his brood, he huffed quietly and paused to gather his thoughts. Apparently some situations warranted more than his usual shoot-from-the-hip logic and devil-may-care

demeanor. "Look," He continued finally. "This doesn't change anything. This thing, Harry, or whatever the hell its name is, picked this fight with us, remember? It's always had the upper hand. We just never knew how much. This is the same sorry-assed demon we've been hunting for twenty-three years, the same demon that's been hunting us." He rubbed his hands roughly over the back of his head and cast his eyes downward at his still-slouching brother. "The way I see it, anything we find out about this thing that we didn't know before is a point to us. 'Cuz you're right..."

At that, Sam looked up suddenly, his eyes still dark and broody, but glinting with a hint of surprise. "I'm right?" He clarified, quirking one side of his face, mouth slightly agape. "About what?"

"About us not being able to hide from this thing forever. Or have you forgotten our little midnight confession session at Bobby's?" He paused thoughtfully, begrudgingly admitting that he'd come a long way toward understanding why it was that Sam would never be able to let this thing go. "It knows all about us. So, the way I see it, it's about time we got the lowdown on his ass, too. Better to find this out now than to wait until the next time it's got us backed into a corner without anything new up our sleeves to fight back with."

Sam nodded slowly in agreement. Dean may not have been college educated on the hows and whys of constructing an argument, but his experienced logic was usually hard for Sam to rebut. And in this case, the younger brother really figured he was in a lose-lose situation regardless. It was either accept that they were probably in way beyond the last lifeguard buoy and keep treading water until the next wave runner came by, or pretend they'd never seen the buoys in the first place and just keep swimming blindly until they were taken by sharks. There were no certainties either way.

Sam was just damned tired of treading water. He wished for once they could spot the lighthouse in the harbor instead of getting sucked further out by the riptide time and again.

The younger Winchester jumped suddenly, startled from his brooding stupor, and jerked a hand to his back pocket as if to swat a stinging bee.

Dean raised his eyebrows inquisitively, lips pursed around words he'd yet to speak in his spontaneous monologue.

"Uh, phone..." Sam explained. "Left it on vibrate," he admitted sheepishly.

Dean nodded and took the opportunity to sit back down as Sam retrieved the phone and looked at the display. It was hard work playing interference on the brood patrol.

The change in Sam's expression was immediate, and for a second, Dean let himself be a little exasperated that, after spending several arduous minutes trying his damndest to coax that sparkle back into his baby brother's eyes, there was someone in the world that could bring that glimmer back with just a glimpse of her name.

Dean didn't even have to ask who it was on the other end of the line. The way Sam's cheeks pinked up just a shade while his dimples put in an appearance and his eyes darted sheepishly away, pretty much gave it away.

The older brother threw his hands up in the air, knowing he didn't have a chance in hell of getting his brother's attention back, as Sam hit stood up and slunk slowly toward the sanctuary of the bathroom. Apparently cracked porcelain and cheap grout were preferable to Kyle and Dean's open eyes and ears.

Sam hit the talk button just as he began to swing the door shut behind himself, but Dean still heard the lilt in his voice as he greeted the caller.

"Hey, Sarah..." And the door clicked shut behind him.

"Sarah Blake," Dean explained as Kyle cast him a questioning look. "A girl," he added, as though the art dealer's daughter Sam had been keeping in touch with for the past several months could really be described as "just a girl". Dean didn't expect a man of the cloth to get the implications anyway.



"I gathered," Kyle said, somewhat amused.

"Funny," Dean said, leaning back against the wall. "He's always saying I don't listen to him, yet every time he might actually be saying something worth listening to, he runs off into the bathroom."

The sentiment was lost as the bathroom door swung open abruptly.

Sam stood in the open doorway, the phone pressed to one ear and his free hand pressed to the other in an effort to drown out any background noise. Dean leapt up from his seat, sensing the urgency in his brother's demeanor.

Sam's eyes were wide with fear and sought out Dean's as he listened intently to the voice on the line. "Helen?!" He choked. "What have you done with Sarah?"

Unable to take the terror in his brother's eyes, Dean covered the distance between them in one long stride. No way in hell someone was gonna put that look on Sam's face while Dean was on duty. He snatched the phone away, face contorting into a snarl. He didn't care who it was on the end of the line. They were going to get a piece of his mind.

Dean drew a breath, prepared to launch into a rant the likes of which none but Sam had heard before. "Who the f..."

His eyes widened in shock and disbelief just three words into his diatribe, and he froze.

* * * *

Plant Manager's Office Abandoned Steel Mill South Dakota

Despite the fact that she knew the look of surprised disbelief that crossed her features would please her captor entirely too much, Sarah Blake, dark eyes wet from crying, cheeks pink with chapped salt trails, and lips swollen around a thick cloth gag, couldn't help but be taken aback. On the other side of the dingy room, the demon within Helen Fletcher's body grinned maniacally, twisting the ugly burn scars on her face as she crushed the phone to her ear.

Sarah had become somewhat accustomed to Fletcher's evil, contorted facial expressions since the possessed woman had carjacked her outside her father's art gallery in New York. Well, as accustomed as one could get to a demon. She'd grown almost tired of the twisted snarl on the woman's once-pretty features and the lopsided way her head tilted when she was either thinking or, as Sarah guessed was the case, listening to the real Helen within her. Sarah had adopted a passive expression for her captor's demonic antics. Even the way her eyes flashed from normal and human to jet-black and oily without blinking had failed to get a rise from Sarah since they'd crossed the Mississippi.

But this was something new. The captive felt her eyes open wide, despite her will to maintain an indifferent façade, and she shook her head lightly, causing the long trailing strands of her dark silky hair to fall into her face as she tried to clear her ears of some apparent blockage. Something must have been wrong with her ears, because she knew that she could not have heard... *that*.

But she had.

"Dean, son, not a word..." Helen said into the phone. At least, it was Helen's lips that moved and, apparently, her throat that formed the words, but the voice was distinctly male.

Demons could mimic voices. If Sarah hadn't known that before, she sure as hell believed it now. The authoritative and, *damn*, sexy voice that Helen was using at the moment wasn't one that Sarah had heard before, but if she'd heard right and the monster had called Dean Winchester "son" then she surmised that it must be the voice of Dean and Sam's father.

The sudden awareness of what was taking place before her had Sarah struggling against her bonds, something she'd given up on hundreds of miles behind her, and trying futilely to scream a warning past the gag in her mouth.

"Dean, I called to talk to your brother. Not you. If I'd wanted to talk to your smart mouth, I'd have called your phone, not Sam's. This is between Sam and me. We don't need you to get involved in this," Helen spat, choosing her words carefully and savoring the obedient silence on the other end of the line.

"You see, Dean," the creature teased, enjoying the way the son's name tasted like venom between her teeth as she poisoned his mind, "I've met a girl. You might know pretty little Sarah Blake. Seems that she and Sam have been keeping in touch. Did you know that, Dean, or is your brother keeping secrets from you again? Honestly, son, that baby brother of yours doesn't **need** you meddling in his private life. What he needs is a little fatherly advice. You see, I really like this girl. Hell, the way I see it, she could be my last chance for some actual, legitimate grandchildren. So, I'm just going to talk to Sam about what his intentions are with her."

The silence on the line wavered as a trembling breath made its way across the connection, and Helen sensed a protest forming. "Uh, uh, uh," she scolded preemptively, mimicking John Winchester's commanding tone to a "T". "Not a word. Now, I'm going to talk to your brother, and he and I are going to sit down with young Sarah here and discuss this man-to-man. Obviously, we won't **need** you for that. Stay out of this, Dean," she warned. "I won't tell you twice. Now butt out and put your brother back on the phone."

Helen grinned as the breathing faded, and she heard clicking as the phone exchanged hands.

* * * *

Cheap Motel, Clark County South Dakota

Sam didn't fail to notice the washed out, drawn appearance his brother's face had taken on as Dean silently passed him back the phone and turned away. He was torn momentarily between poisoning himself to catch his brother, who looked ready to pass out, and addressing whoever it was still on the line.

"D..." Dean began, his fingers growing white where they were clasped around the body of the phone.

"Yeah, Demon," Sam agreed, nodding as he took over the conversation. "The one that possessed your doctor back at the hospital. I know."

Dean sat on the bed hard enough to cause the frame to creak, but he didn't appear to have fallen down. He pointedly directed his gaze away from Sam, knowing that the demon had gotten to him and that he'd fallen for it. The bastard that wanted his brother was up to its old tricks again, and now it was on the phone with Sam, and Dean, the protector, had dropped the receiver like a hot potato.

"What do you want, and what have you done with Sarah?" Sam repeated, as though the interlude had not occurred. Within a moment, his complexion nearly matched his brother's as he slumped back against the wall, running a hand up over his forehead and fisting it in his hair. "Please," he whispered, his voice wavering, "don't hurt her. I'll do anything."

His little brother's plea had Dean, still pale, watching the interaction intently, his own fear momentarily waylaid. He felt a hand on his shoulder and jumped slightly, having forgotten that there was, indeed, another person in the room.

Kyle looked down at him knowingly. "Demons lie," he mouthed. His visions were mostly still a mystery to him, but the work of evil he recognized all too well. Dean nodded, a bit flushed with shame atop the pallor of resurfacing fear. He knew that,

and still the bastard had crawled under his skin. What the hell kind of brother was he?

"Put Sarah on," Sam demanded, his jaw tightening in defiance. "Let her tell me that she's all right. I'm not giving you anything until I know that she's okay."

There was another pause, and Sam's face lost its forceful set. His eyes grew large and moist as his chin trembled. He drew a quivering breath, letting his hand fall from his hair, and spoke with a ghost of his prior conviction. "Sarah. . .I'm so sorry," he said, head tilting to lean against the door. "I never thought. . ." A pause. "I should've warned you. I should've protected you." Silence again as the faint vestiges of a woman's voice crossed the span of the room. "Are you okay? I'm. . .I'm gonna get you back, all right? You just hang in there. . ."

Sam's face darkened again noticeably, as a much more demanding voice came on the line. "What do you want?" Sam demanded in response. "We don't have the Colt anymore. I swear." His forehead crinkled in puzzlement. "Well, what then? We don't have anyth..."

The younger Winchester darted his eyes to his two companions and motioned in the air for a pen and paper upon which to write. Hurriedly, Dean snatched some scraps and a motel pen that was chained to the end table, not hesitating to snap the linkage. He handed the items to his brother, eyebrows raised questioningly, and holding out his other hand as if to take the phone back. Sam just took the paper and pen and braced them against the wall as he began to write, phone cradled against his shoulder.

"Okay go ahead," Sam suggested. "It's an old steel mill?" He nodded, head hanging down as he sighed with resignation. "Yeah, I hear you. Look, how do I know..." He squeezed his eyes shut against the threatening tears, letting his forehead thud into the wall as his hand, pen, and paper, slid down beside it. "No, I'll be there," he promised, ignoring Dean's hiss of disapproval from behind him. He paused a few seconds longer before the beep of the phone being switched off echoed dully in the stale room. He tossed the offensive contraption to the table with a clatter.

Dean didn't have to hear the whole conversation to guess that his brother was being set up. The Sarah card was left bower, trump, and Dean knew they'd lost this trick regardless. No way were they sacrificing their best chance at the next one. "Sam," he began, not bothering to clear his tight throat first and regretting that he choked on the knot that still twisted there. "You know this is a trap. . ."

Sam spun, long arms sliding down the wall and swooping limply around like pinwheel blades as he turned. His chin jutted out as he hunched downward to meet his brother's concerned gaze with his own look of stalwart determination. "Yeah, it's a trap," he agreed angrily, "and Sarah, an innocent girl, Dean, is the bait. Isn't that what we do? Save innocents? Isn't that what *you* do?"

His eyes betrayed his forcefulness as they once again melted into wells of tears. He shook his head and blinked against them, but one still managed to splash onto his cheekbone as he hissed a breath between his clenched teeth. "At least," he choked, eyelashes wet, "at least when *you're* saving people and hunting things, *you* aren't the one who puts them in danger to begin with!"

"Sammy..." Dean assuaged futilely, reaching uncertainly toward his brother's shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"The hell it isn't!" Sam insisted, brushing Dean's hand away roughly as he stalked over to the end table where the car keys had been tossed.

Seeing Sam reach for the keys, Dean leapt to block him but got there too late. Sam snatched them up with a rough clank. "I'm going, Dean."

"No!" Dean argued. "No way! I'm not letting you tear out of here without a plan!"

"Good!" Sam shouted. "Cuz I'm not asking you to let me do anything. I'm a big boy, and I said I'd be there. I'm going."

"Have you even thought about what you're going to do when you get there?"

"Hmm," Sam said, feigning deep thought. "I don't know, but I think I'll start by showing up *before* Sarah gets hurt rather than after."

"Sam..."

"What, Dean?" He snapped, leaning back in to glare into his brother's face once more. "It's all right for you to run off half-cocked when it's Dad in trouble, but I'm just supposed to turn the other cheek when it's someone *I* care about?"

If Sam saw his brother flinch when he mentioned their father, he passed it off as just a result of him being in Dean's face at the moment.

"I care about Sarah, too, Sam," Dean said, eyes downcast as his Adam's apple bobbed convulsively in his throat. "And I'm not saying we should let D..." he cleared his throat, "let the Demon have her. I'm just saying we can't let it have you, too."

"It's not going to have me. This is not the big bad Haris, or whatever the hell his name is."

"That doesn't matter. They're one in the same, all parts of the same 'hood, little brother. You take one on, you take them all on. . ."

"But at least this is the enemy we know," Sam justified. "I've fought her before, and I lived to tell about it. . ."

"Barely!" Dean interjected. "She almost killed both of us, Sam." His defiance bubbled back to the surface. "Tell me, have you been able to make your whammy mojo work even once since then? And do you honestly think she'll come alone?"

Sam looked at his brother, the anger draining from him, but the determined hardness remaining in the set of his jaw. This time it was he who looked down. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" Dean exclaimed, nearly shouting as he forced himself into Sam's line of vision once more. "Of course it matters, Sam. It wants *you*, remember, and we don't have anything else to give it. All we have is one useless bullet!"

"She's only giving me an hour to get there, Dean," Sam admitted, "and this address is at least forty-five minutes away."

"No!" Dean argued. "That's not even enough time to call for backup or do any recon on the place. That's just stupid, Sam! D. . ." he swallowed hard. "You were trained better than that! No way in hell you're walking in there."

"You're right," Sam said, turning for the door. "I'm not walking in there." He picked up the keys and jangled them in front of Dean's face. "I'm driving."

Dean dove for the door and stood across it, arms braced into the frame. Sam stepped right up to him, making himself look as big as possible as he pressed his chest into Dean's and glared into his face.

Dean had played this game many times before, and if there had been nothing but anger and defiance in Sam's eyes, he would have won. But barely masked behind the stubborn exterior, Dean recognized a well of hurt, desperation, and despair. Sam wasn't allowed to fester on Dean's watch.

"No, you're not," Dean sighed, swallowing hard against his better judgment as he stepped to the side and reached for the dangling keyring. He opened the door a crack, still sandwiched behind it. "I am," he offered. Feeling Sam resist releasing the keys to him, he added, "I won't let you go alone. You know that, and hell, with me driving, we might get there in time to actually make a plan."

With a sigh of gratitude, Sam relinquished his hold on the keys, a conflicted expression crossing his face only momentarily before he slid out the barely opened door.

Dean stepped out from behind the door, and hiding his eyes from the priest, gestured for Kyle to follow. "Guess you'd better come, too," he said, coughing nervously into his fist. "Can't have you sitting here without a guard after we went to all the trouble of busting you out of jail."

Kyle nodded sadly, but recognized the turmoil in his companion's features as he started out the door as well. He turned and placed a hand on Dean's shoulder. "You'll

think of something," he said hopefully, and he leaned closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "As long as you don't let it get to you. You're all he has."

Yeah, no pressure there. Dean coughed into his hand again, covering for his sudden lack of words, and gestured impatiently toward the door.

* * * *

Isolated Steel Mill

The Impala coasted to a stop behind a sparse stand of brush, having made the forty-five minute drive in less than thirty-seven. Dean pried his white-knuckled hands from the steering wheel and threw the car into park, keeping his eyes focused downward as Sam's gaze burned into the side of his head expectantly. As independent as Sam had come to be in most aspects of his life, he still looked to Dean when the situation turned dire. And this looked downright grim.

"So much for sneaking up on 'em," the older brother sighed, noting that the steel mill couldn't possibly have been in a more open and isolated location. He had no doubt that there were spy satellites orbiting the Earth at that exact moment which could probably read the time of day off of his wristwatch. "Doesn't change the plan, though," he said earnestly. "I'm going in first."

"Dean," Sam argued. "I never agreed to that. You're not even supposed to be here. She told me to come alone."

"All the more reason for you not to go in there, Sam." Dean stepped out of the car decisively, hand on the .45 in his waistband as he glanced around suspiciously and made his way to the trunk of the car. He knew that Sam would take a few moments to sulk about Dean's assertiveness, and used the seconds to change out one bullet in the chamber of his gun with the last remaining bullet from the Colt, using the open trunk as a shield against his brother's prying eyes.

Of course, there was a snowball's chance in hell that the bullet would have any effect at all against a demon when fired from a regular gun, but it was the same caliber as his own, and it was the only thing in their arsenal, other than Sam's iffy whammy powers, that would have any effect at all from a distance. Dousing it with holy water again would require him to get a whole lot closer than he intended to. Besides, since he was pretty much drawing a blank as to what to do next, he figured he might as well do it literally as well as figuratively.

Dad would kill him if he found out that he'd wasted the last bullet. Then again, he'd have to keep himself and Sam alive long enough for Dad to have the chance, and this was the only way he could think of to save their asses should things not go according to plan. Things had a habit of not going according to plan much too often for Dean's tastes. With any luck, he'd get the drop on the demon and rescue Sarah without actually having to confront her captor.

Not that there was much hope of that happening, considering that they were practically sitting ducks already. The shriveled bush that they'd pulled up behind was the only cover to be found, and it was not exactly up to the challenge. Every ray of sunlight that managed to filter through the branches reflected off the car's slick surface like a beacon. They might as well have painted a giant target on it and pulled up to the front of the building, blaring "Riders on a Storm"

Dean heard the passenger door slam shut as Sam came back to confront him. He slammed the trunk lid in echo and quickly shoved the gun back into his waistband to disguise the fact that he'd had it out. He tossed Sam a vial of holy water, just in case, and dropped one into his own front pocket. "We don't have time to argue about this, Sam," he asserted stoically.

"So what, we just go with your plan, because *you* say so?"

"Works for me," Dean said, taking out his gun and spinning the chamber before sighting down the barrel, snapping the cylinder back into place, and replacing it in his waistband.

"Well, not for me," Sam implored. He hated when Dean tuned him out like that. It was his life, and Sam felt that he should have some say as to whether it could be risked or not. "I'm not just going to stand out here and wait."

"Fine, you take the perimeter." Dean glanced at his watch with a grimace. "No time for any decent recon, just see if you can find a window with a clear shot of the inside of the building. If I can distract the demon, and you see a chance, try to get to Sarah and haul ass out of there."

"What about you?"

"I can take care of myself."

"So you've said," Sam answered skeptically. Dean rolled his eyes indignantly. So not a discussion he was going to have.

The older brother slid around the side of the car and tapped on the rear window, which Kyle rolled down in response. "You wait out here. Go around to the front seat," he instructed, tossing the clergyman his keys. "If Sarah makes it back, and there's no sign of Sam or me, put a couple miles between you and whoever else is out here and start calling for help." He handed over his own phone, knowing that he'd be unable to contact Sam if they got out of shouting distance, but deciding that shouting distance was probably pretty damned far out there. "Start with Dad and work down the list of contacts. Tell anyone who'll listen where we are and how to get here. Got it?"

Kyle nodded, blanching slightly at the possibility that he may have to become the cavalry once again.

* * * *

The brothers slunk up to the massive steel mill, keeping to the shaded side as best they could. Regretfully, the factory was mostly self-contained, and outside of an odd pile of castoff ore here and there, nothing really lent itself as possible cover. They both breathed a sigh of relief as they finally reached the side of the building and pressed their backs up against it, feeling less exposed despite the fact that they were closer to the demon than they had been minutes earlier.

There was a small door between them with an aged sign upon it that indicated it had once been the employee entrance. As Dean slid closer to it and noted that there was no handle and probably no lock, he motioned for Sam to back around the far corner.

Sam, of course, refused. Leave it to little brothers to pick an argument when silence was imperative. Dean clenched his teeth and jerked his head toward the back of the building angrily, and Sam responded by gazing determinedly back, his shoulders squared defiantly. They stood, one on each side of the door, screaming at each other with their eyes and nearly coming to silent blows.

Suddenly, the door swung inward, and two arms reached out, grasping each brother by the front of his shirt and jerking them inside.

"Hello, boys," Helen laughed.

Before the brothers could counter the attack they were flung against the far wall, barely missing several large support beams, and pinned tightly against it.

Dean shook his head to clear the haze after having the wind knocked out of him, and found himself suspended between Sam and Sarah. He could barely turn his head far enough to get a look at the captive girl, but from what he could see, she looked to be okay. Terrified, but alive.

"You rang," Dean huffed sarcastically as he struggled to draw breath between his still spasming intercostals, chest heaving. It was a weak joke, made weaker by the force of his pounding heart, which seemed to suck every ounce of energy from the rest of his body to feed itself.

"Leave them alone!" Sam yelled. "You called, and I came. What more do you want?"

Helen laughed again, her voice crackling like static over a bad phone connection. "What do I want?" She snarled. "Well, for starters, I want people to take me seriously when I give them instructions." She said, sauntering up to Sam so that he had an up close and personal view of the burn scars on her face. She looked up at him almost seductively. "Did I or did I not tell you to come alone, Samuel? I was trying to make this easier on you, trying to keep you from having to watch someone else you love suffer and die. I thought Sarah, here, would be enough for you, but obviously, I was wrong," she hissed.

She turned her attention to Dean, who despite his best efforts to keep his game face on, was obviously not handling this little trip down memory lane very well. His breathing had picked up beyond what was to be expected from the initial adrenaline rush, and she could smell the fear sweating out of him, despite the wry grin he'd plastered on to distract her.

"That's where you messed up," he laughed between straining breaths. "I don't take orders from my little brother. If you wanted me to stay home, you should have told me yourself."

"Is that so?" She grinned. She laughed aloud once more, and her voice gradually dropped several octaves until it was no longer female and entirely too familiar. "Dean, son," she smirked, imitating John Winchester infallibly. "What part of 'stay out of this', don't you understand?"

Sam couldn't turn his head far enough to see the expression on his brother's face, but he could tell from the strangled rasp of Dean's breath that he was terrified. He'd never really come to terms with the events that had taken place in that cabin in Missouri, only moved on despite them. That was a mistake. Demons sought out and played against their human weaknesses, and Dean had a giant chink in his armor that both brothers had been spackling over with toothpaste.

"Hmm," Helen said thoughtfully, still speaking as John, "I don't think he likes this voice. I think maybe he's got some issues with his daddy." She sighed wistfully, stepping closer to the older brother as Dean began to struggle against his invisible bonds. She cocked an ear toward him and looked at Sam with a twinkle in her eyes. "Can you hear that, Samuel?"

Sam's face twisted in confusion as he thrashed futilely against the wall. He bared his teeth around his gaping mouth as his eyebrows scrunched downward inquisitively.

"Here, let me help you out there, son," John Winchester's voice teased. Helen's gaze focused inward, and the air around them began to crackle. A faint thudding, like native drums, began to reverberate within the cavernous expanse of the abandoned mill, and it crescendoed gradually to a booming that rattled in Sam's chest. As he listened, the rhythm increased, and with dawning realization, Sam understood that it was his brother's heartbeat he was being forced to listen to.

"Dean!" Sam huffed, trying to catch his brother's gaze with the corners of his eyes. He got no response, however, just the strangled nightmare breathing that he'd tried unsuccessfully to ignore nearly every night since Dean had left the hospital. The same raspy, tortured, huffing that he'd forced himself not to mention, knowing that Dean would not want Sam to know how often the memories tormented him, the way they were tormenting him now.

"Don't you worry about him, Sam," Helen teased. "I'm not going to lay a hand on him. I won't have to. You see, Samuel, my father rather enjoyed ripping out the hearts of his victims. I, on the other hand, prefer to just let them explode." She chuckled with a low growl that alternated octaves between the voices of Helen and John. "I bet you didn't know that it's actually possible to scare someone to death. I bet Dean knows, though."

She stepped closer to the older brother, reveling in the sheen of sweat that dripped from his brow and smirking with glee as his heartbeat sped up impossibly faster, the pounding rhythm causing the light fixtures to tremble and flicker. "Whattya say, Dean-o," she teased as she stepped close enough to the struggling Winchester to see her own reflection in his eyes as his father's voice rumbled from her throat. "Wanna show your baby brother here, how it's done? I'm sure the expression on your face as your heart explodes in your chest will be something he carries with him forever. I know I'm gonna savor it a good long time myself."

She leaned closer, and could almost swear that the reflection in Dean's eyes was actually that of her captor's father. She'd had no idea she was that good...

Behind her, there was an audible click, and all three captives diverted their eyes to the figure that had emerged from the shadows, unnoticed in his approach. "Get the hell away from my son," John Winchester ordered.

BANG!

Before the demon could comply, John fired upon her, the Colt smoking in his grip as the hostages slid to the floor. "God, I hate a copycat."

The father looked to his sons, no time for a bittersweet reunion, and nodded his head curtly toward Sarah to indicate that he would check on Dean himself so that Sam could focus on the obviously terrified girl.

Sam hesitated. As much as he wanted to dive to Sarah's aid, he had seen the look of sheer horror on Dean's face when their father had appeared. It wasn't the look of someone who'd just been rescued. It was the look of someone who didn't want to be seen. John was probably the last person Dean wanted fussing over him - not that John had ever fussed over his kids.

"Dad...maybe I should..." Sam took a step forward, intending to try and soothe the situation between father and son, but John brushed him off with his usual military air.

"He'll be alright," John stated. "Take care of the girl." His hand was still heavy with the gun, preventing him from offering aid to his fallen son. Without hesitation, he sighed and tossed down the now useless Colt and reached out to Dean.

Dean's back remained against the slimy, damp wall of the mill, his breath ragged as his pounding heart refused to abate. He eyed the offered assistance with trepidation. John rarely ever raised a hand to one of his sons, but a hand offered in assistance was rarer still. Dean was pretty sure the last time he'd been picked up off the ground was when he'd fallen off his tricycle.

Eventually, Dean warily grasped the thick fingers and allowed his father to tug him to his feet.

The pair stared at one another but didn't speak. John had sacrificed the last silver bullet to save his son, and yet Dean couldn't look his dad in the eye without seeing those evil yellow orbs gleaming back at him. It was an illusion of his mind, a trick rooted in his subconscious, locked in by the hardened scar tissue Dean hid so well.

It was something he might never be able to shake.

Dean swallowed and then let out a long calming breath, willing his heart to slow. Maybe then he could speak to the man he had once obediently followed without question. Maybe then he'd be able to face his dad without his voice cracking. Any bridges he'd succeeded in building since Missouri had been demolished again here tonight.

"Dad?" Sam's concerned voice made both men turn. "Didn't you leave the last bullet with us? How?" As he spoke, Sam raised a brow and helped a still quivering Sarah to her feet.

"Son..." the guilty father began. But if it was a confession he was intending to make, he wasn't allowed to complete it.

"Why, John, I see you're still keeping secrets from your children. How rude after they almost died for you..." A figure stepped from the shadows of the mill, his slightly high-pitched tones instantly recognizable to Dean. "Daddy Winchester left his pathetic little army a fake bullet, didn't you, John? And just because you wanted *me*,

the prize, all to yourself. After all these years of dragging your boys through this rat race of a war, you never had any intention of letting them share the spoils.”

“Sonofabitch,” Dean coughed out the word as he watched Ian Blis saunter just a little too close for comfort and recognized him for who he was. The fake lawyer’s eyes flashed and then turned an angry gold as the hunter watched. This was no lesser-demon. This was Haris, their foe, their nemesis. “You bastard...you played us all along...”

“Dean? What?” Sam’s gaze shot from his brother to the demon and back again, but before he could receive an answer, the younger Winchester found his body lifted into the air and once again slammed against the wall. It was getting to be an all-too familiar pastime he wasn’t very fond of.

To his left, Sarah, too, was forcibly detained. John and Dean remained on their feet, but it was obvious Haris was in control of the situation.

Sam cringed, biting into his own lip as he watched Haris take a step towards Dean. *He can’t go through this again. Not again...*

Haris felt Sam’s fears for his brother and fed on them, using the energy that filled the room like a dynamo’s charge. The air came alive with static as he spoke, this time in a much throatier timbre than before.

“‘Sonofabitch’, Dean? Didn’t your father teach you not to use such language in front of a young lady?” The demon nodded as he watched Dean’s expression. The hunter’s usual cocky façade was amusing, but pointless. Haris had seen right through it at the cabin, and he could see right through it now. “A *real* father would have brought you up so much better.” He made a tutting sound with his tongue and turned to John, smirking.

“A *real* father doesn’t sacrifice his kids to save his own neck,” John countered with just enough sarcasm to show where Dean had inherited his cynicism from. “A *real* father is willing to sacrifice himself for them...”

Haris laughed, keeping his fiery yellow eyes trained on the eldest Winchester. “You’re quite right that I sacrificed a few of my children, but then, they are legion. What is one among myriad?”

“You sent us the text, didn’t you?” Sam struggled against the force that held him to the wall, trying desperately to summon his fledgling gifts, but somehow, it was as if a dampening field had all but cancelled them out. Either the demon, or perhaps his own inner terrors had scared away his latent powers. Not that he was surprised. Hell, he only even knew he had powers because of a few random encounters over which he’d had little control and no understanding. Whatever fluke had awakened them then, had yet be discovered.

Haris turned, his lips curling into a slight smile of appreciation. “But of course. Everything must run to a plan. Dean is right. I did play you. Your priest friend, Kyle, was the bait, and like lambs to the slaughter, you came running. Meg, Helen, all my slain children have died for a cause. My cause. For every bullet they took, I was less in danger.”

“And you think just because we used all the bullets we’ll stop hunting your fiery ass? Dude, think again...” Despite his shaking hands and still thrumming heart, Dean refused to give in to his feelings and continued his tirade of insults.

Haris pursed his lips, but for now, stifled the desire to tear into his enemy. Dean Winchester was not his primary adversary. As a mortal, he should have provided little opposition at all, but despite his feeble “meat suit” of a human body, Dean was strangely hard to kill. Of course, Haris had a pretty good idea why that was, but it was an issue he wasn’t prepared to address. Everything in its time.

“I never doubted your tenacity,” Haris admitted, pacing around Dean as Dean had paced around Meg in the protective circle at Bobby’s. “You see, I *wanted* you to follow me. I *wanted* you to expend your resources on my children. Everything you have done has been controlled by me. You are the puppets, and I the puppeteer.”

“And just how many of your kids would you have sacrificed to get what you want? All of them?” John shook his head. “Tell me one thing? Are all demons' spawn so gullible, or do yours just inherit their naïveté from you?”

Haris didn't seem to take offense. The words merely brought a small smile across his lips and he clasped his hands behind his back in amusement. With a glance at Sam, he offered, “Never trust a parent, boys. They always keep secrets from you, isn't that right, John?” The demon moved until his face was so close to Dean's he could feel the young hunter's harried breath on his face. “Maybe you should ask your father what he's keeping from you. But then...maybe you're more afraid of *him* than you are me...”

The observation was meant to sting, and it did.

“You bastard!” The fine line that Dean had been balancing on finally gave way and he snapped. He could crumble and turn into some mindless zombie, or he could fight the thing taunting him. As a Winchester, Dean only ever chose the latter.

Without really having a plan, Dean took a dive for the Colt, hoping that the legend was wrong and that any old bullet would do the trick if fired from the weapon.

It was a ridiculous move, but it was better to try and fail than to stand by and let Haris demonstrate his own form of hary-kary. If Dean was going out, this time he planned on doing it the old fashioned way- a warrior's death, all guns blazing, not pinned against some wall, blood oozing from his mouth as he stood helpless and in agony.

“Dean! No!” Sam screamed as he was forced to watch from his position on the wall, bad memories flooding back like a tsunami. *He's pissing it off all over again! This thing won't leave him alive a second time!*

Remarkably, Haris allowed his enemy to retrieve the ancient weapon without even raising a hand in defense. The demon simply smirked as Dean's fingers slid around the Colt, his expression showing wry amusement. “Now what do you think you're going to do with that toy, Dean?” The Colt was unceremoniously yanked from Dean's hand by some ethereal force and floated over to Haris' awaiting open palm. “Of course, it never hurts to be careful,” he admitted, tucking the weapon into his belt.

“You have the Colt. You have everything. What more could you want from my family?” John stepped into the stream of light cascading down from a broken roof section, effectively placing himself between Haris and his two sons. “If it's revenge, take me...”

Haris's head cocked to one side and his golden pupils narrowed and contorted until they looked almost feline. “Oh, but John, you're not the one I'm here for.” The demon stepped backwards and the elder hunter found his feet inexplicably fixed to the spot. Haris nodded knowingly and continued to back up until he was parallel to Sam and Sarah.

As Dean and John watched powerlessly, Sam's body descended with a dragging motion along the wall until the youngest Winchester was level with his archenemy.

Sam's eyes widened, but he didn't speak as Haris stretched out a hand towards him. Whatever was to come next he would take, not for himself, but for his father, for Sarah, and finally for Dean, who had already given so much.

Haris dipped his head, seemingly looking to the floor, but his voice filled the old steel mill as if he had the place hotwired with a tannoy. “It's time, Samuel...”

And finally, after twenty-three years, Sam was done fighting.

To Be Continued in “Cult”