

Redemption Episode 17

Black Creek, Wisconsin 11:56p.m.

Charlotte Winter sighed as she looked over the cab of the ancient Dodge at her husband. Peter was in one of his moods, and that was a bad thing.

The pair had been over to see friends in a neighboring town, but even that had gotten out of hand. Peter just had to start an argument; but then, he did that all the time lately.

Charlotte suspected it was age getting the better of him. They were both over sixty- maybe he was getting Alzheimer's? She crossed her arms but didn't speak. There would be no point in trying to talk to the incensed farmer for hours. Instead, she let her gaze fall outside the beat up pick-up, to the winding back roads it traversed.

Maybe I should get a divorce...

Charlotte let her mind wander, pretending she could escape the deep void of a life she'd been trapped in for over forty years. Living in the tiny town of Black Creek was suffocating, and yet she had let the place suck the life out of her quite willingly.

Peter had been worth it back then. Handsome. Strong. Loving.

A string of curse words erupted from the red-faced farmer and Charlotte was broken from her pitiful reverie. Peter was angry, and this time not just at his wife or old friends.

As Charlotte broke from her daydream she felt the pick-up swerve dangerously and was compelled to squint as something blurred before the truck like some nightmare illusion. She held a hand up, expecting the suffering Dodge to slam into whatever was in the road, but instead the thing vanished.

"Sonofabitch! Did you see that jerk?" Peter rammed his foot down on the truck's brakes and brought the Dodge to a swift halt. The lane they were on was nothing more than a single-file dirt track. If anything else came along there would be no room to pass. Peter didn't care.

"I...I saw something..." Charlotte shook her head, unsure of what exactly had been outside on the road. At this time of night in the country it was most likely some wild animal. "Peter, should you really be getting out?"

The farmer ignored his wife, tugging a twelve-gauge shotgun from a rack in the back of the cab. Someone or something had irked him, and in the frame of mind he was in, that someone was going to feel buckshot before they went home.

"Smartass thinks he can ride in front of my truck like some dang cowboy yahoo..." The insults came thick and fast as the farmer jarred open his door and stepped out into the chill of the night.

Peter huffed and spat viciously into the nearby scrub. His quarry had disappeared, no doubt because the little butthead had heard of his fiery reputation. *Nobody messes with Peter Winter, not on his on his own land, Bucko...*

Charlotte remained in the cab, still unsure of what had angered her husband even more than he had been moments earlier. Peter had intimated someone had been on horseback in the lane, but she doubted anyone would be so careless as to be riding at such an hour out here.

"Peter, maybe we should just go home," she beseeched.

Winter shook his head, kneeling slowly to examine the hoof prints on the ground in front of his truck. The horse was unshod-something else he wouldn't have

expected. *Knew it was some damn yahoo with no respect for man or beast. Young hoodlums aren't satisfied with stealing cars...*

Hoof beats, thudding heavily as if the animal was racing hard, reverberated along the previously silent lane, and Winter stood from his crouched position, finger poised on the shotgun's trigger.

For painful seconds, only darkness and the noise of the approaching steed filled the country track.

Finally, horse and rider appeared, but not from the direction Winter had been expecting. It was like looking up into the sky after hearing a sonic boom, only to find the actual aircraft far away in the distance.

Winter gulped hard, suddenly intimidated by the charging dappled gray steed that tore towards him. The animal's glistening coat shone in the moonlight, and the farmer could see small puffs of steam rising from its nostrils as it snorted with exertion. On any other day, he would have described the horse as being magnificent, but right now, its very presence scared the hell out of him.

"Peter!" Charlotte's terrified voice cut through the night, her recent thoughts of divorce forgotten now that her husband was in danger. "Peter, get in the truck!"

Winter didn't move.

The aging farmer suddenly found that no matter how he tried he couldn't take his gaze from the rider and his perfectly bred horse. Before, he had thought the person who had ridden in front of his truck had been some punk from town playing some stupid prank, but the rider was no teenager.

As the gleaming steed finally slowed, its hoofs churning the ground as it responded to its master's commands, Winter at last could see the man in full clarity.

The farmer guessed his attacker was in his late twenties, his sandy hair and handsome features almost hidden by a thick layer of dust that suggested he had been riding for days.

The stranger's attire seemed eerily out of date, and was covered with the same film of dust as his face and hair. Whoever he was, he was no high school kid looking for a laughs.

Peter felt his heart rate go up a notch. There had been rumors in town of late. Rumors he apparently should have listened to. "What do you want?" He heard the words leave his throat, but they were thick and gravelly, as fear contorted his normally loud timbre.

The rider didn't answer, but with a tug of his reins brought the steed up on its back legs, rearing in front of Peter until he was sure the animal would come down on him, trampling him to death under its massive hoofs.

Amazingly, the horse remained upright, defying what Peter knew as logic. *A horse can't stay on its hind legs that long, can it?*

The farmer's head cocked and he realized his foe was drawing a weapon. Strangely, he didn't feel compelled to use the shotgun anymore, letting it hang limp in his fingers even though his life now depended on it.

In the truck, Charlotte began to scream as she watched the young rider slide a cavalry saber from a sheath tucked into his saddle. As he swung his arm back for the kill, she couldn't help but notice the mirthful sparkle to his eyes, and the strange gold object dangling from a cord around his neck.

Charlotte squinted, abruptly drawn to the almost radiant effigy. Maybe if she lived through the night its bizarre design would provide some evidence against their attacker. "Peter, for God's sake, shoot!" The petrified wife's pleas did little to rouse her entranced husband.

Peter Winter simply let the twelve gauge slip from his grasp and tumble to the ground.

Within a second, he felt the cool, hard slice of the saber as it ran through his gut and exited the other side. He looked down, suddenly shocked at what he had allowed to happen.

Above him, the rider smirked cockily and then tugged back, pulling his weapon from the farmer so swiftly that Winter's body was forced back with the move. His back hit the hood of his truck, and he slumped down, clutching at his stomach with both hands as blood oozed through his fingers.

A trail of blood smeared the Dodge's grille where he had slithered down it, and the left headlight beam was almost obscured with the thick, already coagulating liquid.

Charlotte screamed and tried to scramble behind the wheel of the pick-up. She slid a hand to the ignition and realized in horror that the ignition keys were missing. Peter must have taken them outside with him.

The sixty-four year-old peered through the windscreen, but the rider had vanished. Did she dare to venture outside to find the keys and try to help her husband?

With a quivering hand, Charlotte let her fingers slide behind the door handle. She pulled back and heard the click as the latch gave way, the door opening with a creak.

Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed, forcing it back down as she clambered from the vehicle. She looked around frantically, scouring the lane for the interloper, but all was still.

Using the hood for support as her knees began to quake, Charlotte urged her wiry frame forward, knowing she would probably find her husband dead. Her hand slid across the metal as her fingers slipped in Peter's lifeblood, and she recoiled.

Behind her, hoof beats resounded down the lane, their owner thundering ever closer for the kill.

Charlotte dropped to her knees, her hands flailing wildly across the ground in search of her husband's shotgun. As her fingers finally curled around the barrel, she heard the snorting of a horse dangerously close, and she couldn't ignore the urge to turn.

The pallid grey steed's hoofs pawed the ground impatiently, its young rider watching her almost playfully.

Charlotte could take the impish look on his face no more. This man, this thing had killed Peter, and now he would pay. She tugged back hard on the shotgun's trigger, its unexpected kick almost breaking her collarbone. *Die you bastard...*

The rider didn't move, but continued to grin as the buckshot melted through his form and dissipated into the night the other side.

Only those who needed to repent and had not would die here tonight.

* * * *

Cabin just outside Black Creek, Wisconsin Three Weeks Later

Dean climbed from behind the Impala's wheel and stretched. He'd been driving for hours and it was a welcome relief to finally be able to flex his muscles.

The Chevy was like a home from home, but driving her non-stop across the country did little for his body - not that he'd let Sam take the wheel unless he had to. Between Sam and Kyle the car had been through far too much of late, but then they all had.

"Dude, did you really have to find us a *cabin*?" The elder Winchester squirmed as he eyed the small wooden structure before him. This was the first time they'd stayed in a cabin since Missouri, and Dean wasn't sure he liked the idea.

Sam shrugged, popping the trunk to tug out their bags. "It's not like Black Creek has much accommodation to choose from, Dean. The place is tiny."

Dean huffed, but took the holdall that was pushed his way. "Tell me again why I've been forced to this nothing of a town?" He didn't let Sam answer. "Oh yeah, Moses, our car wrecking priest friend, thought it was a good idea." He rolled his eyes, referring to Kyle Williams.

Since their encounter in Dakota with their nemesis, Haris, Kyle had been sending them updates, information, and any supernatural case he laid his hands on. Being forced from the vocation he'd dreamed of all his life had led the would-be priest to appoint himself the Winchesters' "researcher" and he actually fit the role quite well.

As long as he did the research from Dakota and kept his hands well away from the Impala, Dean was happy. The priest also kept an eye on Sarah Blake-something both brothers were thankful for after her near demise at the hands of the demon.

"I think Kyle actually found something quite unique going on here," Sam countered as he unlocked the cabin door. "I mean c'mon, Dean, all those people found dead out on the highway, and in such a small town? We're not exactly talking accident."

Dean shrugged and took a glance around what would be serving as their new abode for the next few days. It wasn't unlike the cabin in Missouri, and he felt a small chill run down the back of his spine. This case needed solving and fast, because he really didn't want to be dragging up old memories again.

The nightmares he'd had at Bobby's after the crash had been hard to push away, and the elder hunter suspected sleeping in this place wasn't going to be easy if he didn't want a recurrence of those hellish dreams about their dad while he'd been possessed by Haris.

"I don't know, Sammy, I mean, we could be looking at a regular "killer in the backseat" gig here." He raised a brow questioningly. "What makes you think this thing is unique?" Dean tossed his holdall on the bed and quickly joined it. While Sam began unpacking regular items like clothes and their laptop, Dean's priority lay with his weaponry. A shotgun and two handguns appeared as if by magic and he began checking them over religiously.

"The local cops found hoof prints around every victim's car. Does that sound like a "killer in the backseat" gig to you?" The younger hunter powered up their laptop and began opening files he'd downloaded. The cabin had no internet, so he'd had the forethought to visit the nearest local library on the way in. "Take a look." He spun the screen towards his brother.

"Eight people stabbed to death by what the County Coroner describes as an antique sword." Dean whistled. "How do they know what the murder weapon is if they don't have it?"

Sam tapped the screen with his forefinger. "Read on. It says they found a sliver of the thing embedded in the latest victim's ribcage. They dated the metal from that. The size and shape of the wounds gave them the rest."

Dean broke the barrel of his shotgun and began to clean it as they talked. It was his favorite ritual, and one he could complete without even looking at the SKB. "Still doesn't make this anything supernatural, Sammy. We could just be looking at some whacko serial killer. Definitely not our kind of thing."

Sam shook his head. It was pretty obvious that Dean wanted out of the cabin just about as quickly as he'd walked into it. In fact, Sam suspected if he suggested they sleep in the car, Dean would take that option rather than spend a night in the tiny wooden rent-a-lodge.

Of course, Dean was putting on the brave face he usually wore when something bothered him, and Sam was going to play along with that, because sooner or later, Dean had to come to terms with his feelings.

"Dean, have you even read half of the newspaper reports on there?" Sam sighed and stole a glance at the laptop. "Some of the locals have allegedly seen a rider on a pale grey horse. So far he's only been seen on the same stretch of road as the victims, and he only appears at night."

Dean paused from reattaching the SKB's barrel and frowned. "You think we have some freaky *Sleepy Hollow* kind of thing going down here? I mean c'mon, Sammy, a real life ghost rider with attitude?"

"That's what some folks around here say..." A small, bearded man wearing a grimy baseball cap slipped through the cabin door and began chewing on something

Dean suspected was tobacco rather than gum. He reminded the hunter of their old friend Bobby, and he took an instant liking to the newcomer. "Hank Jessop, your landlord." The man offered his hand along with his introduction, and Dean shook it.

"You've heard about this "ghost rider" too?" Sam shot his brother a look that screamed "cover the guns!" as he spoke, but Jessop's gaze had already fallen on Dean's little hardware collection.

The cabin owner's brow creased curiously, but he didn't question the brothers' arsenal. "Hell yes, sonny. My family's been around these parts too long to miss out on any local gossip."

"But you've never seen the rider?" Dean joined in after finally finishing up the SKB. "I mean, for all you know it could be nothing more than a rumor. Let's face it, why would something like that just suddenly appear in Black Creek, right?"

Hank rubbed a hand across his beard and eyed Dean with a look of amusement. These boys just didn't get how such a small town worked. "Nope, I've never seen it, and God help me I don't want to. As for the why, I'm thinking Redemption..."

"Redemption?" Sam moved closer to their host, unsure how to take the man's last statement. "You mean people think the rider is out for some kind of salvation? He's killing to redeem himself?"

Hank laughed, his beard quirking in sudden amusement. "Hell no, boy, "Redemption" was a town around here back in the late eighteen hundreds. You know, regular lil' cowboy town. When the railroad came through these parts and the bigger towns grew, well, Redemption kind of vanished off the map. And of course there were the rumors..." He coughed, unsure if he'd gone too far. "There are still parts of the old ghost town out there if ya go looking hard enough."

"And you think the thing that's killing people has somehow been awakened from there?" Dean was interested now. Maybe Sam's original idea wasn't so off base after all. All it would take was some unsuspecting tourist to dig up some old bones and wham; the mystery ghost rider could have been born.

"What rumors?" Sam cut his brother off and looked at the older man questioningly. Hank had slipped in the mention of "rumors" so casually Dean had totally missed it, but in their job, something so small could mean a great deal.

Hank swirled the tobacco around in his mouth for a moment, savoring the flavor. He chomped on a wad, and eventually nodded, pleased that the kid before him had picked up on his choice of words. "Some say Redemption vanished because of something bad that happened there. I don't know the details, but it involved a hanging, so they say. Town was never quite the same after that. Others say the place was a den of iniquity anyway, but that was even before my granddaddy's time."

"You said there are still some remnants of the old place?" Dean cocked a brow. If he had to spend a night in Black Creek, he'd rather do it in an old ghost town than the cabin. He knew avoiding his feelings wasn't the answer, but right now he had a pretty good excuse and he was sticking with it. "Can you tell us how to get there?"

"Sure thing." Jessop jerked a thumb back towards the door. "There's only one road out that way. It's Breach Lane, where the killin' always happens. Follow it right along to the end, past Pete Winter's old place, then you'll have to park your car and walk a ways. Just follow the river and it will take you right on into Redemption, or what's left of it."

"Can I ask you a question, Mr. Jessop?" Sam's expression was neutral despite the sudden deep-seated dread that had begun to burn at him for no apparent reason. "What do you really think we'll find out there?"

Hank backed up just enough to open the door a touch and spit out a swatch of his tobacco. When he looked back his eyes returned to the weapons Dean had been cleaning. "Death," he admitted somberly as if it were the sanest answer in the world. "But then, it looks like you boys came prepared for that..."

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Breach Lane
Black Creek, Wisconsin
Later that night

The track ahead finally petered out into nothing more than a muddy glop, and Dean was forced to admit that the Impala could no longer traverse what was left of Breach Lane.

The elder hunter tugged the Chevy's wheel, making sure the classic was as far over out of harm's way as possible on the one track road. After listening to the calming growl of the engine for just a second, he shut off the ignition and shot a glance to his brother.

Sam had been unusually quiet on the drive out, and even now he sat with his head down as if something was bothering him more than he cared to say. The dimples on his cheeks had turned into a deep frown, and as Dean reached for the Impala's door handle he sighed audibly.

It was more than Dean could take. "Sam, wanna tell me about it?"

Sam looked up, suddenly realizing his moping had been all too obvious. Since speaking with Jessop back at the cabin he couldn't shake the feeling that coming out to Redemption was wrong. There was no vision involved, so there was no real reason to be afraid, and yet, deep in his heart Sam knew this was no ordinary apprehension.

Something was going to go wrong out here, and the only real fact he sensed about the whole situation was that whatever went down, he'd be powerless to stop it.

"It's nothing," Sam climbed from the car and joined his brother at the trunk. There was no point in telling Dean when there was really nothing to tell. *Just like you didn't tell Jess about the nightmares, and...* Sam stopped dead as the thought hit him. Why would he think that?

"Look alive, little brother." Dean tossed over a flashlight followed by a salt-filled Remington. He grabbed the recently cleaned SKB for himself along with his favorite forty-five. "Something is eating at you, dude. Now spill. This gig got you spooked?"

Sam pulled a face. "It's not the gig. Just a feeling. I'm sure it's nothing." He flicked on the flashlight, letting the wide beam cut into the darkness ahead of the car.

"Nothing, huh?" Dean nodded knowingly. If Sam said he had a "feeling" and it was nothing, it usually meant it was something, but he just didn't want to share it yet. "Fine, just as long as your whole lot of nothing doesn't get our asses canned by the *Lone Ranger* out here..."

Sam smiled a little at the quip. "The *Lone Ranger's* horse was white, not grey, dork," he corrected. "Maybe it's *Zorro*? He was more into the swordplay thing." He chuckled, attempting to push away the nagging feeling in his mind, but it didn't work.

"Whatever." Dean took point, using his thumb to flick on his own light. "I don't really care who he is as long as we can his sorry ass and get back in time for breakfast."

Sam nodded. The sooner they got back to the cabin, the better he would feel.

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A mile down the muddy track, Dean paused and let his flashlight play to their left. He could hear the sound of burbling water, and remembered that Jessop had said Redemption was near the local river, which meant they were close to the old town. Or, at least, what was left of the place.

"I think we've found our ghost town. You wanna take right and I'll take left?"

Sam licked his lips but didn't answer right away. For some reason he didn't like the idea of splitting up. It was insane considering how many gigs they'd worked this way, and yet all he could think of was Jessop's last few words.

“What do you really think we’ll find out there?”

“Death...”

“Dean...maybe we should stick together on this one...”

Dean raised a brow and his lopsided, cocky smirk appeared. “Dude, you’re turning into a regular wuss on this gig. Forget to eat your SpaghettiOs this morning?” The elder hunter shook his head, playing the moment, but he knew Sammy was spooked big time. That was bad. “C’mon, I want to actually see this place *tonight*,” he joked. “I always wanted to be a cowboy...”

“I thought you always wanted to be a fireman?” Sam countered as he reluctantly began to move away from his brother.

Dean shrugged as he began walking to the left. “What? A guy can’t have more than one career choice?”

“Yeah, but you’re definitely more of a Jesse James or Billy the Kid than any fire fighter...” Sam’s humor-filled voice became muffled as he vanished into the night towards the remains of Redemption.

Dean watched him go and then shook his head. Something was definitely eating at the kid despite his quips. And with Sammy’s sixth sense, that meant trouble.

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Sam hadn’t been walking long when the beam from his light caught something jutting from the earth up ahead. As he aimed the flashlight more directly, he realized what he was looking at was the remnants of a wooden structure.

Sam moved closer, keeping the beam on the aging, mite-infested timbers. It was hard to tell what the building had once been, but from what he could tell he’d found the outskirts of town. He kneeled, letting a hand caress the wooden laths as if tactile touch could bring back memories from the past.

The lumber felt cold to his fingers-unnaturally so, and Sam couldn’t help but recoil and move on, some unknown sense of urgency pushing him forward.

The moon appeared as if on cue from behind a bank of high cumulous clouds, its muted light illuminating the scene more clearly.

Jessop had been right in his description. There really wasn’t much of the old western town left. From what Sam could see, only one building actually remained in its entirety, and it was at the farthest edge of town. He would have to quicken his pace to check out the place and be back at the rendezvous point where he’d left Dean.

Something is keeping me busy...

The young hunter didn’t know where the abrupt and unnerving thought had come from, but he didn’t like it. He let a hand touch the Remington under his jacket, but it did little to quell his misgivings.

Balls of tumbleweed blew in front of him, taunting him to move onward, to see the last building in Redemption and find its long lost secrets.

Sam looked back over his shoulder into the darkness. Somewhere in the black void of night, Dean was alone, vulnerable. The thought struck a chord, and no matter how much the lone structure at the edge of town beckoned, Sam refused its ethereal invitation. He knew now he had to go back. Back before it was too late, like it had been for Jess.

“Dean...”

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Dean kept one hand on his flashlight while he cradled a home-made EMF meter in the other. Ever since leaving Sam he’d had the uncanny feeling of being watched, and on a night like this, he trusted that his instincts weren’t wrong.

The hunter spun to his right a little at the sound of cascading water, letting the ray from his light play in the direction of the rushing deluge, as he noted a broken wooden sign near the steep embankment.

Dean edged forward, eyes darting in anticipation of some ghostly ambush. When he reached the decrepit marker, he kneeled, rubbing a thick layer of dust away to reveal painted-on lettering from another era.

"Redemption Cemetery..." The elder brother read out the words emblazoned in black, somehow knowing this was the place the Winchesters were looking for. They had been drawn here. *He* had been drawn here.

"No! We don't deserve this! We created you!" A girl's muted, terrified scream broke the silence of the night and Dean abruptly sprang to his feet.

Redemption should have been an empty town. A town full of nothing but age-old memories, and yet, he was not alone.

Dean quickly pulled the SKB from under his jacket, noting with alarm that the EMF meter he had been forced to stow away was now screaming as it redlined. *Shit!*

He pointed his flashlight ahead towards the sound of the screaming, letting his shotgun's barrel align with the beam as he played it across the open graveyard. Within a second, he found what he was looking for.

Amidst a few tumbledown stone monuments, intermingled with even more decrepit wooden grave markers, was a young teenage girl. To Dean, she looked no more than sixteen-and she had company.

Strewn at her feet like rag dolls were at least three more young bodies.

Dean squinted in the dim light, hoping he was wrong, but from the amount of blood on the ground he couldn't help but think all three were already dead.

The hunter quickened his pace, bringing the SKB up ready for action. The ghostly killer was here, hiding somewhere amongst a bone yard full of long-dead souls. *Sam sensed this. At least, some of it...*

The girl screamed again, this time her voice almost croaking as she forced her vocal cords to work harder than they were able to cope with.

Dean stopped dead, digging his boot heels into the ground as he realized what had caused the latest batch of wailing. The rider was here, and he intended finishing what he had started. Somehow, the phantom horseman's presence simply melted from the darkness into full form, like the invisible man returning to his earthly state.

The dappled steed on which the phantom rode snorted as its master pulled back on the reins, forcing the once proud animal to circle the teenage girl.

She began to shake, her whole body quivering as she mouthed the words, "We made you," over and over again.

The young rider didn't seem to care who had brought him back from some nether region where he felt he didn't belong. All that mattered was why he was here. His purpose. His destiny that had been stolen from him so long ago.

As Dean watched, the rider drew a saber, just like the one the news reports had described. It looked rusted with age, but on closer inspection the hunter realized the blade was actually coated with a dried layer of blood.

"Sonofabitch..."

The horse reared, controlled by its angry master's wrath, and as its hind legs carried it into the air, Dean spotted what Charlotte Winter had seen almost three weeks previously.

Dangling from the rider's neck on a thick piece of twine was a shiny gold amulet - *his* amulet.

Dean's eyes widened as the realization hit home. Sam had been right all along. This was no ordinary gig. It was personal on a level he would never have thought possible.

The teenage girl's knees buckled as she awaited the inevitable, and she let out one pitiful last cry that broke Dean from his shocked daze. He was here to stop a ghostly killer, no matter what it wore around its neck.

Using the darkness for cover, and the girl as a distraction, Dean made a calculated run towards the rear of the rider, hoping the spirit wasn't expecting his attack.

If the rider was aware, he didn't show it. Instead, he brought the cavalry sword up above his head, his obvious intention being to decapitate the girl.

"Hey, wanna show me what you got, you bastard?" Dean lined up the SKB on his target and let off a shot. *Just who the hell is this sonofa...*

Dean didn't get time to finish the thought.

The rider abruptly tugged at his steed's reins, ignoring the rock salt as if it didn't even exist. He whirled the horse around far faster than Dean had expected, and the young hunter was caught off guard.

For a second, hunter and hunted stared into one another's souls. The rider was young, his hair and features not unlike Dean's—except now, unlike before, parts of his face took on the appearance of rotting, necrotic tissue.

Dean froze, captivated by the thing he was looking at, and it was all the horse and rider needed to take advantage of the situation.

The steed let out some ungodly equine wail and kicked back, catching Dean high in the thigh with its unshod hoof.

It was the first time Dean had been so close to a horse, let alone kicked by one, and the action sent him flailing back, arms outstretched as he desperately tried to halt his backwards tumble.

The shotgun fell from his grasp, and in seconds he felt the icy chill of the river as his body broke the water.

Dean sensed his head go under, and he struggled, body thrashing to try and break the surface of the river for much needed air. The harder he pushed, the more he became aware that something was holding him down.

For a moment, panic took over and the hunter actually believed some demonic force had grabbed him. He let out a breath, calming himself, and sending a small bubble trail upwards towards the moonlight as air escaped his lungs.

It was hard to swim, to use his legs when his right thigh still felt numb from the horse's blow.

Dean looked down, but through the up-churned silt of the river bed and dark of night, there was little to see. He didn't really need to.

The hunter's lungs burned and he stifled the urge to breathe in, realizing that somehow he was caught on some unseen object below the water.

Dean kicked with his good leg, but the motion alone wasn't enough to free him from his unknown captor. He blinked, the river water smarting at his eyes, but that was the least of his concerns.

Somewhere above, the rider still roamed, and Sammy and the girl were still in danger. *Can't leave them...*

Dean thrashed again, but the strength, the life, was slowly ebbing from his body until all that remained was a faint glimmer of hope that he would be rescued. *Sammy knew...*

A last fleeting image of the amulet dangling from the rider's neck made him push one more time for freedom, but the river bed held fast its grip, keeping him down until all that remained was a tiny bubble trail ebbing from the corner of his mouth as his arms floated lifelessly upwards in the watery abyss.

Dean didn't know how long he'd been in the water. In his predicament, seconds seemed like hours, and a minute seemed like all of eternity. All he knew was that as his mind had begun to fog as his body succumbed to the lack of oxygen, a welcoming hand had somehow grabbed his jacket's collar, hauling him from an early, watery grave. *Must be Sammy...*

The hunter felt his body collapse onto the river bank, and before he could thank his brother he was forced to roll onto his side, hacking up water until his lungs felt like they would burst. "Thanks, man," he eventually mustered.

"Yer welcome, young fella. I thought you were a gonna there for a minute..."

The voice was not what Dean was expecting, and despite the urge to cough more he looked up. His savior smiled back with a lopsided, toothless grin on a face that was so wrinkled and etched with deep grooves he looked like he'd been carved from stone.

"I err, thought you were my brother," Dean admitted, pulling his soaking body upright. "Tall, gangly kid. Seen him around anywhere?" *Sammy might be in danger. That friggin' rider didn't look like he was about to quit killin' anytime soon.*

The old man shook his head. "No, sir, can't say as I have, but then we don't get too many newcomers around these parts."

Dean nodded, wondering just how many locals lived in Black Creek. Sam had described the place as tiny, but so far everyone Dean had met looked like they belonged in a retirement home.

He glanced down at his soggy clothes and then across to the river. It looked like the old-timer had pulled him out from the opposite side to where he'd fallen in, and it was going to be hard to get back over. No way did he want to try traversing the treacherous waters at night. One near-drowning was enough.

"I need to find my brother. He might be in trouble. Is there any way back across the river without actually swimming?" Dean wrung out the bottom of his jacket as he spoke, already feeling the cold seep into his body from his damp attire.

The old man's face contorted strangely until he looked both sad and apologetic. "Sonny, once yer this side, there ain't no way to cross back over." He patted Dean on the back, trying to move away from the subject. "You're soaked, boy. Why not come on into town with me and I'll buy you a drink to warm your bones?" He held out a hand, reminding Dean of Hank Jessop. "My name's Arthur, but most folks around here call me Arty."

Dean looked back towards the river. In his current condition a drink sounded good, but he was worried about Sam. He stuffed a hand in his pocket for his cell phone, but despite its waterproof casing it showed no signal. Dean huffed restlessly and stuffed it back in its soggy resting place. *Maybe there will be a payphone in town.*

"Name's Dean Winchester," he offered truthfully, following Arty as he struggled almost arthritically up a small slope.

"Like the rifle?" Arty's voice hitched up a notch in awe and his face brightened, eyes sparkling.

"Yeah, like the rifle, I guess..."

"Folks in town are gonna love you," Arty winked cryptically as he led Dean towards muted lights in the distance.

Lights that were far too dull for the modern luminance of electricity.

* * * *

Sam reached the rendezvous point in record time. The sensation in his gut was making him feel physically nauseous, and it was getting worse not better. He'd left Dean, knowing full well something was going down - something bad. Now, if anything happened to the older brother, he would blame himself just like he had after Jess.

No worse. Sam didn't know if he could go on living with the knowledge he'd led Dean into a death trap. *He'll be fine. I'll find him back at the Impala cursing because I'm late back...*

Sam stopped in his tracks as a girl's hitched sobbing caught his attention. He wasn't far from where he'd left Dean, and as he spun around, flashlight in hand, he realized that he'd found a cemetery. *If I've found it, Dean found it.*

Sam broke back into a jog, moving his light back and forth until he discovered the weeping, blood-covered girl at the base of a small wooden cross. She sat on her knees, cradling the head of another teenager as the remains of his eviscerated stomach coated her blouse.

As Sam approached, the girl looked up, startled and the young ghost hunter held out a hand to calm her fears. "It's okay. I'm here to help you."

The girl shook her head, tears streaming down her face as she looked back to her dead boyfriend and his two jock buddies. "No one can help us. Not after what we did..." Her voice caught in her throat, strangled by more choked sobbing, and even though her eyes saw them, she seemed to refuse to accept that the people with her were very dead. "He'll come back. It's what he does. He hunts..."

Sam winced. The girl was obviously in shock, both from the atrocities she'd witnessed and from a nasty cut to her arm that didn't want to stop bleeding. Without trying to pry more from her, he pulled out his cell phone and as he flipped it open, was relieved to see it had a full signal. *Where the hell is Dean?*

He dialed, pushing away bad thoughts. "Hello, I need an ambulance out at the old ghost town in Black Creek..." Sam shook his head as the operator didn't recognize the location. "Just tell the rig crew to follow Breach Lane as far as they can. I'll meet them there."

The voice on the line began asking more questions and Sam flicked his phone closed. He wanted to remain "anonymous" right now. He kneeled, pulling a clean handkerchief from his pocket and gently tying it around the girl's wound. "Shssh, help will be here soon," he soothed.

She winced, but not from the pain in her arm. She was beyond help. She had toyed with the afterlife, and now she and her companions had paid. "He takes everyone who crosses his path..."

Sam's head cocked to one side, but his voice remained low, soft, cajoling. "Who does? The guy on the horse? Do you know who he is?"

She nodded, swallowing hard. "Death..."

The answer was all-too familiar. Every time Sam asked a question in Black Creek he got the one word response that filled his heart with dread. *Something's wrong. It's Dean...*

The younger brother carefully took the girl by the shoulders and stared her straight in the eyes. He needed her to focus, to think. "Listen, I know you're afraid, but I need to ask you something. Have you seen anyone else out here tonight? A guy, a little shorter than me, blue jacket..." Sam stopped his description as a flash of recognition crossed the girl's features. "Where?" He demanded, abruptly feeling his pulse pound in his ears.

"The rider..." More hitched sobbing. "The rider took him..."

"WHERE?" Sam screamed out the question so loud the girl flinched back and began to shake even harder than she had been before. He hadn't meant to scare her, but if Dean was in danger, he couldn't waste time.

"The river," she offered sorrowfully. "He's gone now, just like the others..."

Sam grabbed his flashlight and pointed it towards the sound of running water he could hear to his left. After a tense moment, he spotted the muddy river bank and scrambled to his feet, making a dive for the burbling stream, because heck, Dean's life might depend on it.

The younger Winchester's boots slipped in the soft gloom as he neared the embankment, and he re-aimed the beam from his light to find the mud had been churned by a multitude of deep hoof prints near the edge.

Along with the horse's tracks, was a lone set of footprints.

Sam instantly recognized the 'CAT' logo imprinted in the mire. Dean had bought the new boots not more than three weeks ago after he'd ruined his last pair trudging through a bog searching for the elusive "Loveland Frog."

The tracks seemed to end perilously close to the embankment, and as Sam eyed them more closely he felt his heart begin to lurch. If Dean had fallen or been tossed into the river, his body could have been carried far away downstream, or worse, battered on underwater rocks.

Sam frantically aimed his light at the gushing surface of the river. "DEAN! DEAN!"

The only response was the slow wail of a siren in the distance as the ambulance he'd called sped ever closer.

* * * *

Dean trudged along behind Art, scowling as water squished in his new boots as if he'd been wearing sponges on his feet. *Son of a...now I gotta buy another new pair...*

"Sounds like they already revved up for the night at the saloon." Arty turned to Dean and grinned as an out-of-tune piano began to play some indistinguishable song totally off key. A female voice was nevertheless attempting to sing along. "I might even try a game of poker later. Care to join me, son?"

Dean frowned and finally looked up from his ruined boots to see the town he was headed for. Black Creek might be small, but he couldn't believe anyone called a bar a "saloon" anymore, not to mention play piano like they belonged in some John Wayne movie.

"That's Black Creek?" The hunter's eyes widened and he couldn't help but wince, as if the sight of the place pained him. Instead of seeing a street spattered with cars and houses, all that lay before him were a few wooden structures that looked like glorified barns. Outside the farthest building was a horse trough complete with two brown mares. "Man, you gotta be kiddin' me!"

"Somethin' wrong, sonny? You look like you seen a ghost." Arty patted his newfound friend on the back and gestured with a gnarled finger to the building most of the noise was originating, including the hellish piano tune. "C'mon, let's get you that drink. You done turned whiter than a sack of flour on me."

Dean moved to follow, but his step faltered. This couldn't be real, could it? "This is one of those towns they recreated, right? Like for tourists and shooting movies?" It was a dumb suggestion, but the only one the hunter could accept.

Arty rubbed at his chin in fascination. "Movie? Sonny, you musta bumped your head on somethin' in the water." He tugged at the elder Winchester's arm until Dean succumbed, gawking as he was led unceremoniously inside the timber-built structure.

"Sonofa..." Dean pushed through the double wooden doors and stopped dead. Inside was just as he'd imagined any western saloon would look: Musty, dusty, and with a distinct odor of spilled liquor and stale sweat. "I know I said I wanted to be a cowboy, but this is ridiculous..."

"What'll ya have to drink, sonny?" Arty didn't seem to notice his guest's astonishment and began chatting with the bartender as if he was a welcome regular at the establishment.

"Whiskey," Dean swallowed.

"How about a double to warm ya through?" Arty nodded knowingly and winked.

"Yeah, well I was more thinking of *a bottle*." Dean pulled out a small wooden chair in the corner of the saloon and watched as locals listened to the blonde woman at the piano belt out another warbling mantra. *I must be having a freakin' nightmare Sammy style here...*

A bottle of whiskey appeared, and Dean was about to snatch it from Arty's wizened hand and take a long gulp when he realized the deliverer of said bottle was not the old-timer. The hand was much too soft, too...feminine.

Instinctively, Dean looked up, half-expecting the woman from the piano to have joined him, because heck, he was the best damn catch in this geriatric town. Instead, he almost fell back off his chair. "Layla?" *It can't be. Layla's in Nebraska, or...*

Layla smiled and pulled out another chair. "Dean..."

"Man, I must be dreaming, because no way can any of this be really happening." Dean finally took the bottle, looked at it as if it were a mirage, and then whipped out

the stopper, taking a long swig. The liquor was much coarser than he was used to and he had to stifle a bout of gagging as it burned his tongue and throat.

"It's happening," Layla offered cryptically. "And yes, I'm not in Nebraska anymore..."

Dean let the bottle slip through his fingers and slam down onto the table as he realized the implications. It had been months since he'd met the young girl with a brain tumor. The chances that she had survived this long were pretty slim. The chances that she was alive and well and had moved to Black Creek were even slimmer. That left him with another, different choice he wasn't sure he wanted to accept.

The hunter eyed the young girl, searching for signs of illness. *I was in the water. Cold, dark...dead...*

"I'm not in Black Creek, am I?" Dean suddenly didn't want the whiskey. He didn't want anything except to be sick as the vile tang of river water abruptly assaulted his taste buds, reminding him of how much he'd swallowed earlier.

"You're in Redemption, Dean."

Layla's gentle tones brought back memories of a hotel room conversation, and of a promise to pray even though he considered himself to have no set religion.

Dean cleared his throat and swallowed hard, unsure how to respond to the revelation. "Redemption's gone. It's just a ghost town. Has been for years. Where am I really?"

"I think you know, or at least suspect." Layla placed a hand atop his. "Redemption is a place for lost souls, Dean. A place through which some must pass to be cleansed of past transgressions..."

Dean licked his lips. Just because he didn't conform to any set religion, his job meant he knew pretty much all the world's different beliefs and customs. This was one he was almost too familiar with. "Purgatory," he mouthed almost inaudibly. "A place of punishment for those who are not without sin before they can enter heaven..."

Layla's head cocked and then she shook it with a playful laugh. "Not exactly the description I would use, but..."

Dean grabbed the whiskey bottle and took several long gulps. Hell, was it even possible to get drunk once you were dead? After a moment his thoughts turned to Sam, to the quest they were supposed to be on together. *Sam. I can't leave Sam. This can't be real. Layla was too good for Purgatory...*

"Me?" Dean swirled the bottle, watching in fascination as the liquor sloshed to and fro. "I get why I might end up in a place like this. I've killed things, even if they were evil. I've lied. I've manipulated people to do my job. But you? I can't believe if there's a God he'd send *you* here. You don't deserve that."

Again, the innocent, knowing smile. "I'm not here to atone," Layla glanced around the darkly lit room. "Consider me your friend. Your guide..."

Dean smirked. "No offence, but I killed enough dead things in my time not to need a guide this side of the fence. Maybe a bodyguard, but no guide. Dead is dead, unless you happen to be best buds with a reaper." He cocked his head apologetically. "Kinda been there too, although I think you already know that..."

"You're not here for forgiveness, Dean. You are here to right a wrong." Layla lifted her left hand and slid it under the amulet dangling from the elder Winchester's neck. "Sins of the fathers..."

"Yeah, fall upon the children, but what's that supposed to mean? Dad piss this spook off sometime and then not finish the job?" Dean pulled backwards until the amulet slid back against his chest. He touched it, somehow feeling comforted by the sensation. Then he recalled the rider, and what had also hung around his neck. "This have something to do with that freaky bastard that put me here?"

Dean pushed away from the table, unexpectedly needing air. Maybe it was the startling sensation of drowning again that had enveloped him, or maybe it was just

the idea that he and the rider were somehow connected. Either way, he needed to be outside before his last meal ended up on the bar's already filthy floor.

Layla followed as he stumbled into the dully lit street, hanging onto a wooden support beam to keep his balance as he suddenly became disorientated by his unearthly surroundings.

After taking a breath, he turned back to the young woman whose life he had surely taken the night he'd stopped Roy le Grange. "Why a western town? If I'm dead, why do I see Redemption? Is it because of the rider?"

"Death is such a definite word, Dean. But yes, everyone sees their home town, their own era when they come here."

"Then why don't I see Lawrence, and Mom? Why don't I see the Impala instead of a bunch of horses and a bunch of tumbleweed?" Dean barked out the question. It wasn't fair that he was here. It wasn't fair that Layla had died. Life, death weren't fair.

"You see *his* reality, *his* world. You followed him back through a portal that should never have been opened, and now he must be stopped before more lives are taken." Layla looked into the distance. The night sky here looked no different from the real world. The clouds still hung low in the sky, and the moon's muted light still cascaded from the heavens.

She turned back, her usually sparkling eyes suddenly grim. "Sins of the fathers, Dean. You have to stop him, but if you die here, you die forever..."

"If I'm already dead, what does it matter? You tellin' me I can freakin' die twice? Great; "two for the price of one" just took on a whole new meaning." Dean turned, scrutinizing the town that may well be all he would know for the rest of eternity. "I *am* dead, right? That's what this little sermon has been all about? I drowned, didn't I? Now you expect me to take out some other dead dude who escaped your little prison here? Ghostbusting from beyond the grave. Wait till Sammy hears about this one."

Layla sucked down a breath. Explaining to someone so unsure about his own beliefs was one of the hardest tasks she could have been given. But this was no ordinary newcomer. He was someone she considered a friend, even though their meeting in a past life had been brief and somewhat tragic. "You don't have to die here, Dean. Time has no dominion in Redemption..."

Dean's brow furrowed. *Great, this is worse than having a conversation with freakin' Yoda!* "The old guy said there was no way back when he pulled me out of the water. He didn't mean I couldn't cross the river, he meant no way back to the living. How can I go back? It's been too long already..."

"It's not your time, Dean. Let's just say you're a guest here." Layla sighed. Even though she didn't belong in Redemption, she had no choice, no chance to return to her loved ones, to her mother who had fought so hard to save her.

Dean grimaced, not noting the sudden look of sadness on the girl's face. "Yeah, you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. What is this, freakin' *Hotel California*?" The classic guitar riff from the Eagles song filled his head, mercifully drowning out the grating piano sounds for a few blissful seconds. "So tell me," he finally asked. "If I'm here to stop "sword-happy cowpoke" exactly how do I send his sorry ass to hell without any weapons? Cos I tell ya, no way am I gonna try praying him outta here..."

Layla's scowl broke into a slight smile again. Dean still couldn't think outside the box, not even after he'd been shown the "other side." Evil things he killed without question, but believe there was some inherent good lurking unseen in the world? He just wouldn't accept it. "You can kill him here and it would be the equivalent of setting his soul to rest. But as I said..."

"Yeah, I can get canned here too." Dean stepped away from the wooden saloon and ambled into the center of the dusty street. It was still like a dream - a bad one. There were so many unanswered questions. So much he wasn't even sure he trusted. "Tell me this: How the hell does this yahoo get out? I mean God or whoever runs this show never intended for people to go back, right?"

Layla nodded. "He had help from the other side. There was never meant to be a way back, but someone inadvertently opened one..." She moved quietly to Dean's side, abruptly wishing the hunter hadn't been dragged into a mess that may already have cost him his life should he make one wrong move. "He terrorizes Redemption, makes the place more like hell than merely a stopover for those who wish to repent."

Dean shoved his hands in his pockets and wished he hadn't as he felt the lining of his jacket squish with water. He turned to face Layla, still unsure whether he was dreaming or not. "No offence, but why can't the big guy in charge stop this creep? I mean come on, Moses could part a sea, Jesus rose from the grave, and the big boss man can't stop some lifeless bozo escaping the freakin' dead zone?"

"Of course he can," Layla hooked an arm around Dean's and slowly began to guide him towards the two mares he'd seen earlier. "That's where you come in. It's as much part of your destiny as finding Haris..."

Dean pulled back, his brow creasing somewhere between surprise and annoyance. "You know about that yellow-eyed freak too?"

"Like I said, time is relative here. I know and have seen lots of things that have past, and that will be. Intervening, however, in those matters isn't my task..."

Yoda, she's definitely been having lessons from the little guy with the big ego...

Dean inhaled, about to try a different approach when a horse whinnied somewhere behind them.

The pair turned to find the rider watching them from his steed. The eyes that had locked on Dean back at the cemetery sought the young hunter out again, and the horseman fixed his gaze on what hung around Dean's neck.

Dean watched, fascinated as the grey charger paced forward, its hoofs sending tiny dust whirls into the night. He expected the phantom rider to speak, to demand where he had gotten the amulet, but the sandy-haired killer merely looked to the elder Winchester and then to Layla.

Layla stepped back as he drew nearer, knowing the rider recognized her - not as a person, but as an emissary of light, intent on sealing his fate. "Why can't you let the past die with you?" The words came out muffled, a hint of fear clouding the clarity of the statement.

Still the horseman refused to speak. Only his dour expression, complete with scowling, maggot-ridden cheeks gave away his anger.

Gripping the reins of his steed and jerking them to the right, he commanded the pale stallion to turn tightly, and as the ghostly animal moved, he reached down and pulled his all-too-familiar saber from its sheath.

Dean watched, transfixed by the spirit's gall. This thing that in death wore his amulet, had the unwavering disrespect to attack a woman who had done nothing but confront his heinous acts in the real world as well as in the afterlife.

"Hey, why don't you come over here and take your problem up with a guy instead of picking on a defenseless woman?" Dean stepped forward determinedly, even though he had no weapon to fight back with. "Or maybe you're as big a coward dead as you were alive?"

The rider moved in his saddle, abruptly torn as to whom to attack. Both interlopers had dared to enter his world fully intent on banishing him. Did it really matter who he disposed of first? He shook his head, not rising to the bait that Dean had dared to offer up. Layla would be sent back to her own resting place. She deserved that much for meddling in his affairs.

"No!" Dean saw the sword blow coming and knew that even though Layla had technically died already, he couldn't allow it to happen again in Redemption. Maybe it would mean her soul would be lost forever like his mother's. Maybe it meant she would be displaced to some other, darker place, where only the evil normally resided, and he couldn't have that on his conscience. Not after what had happened in Nebraska.

Dean dived forward, putting his own body between the harsh blade and Layla without a second thought.

"Sins of the fathers, Dean. You have to stop him, but if you die here, you die forever..."

The slightly curved saber caught Dean's side just as he dashed in front of the girl and sliced cleanly through flesh and sinew. He grunted, suddenly aware that there was now a piece of metal embedded in his body that shouldn't be there, and that it had actually both entered and exited.

Layla screamed, not from fear for herself, but for her savior. Dean hadn't been brought here to die for her. He was meant for so much more in the real world. Even Roy le Grange had sensed that.

The rider smirked at her anguished cry and expertly withdrew his blade, a scarlet ribbon of blood staining its already tainted metal as he quickly re-sheathed the weapon.

Dean grabbed impulsively at the tear in his body the saber had left behind, and as his hands began to stain red with his own blood, he tumbled forward into the loose dirt on the desert floor.

Hoofs pounded near his head, and the injured hunter forced his body to roll onto his side to look up at his attacker. Pain began to seep through the numbness he had initially felt, but he fought it, needing to keep his eyes focused for as long as his body would allow.

Through gritted teeth he demanded, "Why? Why kill people you don't even know, you bastard?" His eyes clouded and his vision blurred, but he refused to give in to oblivion and let the killer have the satisfaction of seeing him die here until he had an answer. "Did the kids back at the cemetery have something to do with this?"

The rider sat forward in his intricately carved saddle and let his right hand slide to a holster under his grime-coated jacket. He withdrew a six-shooter and cocked it, pointing the barrel down as if he intended to send a silver slug straight into his foe's forehead.

Dean coughed and wondered if he was bringing up blood or just bile. He wanted to look, to see if he was bleeding to death from inside as well as out, but he couldn't, because the weapon now aimed at his skull was as familiar as the amulet that dangled from his enemy's neck.

The Colt, with its carefully carved hilt, seemed to draw the young hunter's attention, mesmerizing his already dazed mind until he couldn't see anything but his father offering up the weapon back in Salvation. "You're the hunter...the hunter Samuel Colt made that gun for back in 1835...You were one of the good guys..."

At Dean's sudden epiphany, the rider hesitated, scowling as if some deep, dark secret had been revealed; a secret that would cost him his soul. After a moment, he pulled back on the hammer and re-holstered the gun without firing. His icy hazel eyes bored into Layla for the briefest of seconds, and then he yanked back on his steed's reins and kicked with his heels until the horse broke into a fast gallop out of town.

As the devilish animal vanished beyond Redemption, Layla dropped to her knees and quickly pulled Dean's head into her lap. She looked down, her eyes darting in panic to the blood now oozing through his t-shirt and jacket.

"Guess I should have told you I never listen to warnings until it's too late. I'm thinkin' that attitude right there is gonna cost me big time today, huh?" Dean swallowed hard and then grunted as Layla pressed a hand over his wound just a little too hard. "Think maybe you could pray for *me* this time?" He winked, some roguish spark still present in his weary mind, but underneath he was afraid: Afraid to leave Sammy to deal with Haris. Afraid that the end had come and gone and he'd never had chance to say goodbye to his little brother.

Tears began to form in Layla's eyes and she brushed a stray lock of his hair away from his forehead. She knew his thoughts, sensed his inner pain. "Don't be afraid, Dean. If you have faith, miracles can happen, remember?"

Dean flinched. His prayers hadn't been answered, had they? Even though he'd kept his promise and prayed, Layla was still here- had still died. But then, maybe you had to have the devote faith Layla had for it to work.

He squeezed her hand and noted how cold she felt. Maybe he did too. "Promise me, if I can't, that you'll watch over Sammy? I'm getting kinda tired..."

Layla nodded, squeezing back reassuringly. "Your brother will be just fine. He has the best guardian angel anyone could wish for..."

Dean squinted, trying not to look into the bright white light that was beckoning at the edge of his distorted, blurred field of vision. "You?" He asked, tiredly, forcing out the words even though it hurt.

Layla shook her head and began to fade away as the brilliant opaline light took over the scene. "Not me," she revealed. "You, Dean..."

Through the burning sting in his side, Dean couldn't stifle one last huff, followed by a quirky smirk. "Sweetheart, *me* an angel? That would be a miracle right there..."

Layla smiled back wanly, remembering a time in a small hotel room when all she'd understood was that Dean had probably cost her her life. She nodded briefly, wanting him to know she appreciated his little witticism, and then was gone, replaced by the vortex of white, sucking him in like some quantum singularity, dragging his soul to some unknown place.

Dean let his head drop and closed his eyes, finally accepting this was the one thing he couldn't fight. Something, someone, called to him repeatedly, and he succumbed, allowing his essence to be transported wherever fate intended.

* * * *

Sam flicked his flashlight across the water's surface for the third time and paused. Something was bobbing in the center of the river that looked like a body floating, hands outstretched, lifeless.

It's nothing. Just some junk in the water and you're letting your imagination run wild.

Sam jogged closer, not allowing the beam of light to move from its target. As he neared, the bobbing material took on even more shape and color, and he realized with a sudden dread that the thing was exactly the same color blue as Dean's jacket.

"DEAN!" Sam shouted repeatedly, until his throat grew hoarse with the cry. But there was no response. There couldn't be, not when Dean was face down in the tumultuously flowing stream where the river forked towards Black Creek.

Sam skidded to a halt at the edge of the embankment and tossed down his light. It was waterproof, but there was no way to hold it *and* Dean once he was in the water.

Thinking before acting, the younger hunter tugged off his khaki jacket and threw it to one side. It might hold him down in the water, and later he might need it to keep Dean warm and dry. *If he's still alive...*

Sam didn't dwell on the thought, and instead took a carefully timed dive into the frothing water. The current didn't appear to be too strong, but he wasn't taking any chances given Dean's current predicament.

As his lanky frame hit the river he noted just how cold the water temperature seemed to be and abruptly wished he could swim faster. He kicked hard against the flow, and within a few strokes had reached his brother's motionless form.

"DEAN!" Sam wrapped an arm around his brother, rolling him until his mouth and nose were clear of the water. He looked pale, lifeless, and his skin was cold and clammy to the touch. *Too long. He's been out here too long...*

Sam kicked hard in the water, keeping one arm carefully around his brother as he towed him back to the embankment. Seconds seemed like hours, and the young hunter couldn't help but wonder if a reaper wasn't watching, waiting somewhere out of sight like it had in Missouri. *I didn't let him die then, I won't now!*

Sam winced, tears welling in his eyes as he pulled Dean's limp body out of the river and realized his hands were covered in blood - Dean's blood. It was happening again, just like in the Impala, just like in Missouri. *My fault. I led him here...*

Dean lying bleeding to death, lungs full of river water, and nothing feeble Sammy could do about it.

“NO!” Sam screamed into the night, even though there was no one to hear his embittered cry.

He slipped a hand to Dean’s neck, feeling desperately for the throb of blood that meant his brother was alive. But as he expected, his fingers met nothing but cold, graying flesh.

Dean wasn’t breathing, and no matter how hard he pressed, Sam couldn’t even find a weak pulse.

Maybe reapers believed in the old adage: “third time pays for all...”

The thought had flashed through the young hunter’s mind before he could stop it, but that didn’t mean it was what he believed. Fate was something you *could* change. People made their own futures, didn’t they? Wasn’t it Dean who had taught him that?

Sam clung on to the notion as he quickly tilted Dean’s head back and pinched his nose, blowing precious air into his brother’s lungs.

Come on, man, cough, choke...hell anything...

Dean still didn’t move. Maybe the injury that had bled so much had already cost him his life, and not the river water. Sam considered pausing from his ministrations just for a second to check, to see with his tear-filled eyes just what damage had been done by the horseman. In the end, though, time was something Dean didn’t have. Lack of oxygen could cause brain death in mere minutes.

How long has it already been?

Sam shook his head, not accepting he was too late, and pulled open Dean’s jacket, placing his huge hands on his brother’s sternum to begin chest compressions.

“DEAN! Are you going to let that evil son of a bitch win this easily?” Sam was shouting, willing his brother to hear him, to come back. If it were possible, he would have stormed the gates of wherever the afterlife held Dean’s spirit captive, and dragged his ass back the hard way. “DEAN!”

The insane thought of slapping his brother across the face came to mind, *anything* to try and force his brain back from its oxygen-deprived stupor. In the end, Sam thought better of it, and instead let a dripping hand again feel for a pulse.

Nothing.

“NO!” Sam glanced around, knowing if a reaper was present he wouldn’t be able to see it, but with his gifts, would he, could he sense it? “If you’re watching, you bastard, my brother isn’t going ANYWHERE!”

There was no real evidence to make Sam think anyone, or indeed anything, was watching, but something to fight against, *anything* gave him something other than death to focus on while he tried to save Dean’s life.

“Dean, I swear to God or whoever is listening, if you don’t come back I’m gonna trade the Impala for a *Honda*.” Sam pressed harder on his brother’s chest, one hand over the other, fingers interlaced for maximum effect. So hard, in fact, that he thought Dean’s ribs might crack under the strain. “Yeah, a Honda, one of those chick wagons that don’t even run on gas. I think you actually have to plug them in and charge them up...”

Sam breathlessly made the jibe, daring Dean to live, to fight back and breathe, and then paused, leaning over his brother’s mouth to blow in two more breaths.

“You put your mouth anywhere near mine after what you ate for dinner I’m gonna puke...” Dean heaved anyway, rolling onto his side as he brought up an unsightly mixture of river water and his lunch. The retching was intermixed with an unhealthy amount of coughing and wheezing, as well as several colorful cuss words that would make any girl blush.

Sam didn’t even hear them.

All that mattered was that Dean was alive. Pale, bleeding, but *alive*. “Dean, just lie back, there’s an ambulance already on the way. I called it when I found the kids in the cemetery...”

A spark of recognition flickered across the elder hunter's eyes, but it was only momentary. The pain in his side and the uncontrollable urge to hack his lungs up was taking all of his undivided attention – that and the memory of paying Redemption an unexpected visit. "I don't need an ambulance. Just get...me back...to the cabin and I'll be fine..." Almost every other word was interspersed with an attack of coughing until Dean wanted to hold his burning chest as well as his dripping side wound.

"Dean!" Sam couldn't help but fuss, trying in vain to stop his almost hypothermic brother from attempting to move. "Dean, you nearly drowned and you're bleeding like a stuck pig! You need medical attention!" As he laid down the law, the younger Winchester gently teased away his brother's soaking wet t-shirt to look at the horseman's handiwork.

From what Sam could tell, the blade had passed straight through muscle and tissue, but thankfully, it looked like it had missed anything vital. *Hopefully*. Sammy was no doctor, although Dean had often insisted he second as one.

"Dude, the only freakin' attention I want is a bottle of whiskey and..." More hacking. "And you can practice your stitching on me...for once something girly you're good at that comes in handy." Dean gave up the sarcasm briefly to roll onto his side again, panting. "Man, I'm friggin' freezing..."

Sam instantly looked around, remembering the jacket he had tossed down before diving into the river. Catching a glimpse of khaki to his left along with the discarded flashlight's beam, he swiftly rose to his feet and retrieved the much needed items. Keeping Dean warm right now was imperative if he wasn't to suffer any ill after-effects.

The younger Winchester gently tugged his brother forward and wrapped the jacket around his shoulders, paying careful heed not to jar him too much because of his wound. "If you won't listen to reason, at least let me get you back to the car and get the heaters on."

Dean nodded, his lower lip quivering only slightly less than his entire body. He slid one hand to press over the gash to his side, and then allowed Sam to pull him gently up using his free arm.

Once he felt reasonably secure in his brother's strong grasp, he took a tentative step forward and realized the Impala may as well be on the moon. "Shit!" Dean stumbled, his legs refusing the commands his brain was sending them. The ambulance had been a good idea after all, but he would never admit that to Sammy.

"Sorry, Dean, but I'm not going to try dragging your ass like this..." Sam couldn't watch his brother suffer because he was too stubborn to accept help. *Man, he's worse than Dad!* Without asking for permission, Sam heaved Dean off his feet and literally tossed him over his shoulder.

The move didn't meet with Dean's approval. "Dude, you already tried breaking my ribs once tonight. Set me down, I can walk, dammit!" The cussing was followed by more hacking.

"Dean, you puke on the back of my shirt and I swear..." Sam couldn't help a small smile. It was good to have Dean back. Even though they'd only been separated minutes, the night's events had made Sam realize just how precious their time together was.

"Sammy...don't you dare say the word Honda!"

Sam chuckled and carefully leaned forward as he reached the Impala's left rear door. Being watchful not to jolt his brother, he let Dean slide slowly down from his shoulder and propped him against the cold frame of the Chevy.

Dean shivered as his wet body touched the car's metalwork, and he suddenly felt grateful as Sam yanked open the door with a grating squeak and lowered him inside. "Coulda parked my butt upfront," he griped somewhat resignedly, his bleary mind still wandering between reality and that other place – the place where Layla still lived on, along with a crazed killer.

Sam ignored the remark and jogged to the trunk, quickly searching out two thick gray blankets that he hastily wrapped around Dean. "You're sure you don't want to see a doctor?" There was concern in the hunter's voice as he watched Dean's unfocused eyes roll upwards and settle on him.

"About as much as I want that Honda..." Dean's voice was thick and slurred, but the mock annoyance was still quite discernable through the fatigue and blood loss. "Just turn up the damn heaters will you?" He shivered, gratefully hugging the coverlets his brother had supplied. "And no playing any of that sissy music just because you have me at a disadvantage..."

* * * *

Cabin just outside Black Creek, Wisconsin **The next morning**

Sam rolled onto his side, his lanky frame curled into a ball in the chair beside his brother's bed. He'd been there all night, carefully watching over Dean until his own weary body had succumbed to sleep.

Sleep, if that's what anyone could call it.

All his fitful slumber had brought were vivid re-enactments of the previous evening, each horrific moment in crystal-clear, nightmare clarity. Dean could have died, almost had, and for what?

Sam wafted with his hand at some unseen foe, a short raspy cry escaping his lips before he realized it was just a dream. Dean was alive, he was here, resting. The younger hunter rapidly sucked in air and bolted upright, recalling that he was on a vigil and should not have allowed his fatigue to get the better of him.

"Dean?" Sam stretched, finding the awkward position he had been lying in had not been kind to his bones. "You awake?"

A muffled huff, followed by a groan of discomfort signaled the injured hunter was stirring and decidedly grouchy. "Dude, you ever try freakin' sleeping with a four alarm headache and a hole in your side? I swear I can still taste the river..."

"A hole you insisted was a flesh wound last night when I wanted to take you to the hospital," Sam pointed out, heading to the nearby coffee pot for a quick dose of caffeine. As he strode across the cabin, he stole a glance at Dean and tried not to let his eyes linger too long.

Sam had seen corpses with more color, but he didn't let that unpleasant fact slip out. Dean would be well aware his little brother was hovering as it was, there was no need to state the obvious.

Dean noted Sam's gaze focus on him just that second too long anyway and grunted his disapproval. "You ask me how I feel and I swear that hunting knife is coming out from under my pillow..." He took a slow breath through gritted teeth and sat up on his elbows, daring to steal a glance at his brother's handiwork. The sword wound had been carefully sutured and dressed, leaving none of the garish injury on view.

"You look like crap." Sam grinned, finally getting the chance to use the jibe Dean was usually so fond of throwing his way.

"I feel worse," Dean admitted, swinging his legs over the bed and earning a scowl from his watchful sibling. "What?" He rolled his eyes, "Can't a guy get some clothes on without being treated like a two-year-old?" He looked longingly at a clean pair of jeans tossed over a chair, but wasn't sure he was ready to venture up to retrieve them. Maybe his boxers and t-shirt would have to do for awhile.

"You should stay in bed today. I can get food and do any legwork." Sam poured out two mugs of black coffee and sauntered over, taking a seat on the bed next to his brother before offering one up. "You went through hell last night..." *We both did.*

Sam waited for a response, but Dean simply took the steaming beverage and gratefully sipped. He didn't even turn to look his brother in the eye. It was as if even the mention of the previous evening was too traumatic to face for the moment.

He gulped down a second mouthful of coffee and finally turned, wincing at the burning in his side. "So, did you deal with the freaky cowpoke from hell? Because the last thing I remember was landing ass first in the river courtesy of his horse." The half-truth came out easily, but then he was adept at that, wasn't he? Even to Sammy.

But then, sometimes lies were better to bear than truths, and Sam wasn't ready to hear the truth. *I died last night, visited Purgatory. Hell, I even met up with Layla. And you know what? She wasn't even bitter I cost her her life. Yeah, Sam, your brother's a dead man walking.* Dean looked to the thick, brown piled carpet in the cabin, because it was better to look anywhere than into Sam's knowing eyes.

Lying to Sam was one thing, but in truth he was lying to himself more. He was pushing away what had happened, trying to pretend it was all some hypoxia-induced vision, but really, he knew better.

Redemption had been real, and according to Layla, he was the only one who could stop the mystery rider from coming back again and again. *The necklace. The Colt.* Dean's head jarred up, and he suddenly wanted, needed Sam to say the rider had been banished. Maybe that would prove his nightmare hadn't been real.

Sam shook his head, destroying any chance of peace for his brother. "I didn't even get to see him. By the time I'd gotten to the cemetery all I found was a cowering kid with a bunch of bodies at her feet. And then..." The young hunter swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as he thought of the icy water, Dean's body bobbing lifelessly atop its frothy surface.

"Yeah, we don't need to go *there*," Dean frowned, clutching at his side as if simple memories amplified the pain, both physical and mental. "So, what about the girl? Is she alive? Can we talk to her? Those kids have got to be the answer to this mess."

"I called the hospital this morning before I fell asleep. They're keeping her in for observation, but at this point the cops won't allow visitors. She's the only witness they have, and right now she's probably screaming all kinds of crazy things they don't want made public." Sam set his mug down and stretched again, wishing now that he'd at least stolen a pillow from his bed to fall asleep on.

Dean nodded, at last making a dive for the elusive jeans. "Yeah, I bet she's spilling buckets of crazy about our rider. The cops will think she's lost it." He managed to get halfway before slumping backwards, only just landing on the edge of the bed with a groan. "Think we should be officers of the law, or maybe the men in white this time?"

Sam scowled, grabbing the jeans and placing them back in his brother's holdall, far too far away to be reached by the incapacitated hunter. "The only thing you'd be taken seriously as is a patient. I'll go talk to the girl, you rest up." Sam delved into his own bag and tugged out a small plastic badge. He flashed the fake hospital tag and grinned, cheeks dimpling. "Dr. Winchester's orders..."

"Dude, I took a swim, I'm not dead!" The words came out before Dean had even realized what he was saying. No sooner had they left his mouth than he clamped his jaw shut and looked away from his brother. *Maybe not, but close enough...*

Sam's brow creased and he had to resist the urge to sit back down. Dean was trying to be Dean, but something was "off," and it wasn't just the near drowning. Dean had been close to death enough times for Sam to know the signs when his brother was brooding, and this was not the same. He was holding something back, something big about what had happened out near Redemption.

"Want to talk about it? Cos man, something is digging at you, I know that look."

Dean's frown didn't waver and he still couldn't look his brother in the eye. He simply remained on the bed, one hand on his injured side in deep thought. "It's nothing," he asserted harshly, making it quite clear the conversation was over.

Sam nodded, scooping up the Impala keys. Dean would spill when he was ready, until then, there was a killer horseman to find. "Tylenol in the first draw," he pointed to the small wooden dresser near Dean's bed. "TV remote's in there too, if you can face Snuggles again..."

Dean's scowl cracked into his trademark impish grin. "Dude, even Snuggles is better than the threat of an imported car..." *He so wouldn't touch a Honda, would he? Hmph, guess they are the kind of wheels a Geekboy uses.* He feigned tossing the remote at Sam and then flopped back onto the plumped pillows his brother had carefully placed there the night before. "Now go, will you, before I regret letting you take my car!"

Sam laughed, quickly exiting the door before Dean tried his Steve McQueen *Great Escape* act on the cabin.

* * * *

Local Medical Center Wisconsin

Sam slammed the Impala's door closed and quickly locked it, taking the time to carefully slide the precious Chevy's keys into his side pocket. Dean would use him for target practice if anything happened to the car again.

Sam smiled wanly as he headed for the hospital's main entrance, his expression turning slightly dourer as the regular smell of antiseptic hit his nostrils. Ambulance sirens blared in the distance, the noise becoming ever clearer as the rig raced towards the medical center. Doctors, nurses all bustled to and fro in the busy reception area.

Sam took a step towards the lobby desk and couldn't help but pause to compose himself. It was so much like that night in Missouri. The night he'd watched Dean hastened away, bleeding, dying. But then, that night Dean's life had at least been in the doctors' hands.

This time it had been different, Dean's life had been in *Sam's* hands, and Sam wasn't sure he was handling the aftermath any better than Dean was. He looked down, noting his huge hands were trembling slightly. *Hands that saved Dean...*

The young Winchester shook himself; realizing people in the lobby had already begun to stare at his somewhat awkward behavior. But then, they hadn't seen the things he had. They hadn't been faced with the gray, lifeless form of their sibling and been the only person around who could make a difference.

"Excuse me, sir? Can I help you?" Sam found himself looking into the eyes of a young receptionist dressed in white garb and with a radiant smile that warmed any heart that encountered it. "You look a little lost?"

Sam nodded, realizing just how out of place his sudden "blank look" must have been. *Probably think I escaped the psyche ward or something...* "I'm Detective John Keel from the Wisconsin State Police. I'm here to see," he checked a small notepad for effect. "Julie Mancini?"

The receptionist tapped a few keys, a flash of recognition crossing her features as she brought up the girl's information. "Oh, from the incident last night," she offered with a shake of her head. "Such a terrible affair. You'd better follow me and I'll take you down to her room. There's a local officer on duty outside. What with all the rumors about some maniac with a sword, well..."

Sam nodded. "I understand. It's just that we think we may have some new information, and anything Julie can tell us might be the turning point of the case."

The receptionist's eyes narrowed and she drew herself closer to Sam before whispering in response. "Some people are even saying this is something supernatural. You know, some kind of ghost." She pulled a face that said she wasn't

sure she believed, her thirty-something features wrinkling with an uncertain scowl. “If you ask me, people around here are just too superstitious...”

Sam grinned. “I’m sure they are ma’am.” He noted a burly cop sitting outside a room in the corridor ahead. “Julie’s room?” He asked, hoping to escape any further questioning.

“Yep, that’s the one. She’s been rambling since they brought her in. I doubt you’ll get much sense out of her.” Sam’s guide shrugged and then spun around, sensing she’d get no scandal to chat about over her coffee break after all. “Let me know if you need anything else...”

Sam watched her retreat back to the lobby and then took a deep breath. Time to reveal the fake doctor’s badge to a cop and hope it worked. It was one of Dean’s better forgeries, and Dean was pretty much a master at the craft, even if he did use some pretty obvious names from the rock world. Thankfully, this time, Sam had chosen the name on the I.D.

As he approached, the bearded deputy looked up from his newspaper and set the local gossip column down. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Doctor Keel. I’m here to see Julie Mancini.”

The deputy looked slowly from Sam’s shoes all the way up to his hair, evaluating the newcomer. “They said the girl’s injuries were minor. And, sonny, you don’t look much like a doc to me.”

Sam’s smiled and flashed the badge. “I’m a psychiatric consultant. After Miss Mancini’s traumatic experience and subsequent bizarre statement, the hospital thought I should evaluate her case before any part of her account can be classed as admissible evidence for you people...”

The cop frowned. He’d heard the girl rambling, hell no, screaming all night. She needed more than some shrink that didn’t look old enough to have passed his degrees. Still, maybe it was all her insurance would pay out for. He jerked a thumb to the unlocked door behind him. “Okay, be my guest. Just don’t expect any coherent answers. This morning she threw the damn bed pan at me...”

Sam nodded; attempting to keep a straight face as he cautiously entered the room. “Julie?” He asked softly. “Do you remember me?” He poked his head around the door first, hoping not to have to dodge any liquid-filled projectiles.

Something huddled on the nearby hospital bed flinched, and as Sam moved closer the girl from the previous evening emerged from beneath the covers where she’d been curled in a fetal position. She looked at Sam almost wild-eyed, a sudden spark of recognition stopping her from screaming at the last minute.

“You were there...you saw what he did. They think I’m crazy. Tried to give me drugs, but I’m not crazy. He’ll come back...”

Sam took slow steps until he was at Julie’s bedside. She looked pale, terrified – almost as bad as Dean had looked back at the cabin. “It’s alright. I believe you.” He held out a hand, and the trembling girl grabbed it, squeezing so hard the hunter could see his fingertips losing their color.

“You’re just telling me that,” Julie countered. “Just leading me on like they all do. They don’t believe what me and the others did was real...”

Sam pulled out a small plastic hospital chair that was far too small for his gangly frame and settled down next to Julie. “Exactly what *did* you do?” He questioned soothingly. “Start from the beginning. I need to know everything.”

Julie’s gaze darted to the door as if she didn’t trust the deputy. Once her paranoia was satiated, she began her painful narrative. “We used to go out to the old ghost town to mess around, have a few beers, make out, ya know?”

Sam nodded, knowingly. “Who is ‘we’, Julie?”

“Me, my room mate and both our boyfriends. It was cool. One night we were a little drunk and we found the cemetery out there. Man, you know how many old bones are still in that place? Close to the surface too...” Julie’s eyes turned glassy and then began to water as she attempted in vain to stifle a bout of tears.

“You dug some of them up?” Sam prompted, leaning closer to hear the girl’s almost muted voice.

Julie rubbed moisture from her face and nodded. “My boyfriend, Dave, thought it would be so cool if we tried out this spell, or incantation or something he’d found in a book he was studying. It was just a joke, just a prank. I mean...”

“But after you’d completed the spell the rider appeared, didn’t he?” Sam could see a pattern now. The exact pattern he’d suspected.

“Yes, and even then we didn’t accept what we’d done. Dave actually thought he could control the damn thing, at least until the killings on the highway started.” Julie’s pupils widened until her eyes appeared almost black – demon-like, but it was merely shock. “We went back last night. We tried to undo what we’d done, but there’s no stopping him now...he killed us. He killed us all...”

“Shush, he didn’t kill you, Julie. You’re safe now. I won’t let anything happen to you.” Sam’s puppy-like expression seemed to calm the girl and she let her back fall onto her pillows dejectedly. “The bones,” he queried carefully, “are the bones still out in the cemetery?”

Julie gulped, taking a sip from a glass of water as Sam offered it. “Yes, the grave is open, if you can call it a grave after all this time. There was no name. It was weird there was a marker on it, though...” She took another sip and then a memory from the night before hit her. “You were looking for someone, but the rider took him. Did you ever..?”

Sam at last broke into a smile. “Yes, I found my brother and he’s alive, just like you. This spirit doesn’t get to kill everyone, okay? Fighters like you and Dean get to live another day.”

Julie meekly bobbed her head, but somehow, from her face, Sam got the feeling she didn’t think the rider had done with her, or Dean.

* * * *

Cabin just outside Black Creek, Wisconsin Some time later...

Sam slipped through the cabin door stealthily, hoping against hope that his brother had fallen to sleep while he’d been gone.

The hunter smiled and gently put down the Impala’s keys at the sight of Dean, half under the duvet, fitfully snoring so loudly he sounded like a JCB. Every now and then, the injured hunter started in his slumber, his eyes darting rapidly to and fro under his eyelids as if he were recalling some past and very traumatic event. His body jerked convulsively and then he was still again.

He’s reliving last night. The smile quickly faded from Sam’s features and he moved closer, contemplating nudging his brother to free him from the evil clutches of the nightmare.

Once at the side of the bed, Sam noted a thin line of perspiration across Dean’s temple, along with the fact that his features looked flushed as if he’d been out for a jog. Concerned, the younger Winchester reached out with his palm to feel his brother’s brow, only to have it slapped away when said brother’s eyes snapped open.

“Dude, can you not creep up on me like that when I’m sleeping. What are you, part freakin’ Jedi?” Dean rolled over, huffing as he pulled his body upright on the bed. On any other occasion he would have been too alert to let anyone skulk around his room, even while he was sleeping, and right now he was more upset by his own inaction than he was with Sam.

“I wasn’t creeping around,” Sam rolled his eyes. “I was just...” Words failed him. No way could he admit to checking up on big bro, Dean would freak if he thought Sammy considered him weak or sick...or disturbed by what had happened to him.

"You *were* creeping up on me, Sammy." Dean feigned a smirk and moved to sit on the nearby chair, just to prove he was more mobile than he had been earlier. "So, did you find anything out from the girl at the hospital?"

Despite his brother's renewed energy, Sam couldn't help but notice yet more unnatural color to Dean's cheeks and a new line of sweat forming down the back of his t-shirt. *He should still be in bed.* "Julie and her friends had been using the old ghost town as a place to hang out," he conceded. "One night they decided to play around with some kind of invocation for a joke..."

"Only their little hocus pocus spell worked and scared the crap outta them?"

Sam nodded. "The rider appeared and started his killing spree. The kids were trying to stop him last night, but whatever they did obviously had no effect." He tossed his notepad on the cabin table. "The good news is, our rider's bones are all dug up and waiting for us out at the cemetery. I figure I can just go salt and burn them while you rest up some more. Case closed..."

Dean bit his lip, one hand wringing the other as he determined what to say next. He hadn't planned on telling Sammy what he'd seen – not yet – but this changed things. "Salt won't work," he finally exclaimed, knowingly. "This is different to anything we've ever faced before. It's personal..."

Sam slumped onto the aging wooden chair next to his brother and shook his head with a confused frown. "What? Man, how can you know the salt won't work? There's something you're not telling me about last night, isn't there? Something about the rider?"

Dean cleared his throat, but his voice still came out low and husky. "The hole in my side? I didn't get that *before* I fell in the river. I got it after, in Redemption..."

Sam looked even more perplexed. "Dean, there's nothing left of Redemption, and even if there was you were in the water until I pulled you out. He must have stuck you before. You're just not thinking straight..."

Dean slammed a fist down on the table unexpectedly, making his brother flinch, and the dirty mugs from their morning beverage jangle with the harsh vibration. "I was there, Sam. After I *died*, or whatever you want to call it. The rider was there too. It's some version of Purgatory, except this bastard found a way out!"

Sam gaped. Of all the things he'd expected to be on Dean's mind; this was not one of them. "You think you died and saw the dude on the other side? Do you know how crazy that sounds, even for us?" He lowered his slightly raised voice just a touch. "Look, I hate to suggest this, but maybe your mind played tricks on you. I don't know how long you were in the water. Lack of oxygen can make anyone believe some pretty weird stuff."

"Dude! I know what I freakin' saw!" Dean stifled the urge to slam the table again, and only because the quick movement jarred his throbbing side. "It wasn't a dream, it was real." *Better not tell him about Layla or he'll think I'm ready for Roosevelt.* "We have to find this rider. Find out why he'd be in Purgatory."

"Why?" Sam's question couldn't have been simpler. "What does it matter what he did in a past life? If we could just burn the bones, job done, what would it matter?"

"First, I already told you, burning and salting this sucker won't work. Don't ask me how I know, I just do. Secondly, like I said, this is personal." Dean's eyes dropped to the carpet once more. "Remember Dad talking about the hunter Samuel Colt made the six-shooter for? Well, Sammy, this is the guy. Over in his world he still has it. I'd recognize that thing anywhere."

"This guy was once one of us?" For a moment, Sam forgot how incredulous his brother's story sounded and instead was taken aback by the information he was being fed. "If he was one of the good guys, why would he start killing in the afterlife? For that matter, why would he even be in Purgatory?"

"That," Dean smiled, "is why I have you, Geekboy. We need to find out town records for Redemption. Anything weird or out of the ordinary that happened there. The rider is bound to the place. There has to be a connection." *Don't tell him about*

the necklace. That's just too whacked to be believable on top of everything else. Except I know what I saw...

Sam obediently grabbed the laptop, but his unenthusiastic expression spoke volumes. He was still skeptical that Dean had seen *anything*. "You do realize any information that far back will probably be in the Black Creek town records office? I doubt there will be anything of use online, but..." He plugged the machine into his PDA anyway and prayed for a connection. After a moment, his long fingers began tapping anyway at the keyboard, signaling that he had found something. "Interesting..."

"What?" Dean leaned over, too impatient to wait for a reply.

Sam continued anyway. "Looks like Black Creek has a historical website for Redemption. It's run by a local guy named Arthur Gamble." The hunter's eyes raced across the screen, speed-reading all the data that kept popping up at his command. "Gamble had a great, great grandfather that lived in the cowboy town and that's why its history intrigued him enough to start the site..."

"Arty?" Dean mouthed the name, thinking of the old-timer who had pulled him from the swirling river water.

"Yeah, how did you..?" Sam inhaled, realizing the answer for himself. He read on, not wanting to fuel the fire that was already consuming his brother from within. "Apparently, the only thing noteworthy about the town was a hanging. Some guy named Emmanuel Claviger was tried, convicted and hanged for murder back in 1865."

Something nagged at the back of Dean's mind and after a second he realized it was something their host had said. "Didn't Hank say something bad happened and the town was never the same? Sammy, I think this is what we're looking for. Is there any more information on Claviger? What he was convicted of, who was involved?"

"Sam clicked on the "read more" option and was surprised to see several tin type photographs of the old western town. From the layout he could picture in his mind exactly where he'd been standing the previous evening in relation to the images, and it intrigued him. The building, whose remains had seemingly called out to him, had in fact been the structure that had doubled as both the Sheriff's office, holding cells, and court house.

"Claviger was an out-of-towner convicted of killing a farmer." One of Sam's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Get this, Judge Ernest Winter refused leniency even though the defendant was clearly quite mad, insisting his victim was in fact some kind of skinwalker who had killed Claviger's wife, leaving him with two young children to bring up. The judge said skinwalkers were some heathen Indian superstition and if Claviger believed in them he must be a heathen too..."

"Wasn't one of the rider's victim's names Winter?" Dean rose carefully from his seat, intent on pulling on his clean jeans while they talked. He had no intention of staying in the cabin again after their fact-finding mission was over. "Claviger sounds familiar too, I just can't put my finger on where from..."

Sam scowled as his brother teetered while attempting to tug on his jeans, and then nodded. "Winter and his wife were killed on Breach Lane three weeks ago. Looks like our rider might be out for revenge against the descendants of the people who convicted him. Think the guy he killed back then was really a skinwalker?"

Dean shrugged, panting as he finally flopped back on the chair, red-faced, but dressed. "Who knows? You have to wonder about the irony, though, huh? A hunter, losing his wife, left behind with two kids..."

"All this story lacks is a demon," Sam confessed, clicking on more keys.

"Dude, just don't even freakin' go there!" *My necklace, this freak has my necklace, for all we know maybe the demon was involved in all this too. I can't tell Sammy, he's not ready. Hell, I'm not ready for this.* "Gotta love the friggin' irony that we've ended up dealing with this," he barked somewhat testily. "I think he was the first of our kind,

and somehow hunters gotta deal with their fellow hunters when they turn bad, even on the other side..." *Sins of the fathers...*

"Dean, that's a stretch, and you know it. We didn't get summoned here by some divine force, we chose this gig." *Then why did I get that sense of foreboding out at the ghost town last night? Why did it feel wrong?* Sam ignored the thought. "We chose the gig, we found the bad guy, and now we have to send his butt back to hell, or wherever."

Dean shook his head scathingly. "You really think us getting a gig that involving the Colt could be coincidence? I mean, really, Sammy?" The hunter huffed, but reluctantly agreed with his brother about one thing. "Okay, so, coincidence or not, how are we gonna kill this sonofabitch?"

"You're sure burning the bones won't work?"

"I'm sure, little brother. This thing is...hell, I don't know what he is, but he's going down." Dean let a hand fall to his side, but dare not get close to the wound. The pain was almost unbearable now, and he had a good idea what that meant – he'd felt the sensation before. Of course, no way was Sammy going to be burdened with that. "Look, one thing we do know is that the kids opened up some kind of gateway to Purgatory, and this dude can travel back and forth as he pleases, right?"

Sam's eyes narrowed and his dimples vanished, signaling he was more than dubious about any kind of gateway or Purgatory, but he didn't voice his concerns. "According to you, but how does that help?"

"The freak can't die here easily, but in his world, in Redemption, I just happen to know his ass can be grass as easily as that." Dean clicked his fingers together for effect and smirked, little realizing the implications of his statement.

"I'm not even sure I want to know how you're so certain." Sam closed the laptop and stared his brother right in the eyes. Eyes that still looked bleary and half-focused. What was worse, the sheen of sweat on Dean's brow had grown until he almost looked like he'd just stepped from the shower. "The thing that worries me most is what you might actually be suggesting. Even if you're right, what are you going to do, throw yourself back in the river again to get back to his world, to his plain of existence on the other side? Because, man, if that's what you're suggesting I'm gonna tie you to that bed right now!"

Dean's eyes glistened. "Whoa, I'm all for bondage, you know that, but, dude, I prefer a girl..." When Sam didn't see the funny side he took a deep breath and nodded, becoming more serious. "Maybe I can cross over without all the theatrics this time. I've died once, been there once. Hell, maybe even this thing will help." He gently fondled the amulet around his neck. They never really had discovered its purpose, its destiny.

"So, if this place exists, and you *do* have an open invitation, how do we find it?" Sam raised a brow questioningly. "It's not like we can just ride on into Redemption like a drive in movie." His eyes narrowed. "Besides, you're not going back there..." *He's still sick, but even if he wasn't, I can't let him willingly offer himself up like that.*

Sam leaned back on his chair and crossed his arms defiantly, knowing the argument that would follow his statement. Dean would walk into hell without any regard for himself, and heck, Sam had let him do it far too many times. But this, this was something even scarier. What if Dean really had clinically died just for a few moments? What if he had been privy to some bizarre glimpse of where souls journeyed when they sought to be cleansed of their transgressions? Worse still, what if Dean tried to go back and catch the rider there, only to never return?

Maybe Sam was being selfish, but no matter how hard he looked at his brother's reasoning, he couldn't, wouldn't readily allow Dean anywhere near Breach Lane or the ghost town.

Dean knew it too. "That sounded just a little bit too much like one of Dad's orders, Sammy, and believe me, trying to mimic the old man doesn't become you." Dean's left brow quirked upwards and he offered up a half-hearted smile, but it was easily

apparent his brother's tone had irritated him. "Course, I seem to be growing out of following orders lately anyway..."

"Dean! You're not even strong enough to drive the car, let alone walk out there and face this thing, even if you can find it!" Sam jumped to his feet and snatched up the jangling bunch of Chevy keys before Dean could even draw another slightly ragged breath. He hovered near the cabin door, his heart racing as he had to confront his own brother in a very unwelcome standoff.

Dean nodded, but forced his aching body up from the chair. The "cocky smirk" appeared and he snatched his favorite .45 from the table beside his bed. "I sure as hell hope you picked up those keys to drive us out to Redemption, Sammy, because hurt or not, I'll go right on through you if you make me. This bastard isn't killing anymore innocent people tonight..."

Sins of the father...

Sam's lip ticked up in one corner as if he were unsure how to answer. The cabin was filled with an unwelcome silence as each brother refused to diffuse the moment. Dean intended to catch Claviger and send him back to hell. Sam fully intended watching his sibling's back no matter what. It was a clash of wills, and Winchesters never yielded easily. Even Haris had learned that the hard way.

"Dean, you're sick," Sam was the first to break the awkward moment. "What if the rider *is* there? You're in no shape to fight him, let alone try following him back to this ghost town." The younger brother shook his head cynically.

Dean grabbed his jacket from a hook on the back of the door and then slapped Sam lightly on the back, attempting to lighten the mood and make good his escape. "That's what I have you for, isn't it? I mean, every hero has a sidekick to save his ass, right?"

Sam turned, knowing he'd lost the battle of wills, as always, even if Dean did still look half dead. "Yeah, well just don't expect seeing me in Lycra anytime soon, okay?" He shot his brother a look that said he was still totally unhappy with the situation, but scooped up his own Glock before trudging out to the Impala, keys still in hand.

* * * *

Breach Lane Sometime Later...

Sam cut off the Chevy's grumbling engine and shot a glance over as Dean checked the clip of his weapon. The elder hunter still looked flushed; the tiny pearls of sweat welling on his forehead signaling he probably had a temperature.

"Man, you look like you're burning up..." Sam reached out to feel his brother's brow, and even though his palm was unceremoniously wafted away, he could still feel the heat radiating from Dean's injured body. "We should have checked your side before we left..."

Dean shrugged, pushing off the sudden attention and hiding the fact that he didn't need to check. He already knew something was wrong. Hell, he'd had infected wounds enough times to recognize the agonizing pain they caused. But there was no time to bother about that until Claviger had been put to rest. He could handle a little discomfort, and besides, some veiled part of him wondered if being ill might actually help him cross back over to his nemesis's world.

"I'll live," Dean exhaled as he spoke, stuffing his .45 into his waistband away from his wound. "Now can we just get on with this? I think I have a growing aversion to being in this cowpoke town after sundown. Trust me, the saloons are way overrated in John Wayne movies."

"Yeah?" Sam grinned, popping the trunk to grab a rock salt-filled Remington. "And here I was thinking I'd missed out on all the fun. Those saloon brawls always looked

pretty cool on TV.” He grabbed some spare shells and then slammed the trunk closed again. “I was more a Clint Eastwood fan myself, though.”

Dean shook his head as he began to carefully walk in the direction of the abandoned Redemption cemetery. “The words ‘pig sty’ would be a kindness. I swear none of the dudes in that place ever heard of washing, let alone taking a bath.”

Sam jogged to catch up his brother and was quick to notice just how tentative each of Dean’s steps were. Dean was hurting, big time. “Actually, sounds like you fit right into the place,” he countered, testing just how “on form” his brother was. *If he doesn’t snark back, he’s as sick as he looks...*

Dean paused, but didn’t respond to the perfectly timed jibe. Instead, he shot the wooden grave markers up ahead a glance and then began ambling towards the river’s edge as if he had all day. The pain in his side was intensifying, and he was starting to feel giddy. *Better find Redemption and fast.* “See anything?” he asked, not really expecting Sam would.

“Nope, just a few yellow police markers that weren’t here before.” Sam kneeled, taking his eyes from his brother for a second to check out fresh hoof prints in the already churned up dirt at his feet. “These are recent, though, and they head straight towards the river. Looks like our guy has been back...” He looked up to see Dean already trudging after the tracks. “Dean?”

Dean didn’t respond. Instead, he kept his blurring vision focused on the river bank. His world was distorted, spinning, and his balance was off, but still he could see what Sam could not.

The river, or rather its edge nearest the old cemetery, was the key. This was where the rider emerged from Redemption, and this was where he returned after his killing sprees.

The hunter forced his aching body forward, left hand outstretched at the sight of the strange portal that led to some other temporal plain of existence. Dean had almost expected some version of TV’s *Time Tunnel*, but the gateway to Purgatory simply looked like the landscape before him had been distorted somehow, its edges rippling and pulsing until he could see a different world beyond.

“I see it, Sam...” Dean tried to turn, to point out the threshold to Redemption, but his dragging feet merely skidded in the thick mud, and he stumbled, landing hands first in the slurry. The hunter rolled, desperate now to reach the ghost town before he passed out, but every breath was an effort, every move an intolerable agony to his side.

“Dean!” Sam ran so fast his own feet slid in the thick sludge at the water’s edge. He let his knees buckle on purpose, his gangly frame sliding to a halt at the side of his feverish brother in the wet earth. “Dean!”

“Sammy...I have to go back...” Dean didn’t appear to hear Sam’s words. He reached out instead with his right hand to the thing only he could see, pleading some unknown force, energy, power to take him back into the realm of the dead.

“Dean?” Sam’s voice came out a muted whimper. He shook his brother’s limp form, but Dean didn’t respond. His eyelids fluttered slowly closed and his body sagged in Sam’s arms.

Panicking, Sam tugged up the elder hunter’s t-shirt and reached out to tentatively touch the dressing he had so carefully applied. He recoiled at the sight of the bloodied, puss-filled gauze and blamed himself once again for not checking sooner. *Infections can kill. Blood poisoning...he already has a high temperature...*

* * * *

Redemption was quiet, too quiet. Dean had never seen the place so desolate. It actually looked like a *ghost town*, tumbleweed blowing indiscriminately across the sandy ground in abundance. Still, despite the silence, the emptiness, Dean knew that somewhere, Claviger was waiting.

Dean hadn't been allowed back over for a picnic. He was here because fate, the forces of good, or whoever ultimately controlled the universe, deemed it so.

Great, I'm the best the good guys got? Shit, they so need to get a life...

The hunter considered his words and wondered if cussing was even supposed to be allowed in Purgatory. The place was a haven for souls intent on repenting sins committed during life, after all.

"Redemption isn't really about language, or past transgressions, Dean..." Dean looked up to the nearest storefront to see Layla, arms folded, watching him intently. "Usually people come here because they *want* to. They need to feel worthy before..."

The elder Winchester nodded. "You can say 'it.' I'm not going to freak out if you believe there's a God watching over you." He shrugged, "Course, it doesn't mean I have to believe."

Layla stepped down from the wooden decking and joined the hunter in the center of the abandoned street. Wisps of her hair blew in a slight breeze that seemed to blow in from the west. She brushed them absently to one side. "You have faith, Dean, you just don't know it."

Dean's eyes narrowed, unsure how to take the comment, and he abruptly realized the pain in his side had dulled to a throb. *Guess I get a little leeway here in the dead zone.* He glanced down anyway, remembering the .45 he had brought with him.

The silver weapon glinted in the early morning light, and he tugged it from his waistband, remembering Claviger and the task he was here to complete. Somehow though, it just seemed wrong here. A modern weapon in an age-old town. A town that didn't even really exist.

"Guess I should have brought something a little more suitable along," he conceded, thinking of the Colt the rider wielded. "An automatic isn't exactly fair against a six-shooter..."

"Sonny, guns aren't exactly allowed here anyway. 'Tis against the rules!" Arty emerged from seemingly nowhere and rubbed at his grizzled features. "Course, that son of a gun who calls himself a hunter been using one since he got here, but that don't make it right..."

Dean couldn't resist a grin. Arty was just so picture-perfect for a Western movie it was unreal. He was the only thing that the movies apparently got right about the genre. "If guns aren't allowed, how come that freaky son of a bitch gets to keep his Colt? He sneak it in under his halo?" Dean rolled his eyes. "Wait, your halos kinda slipped, right? Guess he must have full on Houdini'd that sucker in here..."

"Houdi...say what?" Arty grimaced. "Son, you been drinking this early in the day? Cos it ain't healthy, ya know?"

"It's alright; he's here to deal with the rider." Layla patted the old man's arm and he flinched at her touch. His pupils shrank and he seemed almost submissive in her presence.

Arty knew Layla wasn't like the rest of the townsfolk, but then again, neither was the young man he'd fished from the river. No one was meant to go back, but Winchester had defied the odds and left Purgatory once. Maybe he would again.

"Seen him this morning, riding that hellion steed of his. More blood on his hands too, by the looks of things." Arty bobbed his head towards the far side of Redemption, near the holding cells and Sheriff's office. "He's out on the edge of town, and he's waiting..." The old-timer seemed suddenly not to want to talk, despite his usual garrulous personality, and he scurried into the nearest store, carefully closing the door behind him as the rusty bell above tinkled, sounding his arrival.

"I guess it's time..." Dean swallowed, lines from Bon Jovi's *Dyin' Ain't Much Of A Livin'* racing through his brain. *Damn, I knew watching "Young Guns" when we were kids was so not a cool idea.*

*Dyin aint much of a livin
When youre livin on the run*

*Dyin ain't much of a livin for the young
Is it too late to ask for forgiveness
For the things that I have done
Dyin aint much of a livin for the young*

Layla nodded. "He will be waiting for you. He knows you're coming. It ends here, now, forever..."

Dean let his eyes fall to the gun in his hand. He wasn't afraid to face off Claviger and risk his life. He'd been a great shot from the very first day his dad had taken him shooting. But still, taking a life, even here, in the hereafter, it didn't seem right. He wanted, needed to know more about this stranger to whom he felt such a strong connection. There were so few answers, and the only person who could give them brandished *the* Colt and was less than talkative.

"You already know what's going to happen, don't you?" Dean eyed Layla, but she showed no reaction. But then, that was her job now.

"I know that things will take their course as fate has ordained them, yes."

Dean sensed a reluctance to answer, just as he'd expected. He smiled, still liking the no-nonsense girl who had tamed him in Nebraska. "And does this quirky ol' fate happen to know how I'm gonna get a mile or so out to our freaky friend with a sword? Cos, sweetheart, I ain't walking."

"You could always 'borrow' a horse." It was Layla's turn to smile waywardly. "I hear you're pretty good at boosting rides, although your credit card scams won't work here."

Dean let his eyes roll skywards, his trademark cheeky, mirthful expression spreading across his features. "Lady, the only horsepower I know about has Chevy emblazoned on it. I wouldn't know *Champion the Wonder Horse* from the freakin' Donkey in *Shrek!*"

Layla held out a hand to a pure white mare tied in front of the saloon. The horse seemed docile to the point of lethargy. "That's the front end," she joked, pointing to the animal's head.

"Man, you gotta be kiddin' me, right? The freakin' bad guy has the charger from hell and I get Grandma's Sunday ride?" He eyed the mare, abruptly becoming aware of the irony of the animal's color. "Glad I got the white one," he muttered under his breath, meaning more than simple color choice.

"I thought you didn't believe in any of that? You sure you've never read the Bible, Dean?" Layla's lips quirked up in amusement.

"There came a Pale Horse, and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto him over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death." Dean quoted Revelations perfectly, surprising even Layla. "It's my job to know this stuff, remember? I felt the sword part of that freak first hand. Doesn't mean I have to believe he's some apocalyptic omen, though." He shrugged and smirked when his biblical knowledge was questioned. "Besides, I saw the kick-ass Eastwood movie..."

"Some might think of Claviger as an omen of the apocalypse, yes. He was once a good man, now turned so inherently evil he is hard to destroy." Layla's eyes grew sad and she turned away, not wanting to even think about the evil that would still roam the earth if good was triumphant in Redemption. Evil that Haris had conjured since the dawn of time. "You're the balance, Dean. You're the one who can stop Claviger's reign of death here and in the real world. Trust your instincts and if nothing else, have *faith* in yourself..."

"There's that word again." Dean shot a sideways glance to the girl but headed for the horse anyway.

The animal turned its head as he neared, its ears bristling attentively to his soft footfalls. As he drew closer, the mare snorted, but didn't move.

Gimme a motorbike, anything that doesn't have a mind of its own that can toss my ass. "Whoa there," Dean gently patted the horse's mane, offering the beady eyes that watched his movements a smile, even though he was suddenly more scared of the mare than he was of Claviger. "You toss my ass; I'll make sure you find your way to heaven's version of a glue factory..."

The mare remained impassive, letting the rookie rider put a foot in the ornate stirrup that dangled from its saddle without moving. If it had understood the sarcastic quip, it was obviously waiting until later for equine revenge.

Dean took the lack of movement as a good sign, and quickly swung up onto the horse's back. "Next time, Sammy gets flung in the river and gets to play horsy." He gathered the reins and carefully tugged, hoping he was giving the animal the right commands. "Jeez, I'll never bad mouth a Honda again," he muttered through gritted teeth as his mount began to trot even though he hadn't directed it.

Riding this thing gives the phrase 'bear with a sore ass' a whole new depth...

* * * *

Sam faltered only for a second after his brother's collapse. Dean needed more help than he could give, but he wouldn't want to go to hospital. The presence of a garish, infected sword wound would bring up questions that could easily end up involving the local police. Not something the Winchesters wanted with their track record.

Still, Sam knew that this time his ministrations alone wouldn't work.

"Just hold on, Dean..." *What if he was right? What if he really can go back and face off the rider. What happens if he dies there..?* Sam slid a hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell. He rapidly thumbed through his phone book until he found the little-used number he was looking for. Maybe being in Wisconsin was an actual Godsend, after all. While he waited for the ring tone, he pulled his brother's jacket back around his quivering body. "Stay with me, man..."

After several rings, an answering machine kicked in. "Hi, I can't get to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number, I'll get right back to you..."

Sam grimaced, biting his bottom lip so hard he tasted the iron tang of his own blood. He had to get Dean back into the land of the living and fast, before the diehard hunter possibly met his match in hell, or wherever Redemption really was.

"I'll call on the way back to the cabin," he spoke to no one in particular as he heaved Dean's frame over his shoulder for the second time in a week. "Maybe she'll be home by then..." *Maybe or maybe saying it just makes me feel better. Maybe hearing my own voice, any voice is better than the silence, because Dean is never this quiet unless he's gagged, or sick as hell.*

"Maybe;" such a small word, but one that meant so much right now.

* * * *

Dean didn't like the way his journey was taking on a life all of its own. The mare had promptly decided to kick into a full-on sprint the moment they'd passed the Sheriff's place and he was now finding it hard to even stay in the saddle. The bouncing motion of the animal was almost nauseating, but that was only half of it.

Dean hated not being in control of his ride. It was why he hated flying, and it was now the number one reason why he never wanted to see another horse in his life. "Whoa there, Silver, what did Layla stick me with, a freakin' horse with a control freak complex?" He tugged back on the reins, but the bit tightening in the mare's mouth did little to slow its gait. "I swear you are so dog food after we finish this gig..."

Dean grimaced. *Dude, I'm talkin' to this whacked out animal... So gotta get a grip...must be the fever...*

The horse whinnied and shook its head, abruptly slowing as it drew closer to a rocky incline – the perfect spot for an ambush.

Dean gathered himself and took a deep breath. Layla was right. There were things here he didn't understand, and perhaps a little faith was the only thing he could trust in. Now that the only other steadfast thing in his life, Sammy was missing, he needed something to hold on to. Something to trust. *Yeah, but a freakin' horse for cryin' out loud?*

But then, this was no ordinary horse. Layla had offered it up expressly for his use, and the animal did seem to know exactly where it was going without his pathetic attempts at giving it instructions.

"Nice horse, hunter...looks like Grandma's Sunday ride..."

Dean whirled in the saddle, the sudden jerking motion bringing a twinge to his injured side. Behind him, the rider had appeared from nowhere and was sitting calmly on his pale steed, his comment echoing Dean's from only moments earlier in some bizarre replay of words.

"Yeah, well appearances can be deceptive. This baby has more under the hood than you might think..." Dean tugged at the reins and the mare responded perfectly, spinning around so that she was facing the grey stallion and its evil owner.

The rider glanced at his foe's horse and smirked until the decaying flesh on his face cracked, allowing more maggots to burst into view. "You want to kill me..."

"Dude, you're already dead. I just want to send your ass to hell where it belongs. Just because you once fought the bad guys doesn't give you the right to run riot - here, or in the real world." Dean sat forward, sensing the mare was restless, ready to take flight. "Why? Why cross back over and kill innocent people? Why blame them for your mistake?"

Claviger huffed, the vile stench of putrefying flesh oozing from his lips. "All my life I killed bad things. Then one of them took my wife, took my life away in an instant. I followed it, was sure I had the right man..."

"But you were wrong, weren't you?" Dean demanded, anger making the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. "You killed an innocent, that's why you came to Purgatory before crossing over. But you didn't repent, did you? All that hatred just festered until all you could think about was revenge, on anyone, or anything..."

"You speak to me of revenge? *You?* You think I don't know your family, boy? I know all about them. How could I not?" Claviger pulled open his jacket to reveal the amulet. "You want revenge for your mother, for Jess..." He shook his head, suddenly becoming saddened. "You and I are so much alike it hurts."

"Except I don't kill innocent people. I send evil suckers like you to hell." While he talked, Dean couldn't take his eyes from Claviger's ghostly version of the necklace. How did the dead cowboy know so much about him? Why did he have the amulet? Questions, so many questions, but he wasn't about to beg for answers.

"Evil, such a relative word, Dean. And didn't you once say there's nothing you wouldn't do for your family? Careful what you preach, Dean. You have no idea what lengths you will go to. I've been there, I know..." Claviger stared at the silver automatic tucked into his opponent's waistband warily as he spat out his unhealthy diatribe. Even in the afterlife, he was aware of the power it wielded, and secretly, he feared it.

"Who are you? Who are you really?" Dean couldn't hold back any longer. He didn't expect a reply, at least, not a truthful one, but before the ultimate showdown came, he had to try. "The necklace..."

Claviger laughed, his left cheek splitting wider until pure white bone was visible. "It belonged to my family. Call it an heirloom from my mother's side, passed along for generations. As for who I am? Maybe you'll learn one day, if you don't die here in Redemption." He glanced past the rocky incline to which they were so close, and beyond, to a small tree atop a hill. "It's time, Winchester, but I'll have no pleasure in killing you. I want you to know that..."

The rider dug his heels into the dapple gray's side and the animal reared, its hind legs carrying its full weight for seconds before the horse darted up the grassy knoll.

Dean licked his lips and watched as the ghost rider sped towards the gnarled oak that had taken Claviger's life so many years ago. Even from this distance, the young hunter could still see the fraying noose hanging from the branches. *Strange they didn't build a gallows. Too many movies...I've seen too many movies...*

Dean kicked the white mare's sides gently, and before he even tried to guide the animal it broke into a gallop after Claviger's steed. Amazingly, the mare proved just as swift and agile as the horse it chased, and once again Dean struggled to remain in the saddle.

As the animal reached the summit of the grassy hilltop it slowed mercifully enough for the elder Winchester to slide from the saddle onto the earth beneath the oak tree. The horse continued on its way, only stopping when it had distanced itself from the grey stallion.

A few yards from the oak, Claviger waited patiently, somehow needing the showdown to take place where he had drawn his last breath.

Dean looked up as the shadow of the noose played across the nearby tree's bark, swinging as if Claviger was still dangling from it and he couldn't help but feel pity. Claviger had been insane with rage, with a desire for revenge for his wife. *Just like Dad...* He hadn't been thinking straight, and it had cost not only an innocent's life, but ultimately his own too. *Could Dad ever get so twisted? Could I?*

Claviger had crossed over a fine line, one that the Winchesters walked every day, and Dean knew it. But still, it was no use offering forgiveness, Purgatory had given him that chance, and instead Claviger had turned to his back on what he had once held dear. *Talk about turning to the dark side...*

"You hate me because you see in me what you may one day become..." Claviger's hand rested at the side of his holster, hovering, poised for action.

"Dude, I'd shoot myself first." Dean shrugged and then grinned. "Well, maybe just in the foot." He looked down, wondering if the .45 would be as easy to draw from his waistband as the rider's weapon would be from its side holster. *Guess I'll soon find out.*

"You mock what you don't understand..."

Dean nodded, slowly moving so that he was facing off Claviger in the traditional stance of two gunfighters. "So enlighten me. Who the hell are you? You're not just some spook off the street. I was brought here to face you for a reason..."

Claviger flexed his black-gloved fingers until they cracked, wanting, needing the extra dexterity for his draw. He let seconds tick by, not a sound permeating the strange world they inhabited somewhere in space and time.

Eventually, the hazel eyed cowboy inhaled with a sarcastic smirk that equaled any Dean could muster. "Why don't you ask *your mother?*" he offered cryptically. "Oh, but then, you can't can you? Not unless I kill you..." Claviger's hand slid the Colt from its holster before he'd even finished the caustic and intentionally obscure jibe.

The engraved weapon cleared its leather pouch in vivid slow motion, and in an instant Dean had reacted to the move.

To both hunters, the other's actions seemed unhurried, careful, practiced, but in reality – if time in Redemption could be called that, both men's reflexes were almost in lightning sync.

Two cracks resounded across the summit, but only one figure crumpled to the ground.

Claviger slumped onto the grass, no blood pooling from his wound, no hole even evident in his already necrotic body. He coughed and then laughed, the sound of some death wail escaping his lips. "Guess you'll have to wait for your answers, boy."

Dean should have felt triumphant, should have felt at least relieved, but as he stood above the frail form of his enemy all he felt was empty - wrong.

Claviger nodded weakly, somehow understanding the emotions the young hunter was feeling. He smiled wanly. "Never lose that feeling, Winchester. The day you do,

is the day you become like me. That's not what we were meant for..." The rider's head drooped slowly to the ground and he fell silent.

As Dean watched, his foe's body seemed to glow with some iridescent radiance and gently lifted a few inches from the ground, reminding him of scenes from the movie *Highlander*.

In a brief flash of light, Claviger's remains vanished, transported to some afterlife Dean could only imagine. Heaven, hell or some other place in between mere mortals had no knowledge of? There was no way of knowing.

Once the last vestiges of luminance had disappeared, the pain in Dean's side began to re-emerge, throbbing, taunting as if it had never gone. He winced, abruptly realizing that his legs could no longer hold him, and he clutched at the agonizing wound. *Is this it?*

"Son of a bitch..."

Before he could brace himself, Dean found his knees had suddenly buckled and he was tumbling forward, falling onto the same patch of ground Claviger had recently vacated. He rolled onto his side, curling into a ball as if he were still inside the protective warmth of his mother.

The position did little to quell the pain, or the alarming realization that somewhere in the real world he might be dying.

Dean blinked, long eyelashes fluttering at the shadow that had stepped across his field of vision.

The morning sun hid the figure's features, just for a second, but he somehow knew who had come to him once again.

"Back in Nebraska...you should have lived, not me. If Sam hadn't stopped Sue Ann...I was...I was..." Dean coughed, feeling his soul being drawn away before he could finish his apology, his confession.

Layla kneeled, ruffling a soft and gentle hand through his sweat-drenched hair. "You were ready to let the reaper take you so that I might live, weren't you? You believed you'd cost an innocent life, and wanted to give it back?"

Dean nodded weakly, words failing him.

"I know, Dean. I've always known." Layla stood from her crouched position and smiled. "But you see, Roy was right. Your job isn't finished, my time on earth in the flesh was. Everything happens for a reason..."

Dean blinked, and Layla was gone, replaced by the brilliant white light he had seen before. Three voices echoed through his skull, calling to him, but he was too tired to fight to answer them all through the blazing glow that engulfed him.

The closest, the strongest, begged him to listen, to remember, to help, and Dean found he suddenly couldn't refuse the plea of a dead man.

* * * *

Sam sat next to his brother's bed, every few minutes wiping new beads of sweat away as they formed on Dean's brow. He glanced down at his watch almost as often, knowing it was only seconds since he'd last checked the time, but needing to see it to believe.

When his eyes weren't fixed on Dean, or his watch, they were glancing at the door, willing a certain friend to arrive. A friend who could hopefully be of more use than he was right now.

"Should have died...should have been me already..." Dean's muffled, fever-induced mumblings had come in short bursts, and so far, all he'd talked about as he tossed to and fro on the bed, was dying.

Sam winced at the heartache Dean's delirium brought, and yet, as he sat devotedly watching over his sibling, he recalled that this was not the first time the Winchesters had been in this situation. *Dean made it then, he'll make it now. He's always been the strong one...*

A small frown crept over Sam's face as his mind momentarily wandered back to their childhood. It hadn't been long after the shtriga incident. In fact, it had been the first time John had dared leave the boys alone again after Sam had been attacked.

Sam could still smell the earthy aroma of the cabin, the snow-covered Canadian woodland outside it stretching for miles. At the time, he'd been so young all he'd wanted to do was play at making snowmen, or watch TV. He hadn't understood the dangers they had been subjected to, or the terrible responsibilities resting on his sibling's shoulders every time John left them for a gig. All Sam had understood was that he was bored, and the only entertainment had come from Dean, ever the little helper, eager to please his strict father after his transgression in Fort Douglas.

The brothers had been alone for a week before Dean had at last realized John might not keep his promise and return. But even then, he hadn't admitted it to Sammy. Oh no, Dean had still insisted the day they'd run out of food that Dad would be back to pick them up. All they had to do was be patient.

A day later and Dean had finally come to a decision. Something was wrong.

Sam inhaled, thinking of the harsh wintry blizzard his elder brother had fought through to reach their nearest neighbor for food and help. Dean had only gotten halfway when the storm had simply become too much and he'd had to return, tiny body frozen to the core.

Dean had been sick that night too, and just like now there had only been Sammy to tend him, wrapping him in blankets and keeping a silent vigil, face wrought with fear for his brother.

Sam could still hear Dean's delirious cries, but had never asked his elder brother what they'd meant after he'd recovered.

"I'm sorry, Sammy...so sorry..."

Maybe it had been about the shtriga, maybe it had been because he'd failed to get help, but it was a cry Sam had never forgotten.

Just like now, Sam had been helpless, powerless to save his brother, but Dean was strong, strong not only in body, but in mind. Even as a kid his determination had carried him through situations most children would have simply not coped with.

"Next time, I get the last Lucky Charms, dude..."

Sam couldn't help but let his lips curl into a small smile as he recalled Dean's first words when the fever had broken all those years ago. The wit had always been there, bristling under the surface, even at that age. Not that he'd ever use it or bad language in John's presence back then.

Dad.

Why was John always missing when Dean or Sam needed him most? Why was he never there when his son lay at death's door?

Because Dad is out there fighting too, just like us...

Sam hadn't understood all those years ago why their father could have left them so long in the cabin, but later he'd learned that John had been investigating reports of a Sasquatch when he'd been attacked and injured by a wild animal – nothing supernatural, but enough to keep him from his sons until he'd been discovered lying half-dead in a small ravine.

Sam shot a glance over to the bed as Dean rolled onto his side and groaned until the sound began to gurgle in his throat.

Why the hell does this family do this? Revenge? Answers? Is it really all worth it?

A sharp rapping on the cabin door extinguished any chance of further thought, and Sam gratefully pounced to undo the latch and let his visitor in.

Val Harper frowned even before she'd gotten halfway into the cabin. "He's not even conscious? You didn't tell me that on the phone..."

"I um...didn't think..." Sam ran a hand through his hair and slowly shook his head, admitting that his judgment had been slightly clouded by panic when he'd called the nurse.

The brothers had met her on a previous gig at the children's hospital in Wisconsin, and while she tended to be just as acerbic as Dean, and also insisted there was no such thing as the hereafter, she could totally be trusted if a life was at stake.

"You know you should have taken him to the nearest hospital, right?" Val shot a vexed look at the younger Winchester and pulled off her jacket, tossing it onto the bottom of Dean's bed. "He's burning up." She let a hand rest gently on her patient's forehead, feeling the intense heat radiating from his skin.

"I know, but that would mean questions, probably police involvement..."

"Do I really want to know?" Val rolled her eyes, but already had a good idea how easy it would be for the brothers to get into trouble. Their line of work wasn't exactly a standard kind of employment. She teased back Dean's t-shirt and the dressing Sam had applied to look at the wound. The sickening almost scarlet colored edges of flesh made her draw in air through her teeth. "He had to have known this was infected before he got this sick. Jeez, I always knew he was a stubborn ass!"

"Tell me about it." Sam crossed his arms and took down a long, forlorn breath. *He wanted to get like this, just to deal with Claviger...* "Can you help him?" His voice was almost pleading, and Val could have sworn she saw a glint of moisture in the young hunter's eyes.

"It's bad, Sam," Val offered ruefully as she pulled open a small bag she'd brought in with her. "I can pump him full of a broad spectrum antibiotic and we can try, but if he doesn't start to improve pretty quickly we're going to have to get him to the nearest E.R. and get an IV in. No arguing. Some water-borne bacteria need specific treatments, and without tests I just wouldn't know what to give him..."

Sam bobbed his head, but only heard half of Val's words. Dean had opened his eyes, and while it was quite clear he was still not aware of what was going on around him, he had fixated on something in the room – the problem was, Dean's glassy pupils searched beyond both Val and Sam to some unseen thing at the rear of the cabin.

It was the same blank look he had once had in the back of Kyle Williams Ford when he'd been bleeding to death. The same blank look that had apparently signaled the presence of a reaper...

* * * *

Gamble's Grill & Bar, Black Creek Two Days Later...

Val Harper looked across the small wooden table, taking in the Western-styled bar's interior rather than look her young companion straight in the face. She'd done all she could, but sometimes that just wasn't enough. "I'm so sorry, Sam. If I could have done more I would, but..."

Sam swirled the dregs of his beer around in the bottom of the bottle and nodded, accepting the apology with a sigh. Some things were just meant to be. "I know. It's not your fault. Dean..."

"Dean was so not sitting in that damn cabin any longer, no matter how much Florence Nightingale and her sidekick geekboy tried to tell me I needed to rest. Dudes, rest is for the dead." Dean grinned at his two companions. "Or the wicked or whatever," he admitted with a shrug. "Now, what's a sick guy gotta do around here to get a drink?" The hunter looked at his brother cheekily and raised a brow along with his empty glass.

"Pay?" Sam shot back with a dimpled grin as he pushed up from his wooden chair. "I mean, c'mon, Dean you've hustled me enough at pool to afford a few beers."

"Alright, alright..." The elder Winchester reluctantly dug out his wallet with a theatrically perfect wince just to make his brother feel guilty and then tossed over a twenty. "I'm freakin' starving. See if you can grab something to eat too."



Sam nodded, eyeing his brother with an uncertain stare as he headed for the bar. Dean was politely using their brotherly code to tell Sam to keep away for awhile. Either that meant he was about to try his wily Winchester charms on Val, or he just wanted to talk to her in private.

For once, Sam suspected it was the latter. During the gig at the children's hospital, Dean had inadvertently discovered that Val's long-dead husband's spirit was still bound to her. Back then he hadn't told the nurse, but after she'd saved his life, maybe, just maybe he was going to set the record straight.

Sam leaned on the bar while he waited for the owner's attention, looking back to see the usual sparkle in his brother's eye as he spoke to the pretty young nurse. *He so likes her...*

"So, you mind telling me why you just sent your brother out of the way?" Val took a sip of her own drink and set the glass back down on the table with a knowing and slightly sarcastic smile. "You know you don't fool me for a second, Dean Winchester."

Despite having the abrupt feeling he was being spoken to like a naughty schoolboy, Dean couldn't help but tell the truth. It was an unusual but refreshing change of pace from his normal, carefully practiced lies and excuses. "The other night, when I was out of it..." He fumbled with his empty bottle, trying to find the right words. "I saw something – someone in the room besides you and Sam..."

Val laughed, abruptly relieved that the young hunter wasn't trying to hit on her. If he had been, she might actually have struggled to brush him off, despite the love she still felt for her dead husband. "I'm not surprised," she explained, glancing over to see where Sam had vanished to. "The temperature you had, it's a wonder you weren't seeing pink elephants climbing the walls."

Dean measured his response, hoping the sudden lack of Winchester wit would let the nurse know he was serious. "No elephants," he offered. "Just a dead guy watching over his wife. Val, I know you don't believe in the afterlife, but trust me, I've been there, and that night, I saw Tony. He wants you to know he'll always watch over you, but that it's time to move on..."

Val suddenly sneered. *Guess I spoke too soon. He is trying to hit on me.* The thought brought out unexpected anger. "Of all the people I would have expected a better pick up line from, it would have been you, Winchester! Even for you that's sinking pretty damn low!" She moved to grab her purse and began to rise from her seat when Dean caught her arm.

"Tony said he loves the Crager SS split rims you ordered for the car on his birthday..."

Val stopped dead, her mouth open as all the fight drained from her. The nurse unceremoniously flopped back onto her seat and shook her head. "How could you know about the wheels? I only ordered them for the Charger last week. They said they'd get them in time for - for...but they haven't come in yet. You couldn't know..."

Dean nodded. "This Saturday would have been his birthday." He licked his lips, finding it hard to talk to a woman without flirting and come across as honest. "Look, seeing Tony the other night at the cabin was as freaky for me as this is for you. I'm not Jennifer Love-Hewitt. I don't normally do the whole *Ghost Whisperer* deal, ya know? That's Sammy's thing."

"He's been watching me all this time? Since the accident, I mean?" Val's voice quivered as she finally had to accept that maybe spirits did exist. When Dean nodded in reply to her first question, she continued. "Did Tony say anything else?"

"He begged me to tell you its time to let go. I was pretty out of it. I couldn't even focus on you or Sam, but Tony was there in the room, and he was one persistent mother, I can tell you. He wouldn't let me have peace until I'd heard him out and he knew I'd pass his message on." Dean's gaze shifted from the tabletop to Val, searching to see if she believed him. The sudden look of loss and grief in her eyes told him she did.

In the background, a young kid flicked a coin in the jukebox and The Eagles *Desperado* began to fill the bar.

Val smiled as the piano intro began in earnest. "Funny," she admitted ironically. "This was one of Tony's favorites..." A small tear trickled from the edge of her eye, but she quickly brushed it from her face.

"You can move on, Val. It's what he wants. That doesn't mean you have to ever forget him. Trust me, both Sam and I know..." Dean let a hand fall atop Val's just for the briefest of moments as he thought of the loss of Mary and Jess.

The melody from the jukebox seemed to grow louder, each line seeming to fit the current situation with frightening accuracy.

*Desperado, oh, you ain't gettin' no younger
Your pain and your hunger, they're drivin' you home
And freedom, oh freedom well, that's just some people talkin'
Your prison is walking through this world all alone
Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?
Come down from your fences, open the gate
It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you
You better let somebody love you, before it's too late*

Val eventually nodded and squeezed Dean's hand back with a wan smile. "Maybe Tony doesn't want me to be alone, and maybe he's right. But you know something? I think in delivering his message to me you missed something. You need to practice what you preach, Dean, or I won't be the only sad and lonely person out there..."

You better let somebody love you, before it's too late...

"You just take care. I don't want to be saving your sorry ass again, you here?" As the song finished, Val retrieved her purse and quietly slipped from her seat to the bar's exit. She turned at the saloon-style doors and looked back with one last smile before leaving, and in that instant Dean knew she was right.

He and Sam were travelers, warriors, and above all brothers to the end, but if they weren't careful their fight would consume them and they'd exist only for the crusade, just like Claviger. Maybe they already did.

Dean smiled, realizing just how much he'd come to like Val. *Perhaps in another life...*

The hunter tossed a coin to the kid that had put on the jukebox. "Hey, play it again, Sam." He winked, watching as the teenager scowled at him, not understanding the *Casablanca* reference, but clicking the button for The Eagles once again.

"I didn't know you liked the Eagles *that* much?" Sam questioned as Dean joined him at the bar.

Dean shrugged. "Kinda growing on me," he smirked, meaning Val as much as the music. "Say, can I get another drink over here?" The hunter waved his glass at the bar owner and waited patiently for the rather rotund Arthur Gamble to waddle over. "Whiskey," he requested unconsciously as he looked at the myriad of tin types on the bar walls and thought of Arty.

Gamble noted the hunter's gaze as he poured a double Jack Daniels. "You a Western fan, sonny?"

Dean shook his head with a slight frown as he recalled Redemption. "Used to be," he offered, wishing his experience of the era had been a good one. "Let's just say, this is definitely better than the last Black Creek bar I took a drink in." He didn't wait for Gamble to query the remark, but continued, "The guy in the end picture." Dean pointed. "He was a relative of yours, right?"

The bar owner smiled and brought over Dean's beverage, placing it down gently on the counter before peering at the photo in question. "Yes, sir, he was a bit of a rogue so they say. Some say he even knew famous outlaws in his younger days. Old fella is probably skulking in hell for his crimes right now, but I can't help but like him, even though we never met."

"Oh, Arty's not in hell." Dean winked, sipping his whiskey. "He's just somewhere south of heaven."

Gamble's right brow furrowed and he began mopping the counter, unsure how to take his customer's remark. Eventually, he couldn't resist the urge to ask just how Dean knew his ancestor's name. "You been reading my web site, kid?"

Dean took another drink, soaking down the last dregs and then slowly setting his empty glass down. He could tell Arthur Gamble the truth, but he'd never believe it. "Yeah, pretty cool web page you got there." He smiled, still thinking of the grizzled cowboy he'd met. "I'm sure Arty would love the place you've got here too. Right up his alley." When Gamble frowned again, Dean added, "From what I read..."

Satisfied, Gamble nodded and meandered to the far corner of the bar to serve another customer.

Sam watched and then turned to his brother with a slight smirk. "You actually met Arty, didn't you?"

Dean slowly bobbed his head, toying with the empty tumbler in his hand as if it would magically refill itself. "Yeah, he was a cool old fart, for a dead guy." The hunter sighed, signaling to Sam that something was still weighing on his mind from the ghost town other than Arty Gamble.

Neither brother had really had chance to talk since the night of Dean's fever, because Val had always been present, tending Dean, cooking for a distraught Sammy and generally saving Winchester ass. Maybe now was the time to start asking questions before Dean clammed up altogether.

"Dean..." Sam chewed his lip, trying to find the right words to pry information from his brother without becoming too inquiring. Dean hated it when he thought he was being backed into a corner with questions. "What happened with Claviger? I mean, I know you must have dealt with the whole Purgatory deal but...you haven't really said much since you came back..."

"That's because there's not much to tell," Dean shrugged, abruptly wishing Gamble would come back and fill his glass to the brim. "It's over..."

"You put Claviger's soul to rest?" Sam's head cocked to one side a little and his eyes sparkled with curiosity and uncertainty. "You sure, Dean? Because for a guy who just kicked ass you've been awfully quiet."

"He's gone," the elder hunter confirmed. "We fought it out like two gunslingers, but..."

"But?" Sam pushed, knowing something was niggling his brother inside.

"But he should have beaten me, Sam. The guy was an expert with a six-shooter. Damn fast too. I should have at least been winged by him, but not a scratch..."

"You think Claviger let you finish him? Why? He had to know what would happen." Sam perched his lanky frame on a bar stool, wondering what his brother was implying. "I mean, if he wanted putting to rest, why come back here at all? Why kill innocents in the real world?"

Dean swallowed before answering, his voice low and almost indiscernible. "Claviger didn't *want* to be laid to rest, but he didn't want to kill me either. I don't know how or why, but he knew too much about us, Sammy. Too much about me, you, mom..." Gamble reappeared in their midst and Dean swiftly pointed for more whiskey. He needed it. "Sam, he had *my* amulet, or at least a ghostly version of it. He let me win that gunfight because in the end he hadn't the heart or the guts to finish me. That's why it had to be me that faced him off..."

"Why us? Why our family?" Sam gestured to Gamble that he wanted a drink too. Finding out he had gifts had been bad enough, but now they had a new revelation to

deal with. A ghost from the previous century not only *knew* the Winchesters, he was somehow connected to them by history. Connected enough to lose a fight and be banished just to let Dean live.

Dean shook his head and took another long, calming drink. “Dude, I have no freakin’ clue. All I know is I never want to watch another Western. EVER!” He smiled, sensing his brother was headed for one of his self-derogative moods – and he wasn’t going to let that happen.

Sam’s head drooped nevertheless and guilt started to wrack his brain. “I’m sorry you had to deal with all this alone, Dean. You had to face that freak, you almost died, and there was nothing I could do to help...”

“Dude, getting in and killing Claviger was easy. But without you? Man, I’d have never gotten my sorry ass back...”

Sam still didn’t look up, and a silence fell between the two brothers, only more bar room country music filling the air. In the end, Dean couldn’t take the unbearable quiet any longer.

“Hey, c’mon, let’s play a game of pool. Hell, I might even let your sorry ass win. It’s kinda hard to stretch over the table with my side and all.” The hunter rose from his seat and grabbed his brother’s arm, tugging him towards an empty pool table in the dimly lit corner of the bar. “Winner buys drinks and supper.”

Sam cringed, his mood lightening just a touch. “You’re so not hustling me with that injured player trap.” He picked up a cue and tossed one to his sibling with a quick flick of the wrist, noting how perfectly the “wounded soldier” caught it.

Dean smirked lopsidedly. “Wanna bet, little brother?”

Sam groaned. It was going to be another night of losing and paying up, but even that small respite from their war against evil was enough. Maybe someday, they’d know Claviger’s secret. Maybe they’d even know why he and the other kids had gifts that Haris so desperately wanted. But for tonight, they were simply two brothers, their only battle taking place on a pool table.

The End