

Episode Four: Swamped

By BurstynOut

Louisiana Swamp, vicinity of Honey Island

Tangled fronds of Spanish moss, dangling heavily from the lowest branches of native cypress trees, stretched their stringy tendrils across the path of the fleeing hunters as Dean and Sam tore through the swamp. The heavy, moist air seemed almost to pour into their straining lungs and threaten to drown them rather than replenish their oxygen-deprived systems.

A grimace of exertion was painted across Dean's face, mingled with a distinct air of 'I knew it, I just friggin' knew it.' Sam, the intended benefactor of said disdain, was in no position to reply as he plunged along behind his charging brother, long legs tangling in the heavy, sticky undergrowth. The movement of the vegetation in their wake was obviously more than just the snapping back of branches disturbed in their passing. The entire wetland area seemed to have taken on a life of its own with the sole intention of hunting the hunters.

Though the pursuer or pursuers remained hidden in the greenery, the thundering approach was reminiscent of a scene from the movie 'Jumanji' and the brothers almost expected a herd of stampeding rhinoceros to break through the foliage.

"Nice job dropping the rifle in the water, geek boy," Dean grumbled between straining breaths. He was completely soaked, his dirty blond hair dirtier than usual with bog mud clinging to his scalp. "Don't suppose you got a Plan B worked out in that college educated head of yours?"

"Hey, this is so not my fault!" Sam huffed as he ducked beneath some low hanging vines. "The bugga's got a low center of gravity, and you're the one always saying my legs are too long. It was like a linebacker running down a basketball center back there," he argued, feeling compelled to defend himself despite his body's desperate need to conserve the air it took to form the words. "Besides, you were supposed to have my back! And thanks, by the way, for jumping in after the gun while the thing practically ripped my jeans off."

"What?! You didn't think I was gonna touch that slimy critter with my bare hands, did you?" Dean sneered back, turning his head enough to keep one eye on the path in front of him while allowing the other to burn a hole in his little brother. "That's our best rifle. And holey jeans are so you, baby brother. It's not like you need every inch of those giraffe legs of yours anyway." he smirked.

The sound of rustling leaves and snapping vines behind them grew progressively louder. Above them, long dead branches of the ancient trees began to shower down on them as the hanging vines were yanked tight around them. The brothers ran, ducking their heads beneath their curled arms protectively, and realized they were losing ground quickly.

Temporarily blinded by yet another mass of tangled moss, Sam caught the toe of one foot beneath a raised tree root and went careening forward into the back of his older brother. He hit the ground with a thud and a muffled "Umph!" as Dean struggled to keep his own footing.

Sam lifted his face out of the soft, muddy earth just in time to see his brother turn in an effort to come back to his aid. Before Dean could reach him however, there was a distinct twanging noise followed by the hiss of burning rope, and his older brother disappeared from Sam's line of sight. A second later, Dean's dazed and startled face appeared once more, completely inverted as he dangled by one leg from a hog snare knotted in the canopy above them.

"Dean!" Sam cried, forgetting his own predicament as the thunder of pounding hooves advanced behind him. He was about to lurch forward when his feet were knocked out from

beneath him once more. Helpless to stand amongst the chaos, Sam threw his arms over his head protectively and waited to be torn to shreds.

His anticipated demise proved anticlimactic, however, as the thunder rolled over him like a fog in the bayou. He was paid as little heed as a tussock of bog grass as the pursuers stampeded around him and made a beeline for the dangling Dean.

Dean was momentarily disoriented from having the world spun on its axis around him. Shaking his head, he had just enough time to grimace and draw back futilely as the herd of wild pigs trampled over his brother and advanced on him in his helpless predicament. He paid little attention to the dozen or so average sized swine that found him first but struggled, eyes wide in panic, as the dreaded Hogzilla broke from the undergrowth.

He was so fixated on the monster hog, a thousand pound freak of nature with twelve-inch curled tusks, that he barely noticed the smaller, black-and-white, domestic-looking pig that had apparently taken a liking to him. He felt the small snout root under his chin momentarily, and batted it away. "Hey, hey! Hands off the merchandise!" He quipped absent-mindedly, never taking his eyes off the monster that approached.

Dean barely noticed the frantic milling and grunting of the critters below him as he worked his fingers nimbly over the handle of the hunting knife at his wrist. He'd never hunted wild hog before, but he supposed the heart must be somewhere in the same vicinity as that of a black dog. At any rate, he knew he'd most likely get one chance to strike before Hogzilla tore him from the snare and made lunch of his ass. From the looks of the thing, it didn't go hungry very often, and Dean must seem a veritable seven course meal.

He drew his razor-sharp dagger, poised to strike like a cobra, and willed himself to wait for the perfect shot. The stench of wet, muddy hog was almost overwhelming, causing his stomach to clench convulsively. His chin trembled with determination, accentuating the familiar dimple, as he reached out with his left hand and placed it squarely on the beast's back, steadying his swinging body enough to place the killing blow. His right hand drew back to his shoulder and struck with lightning speed, sinking the dagger to the hilt in the space behind the animal's scapula. When the shaft thrummed in his hand, he knew he'd hit the heart, and Hogzilla dropped like a ton of hairy, stinking bricks below him with a stifled shriek that sent the rest of the pigs scattering to the wind.

Huffing with relief, Dean curled upward on himself and climbed up his own wrenched leg to the rope at his ankle. He wrapped his fist tightly around the rope several inches beyond his ensnared foot, and sawed through it quickly. His head pounded from the blood building behind his eyes, and he almost slipped and cut his hand several times before making it through the hefty rope. Finally, he felt his foot snap free, and he clung momentarily with his hand until his body righted itself in the air, and he dropped silently to the ground.

"Sammy," he called weakly, as his lungs strained to fill. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Sam assured him, stalking cautiously up to the fallen monstrosity. "I guess what they say about pigs being vicious when threatened is true. Good thing for me, they didn't even seem to notice I was there; they went for you for a change," he noted contemplatively. "Wonder what was up with that?" He asked, toeing the carcass in disgust.

"That's easy," Dean smirked. "While you, little brother, are a demon magnet, the living, breathing females of the world, will always prefer me. They can tell actual testosterone from that watered down sissy crap you got in your blood."

"Whatever, man," Sam laughed with a shake of his head as he held out his hand to his squatting brother. "Only you would find the flirtations of a giant hog to be flattering."

Sam helped his brother to his feet, and Dean balanced precariously on the raw ankle, but found it sturdy enough to walk on. They headed back to the Impala, eager to collect their bounty and get cleaned up.

Dean found some old, raggedy towels in the trunk of the car as he put the hunting rifle away and spread them over the driver and passenger seats with a grimace before settling

behind the wheel. For once, he didn't mention the recently repaired damage to the car, a familiar taunting of his brother that had become habit since the fiasco in Missouri. He had plenty of other issues with Sam at the moment.

"There's no way it's a pig, you said," Dean grumbled as he turned the key in the ignition. "No such thing as Hogzilla, you said. That myth was proven to be just some trick photography. College boy, in all his infinite wisdom, swore to me that this had to be our kinda thing. A werewolf or a Wendigo, you said." Dean's words were punctuated by his clicking jaw as he bit off the words accusingly.

Sam raised his hands in exasperation. "Hey! It was a paying gig, big brother. We don't get those very often. It was worth checking out. And you gotta admit, that was not just a pig. That was a freak of nature. If that thing wasn't supernatural, then I don't know what is."

"You're just trying to make excuses for the fact that it knocked you on your ass, not once, mind you, but twice. And then you had the ungodly grace to drop the rifle in the muck," Dean argued.

"At least I didn't end up strung from a tree by my ankle," Sam sassed.

"Only because you were already face down in the mud, giraffe boy. Smooth move, by the way. If you hadn't pushed me, I'd have seen that snare a mile away," the older brother assured. "Then, after you got me snared, you just left me dangling while you got your girlie mud facial."

"I thought you looked like you were having a good time necking with that little black and white one," Sam grinned wryly. "Don't think I didn't see her plant a kiss on you, Romeo. Come to think of it, I think that's the most action you've seen in months."

"Whatever, Dude," Dean said more quietly, obviously skirting the issue.

"No, really, man. You haven't picked up a girl in one of these Podunk towns for ages. What's up with that? Downstairs brain on strike?"

"Very funny, smartass. In case you forgot, it was you who tried to turn me all girlie with the yoga stretches and crap. Hard to keep the downstairs brain thinking at all when kid brother's tossing me pictures of skinny-assed dudes doing downward facing dog poses." Dean stated, lowering his eyes in disdain.

"Well, what about all your other 'assets'?" Sam asked, placing unnecessary stress on the first syllable of the word. "You still got all those hot scars, right?" He smacked his brother on the shoulder with a sideways tilt of his head.

Dean finally dropped his rant and shook his own head with a lopsided grin of amusement. "Yeah, more than I need," he admitted. "The thing about scars, Sam, is this. Chicks dig the old ones. The fresh ones. . .not so much."

Sam bit his lower lip and nodded slowly in agreement. "I guess." He looked out the window as they pulled into the parking lot of the Denny's they'd set up as a meeting place. He didn't want to say anything, but he hated seeing his brother's scars, too. He knew too much about the pain that lay beneath them.

"Here's our guy," Dean noted, guiding the Impala expertly into the parking space beside a shiny, silver 350Z.

Daniel Burns, the proprietor of Honey Island Bayou Tours and Wildlife Observatory, stepped out of his car clasping a leather portfolio in his left hand as he extended his right in greeting. "Dean," he said courteously. "Sam. Did you find our swamp monster?" He asked, eyeing the boys' bedraggled appearance with amusement.

Sam looked down at himself with a grin, extending his hands out to his sides, and said, "Actually, I think it found us."

"It looks that way," Burns agreed laughingly. "So, what's the verdict? What was it? Can we open the tours again?"

"Turned out the locals were right," Dean stated. "It was a giant hog, after all."

"Was? So that means you killed it, right?"

"Yes, Sir," Dean affirmed. "You should be able to start your tours back up any time. Sorry we didn't find something more bizarre to add to your exhibit, but that was one helluva giant pig. Might be worth your while to stuff it and put it on display anyway."

"I just might do that, provided I can get to the carcass before one of our resident alligators does," Burns suggested. "I just hope I haven't wasted you boys' time sending you after what turned out to be something I could've gotten a local hunter to take care of for me. There are a lot of superstitions linked to that swamp, and I didn't want to take any chances. When I got your number, I thought you'd be just the men for the job."

"Well, there's no job too small," Sam dismissed, not letting Dean get started on his rant about the holes in his research.

"Especially when there's a paycheck at the end of it," Dean continued. He felt an elbow from Sam for his lack of tact, but he was covered in stinking mud and itching for a shower. Tact was officially suspended until further notice.

"Of course," Burns nodded, opening his portfolio. He pulled out a Mont Blanc pen, the mark of a true businessman, and held it poised over the sheet of checks. "To whom do I make it out to?"

"Uh, Sam Winchester would be fine," Sam said, knowing that his real name was the only one of their many aliases that wouldn't draw attention from a bank computer when they tried to cash the check. Thankfully, Dean didn't argue the point.

"Okay, then five thousand dollars as we agreed, plus three hundred for your accommodations," Daniel said, filling in the ledger. Both Winchesters stared at the pen hypnotically as it floated over the page as if they feared it would disappear before they collected their reward. Somewhere in the backs of their minds, they each noted the small tattoo on the man's writing hand, but neither paid it any real attention as the check was torn out of the folder with a jerk and handed over accordingly.

Even covered in muck, Dean couldn't maintain his guise of irritation as he grasped the paper. Hell, he'd mud wrestle twenty Hogzillas if there were paychecks like this involved. His trademark grin spread wide enough to crack the mud on his cheekbones, and Sam thrust his hands into his pockets and looked down at the ground with a reciprocal grin of his own. It was so good to see Dean smile like that. He didn't do it nearly enough.

Sam made a mental note to himself to look out for more paying gigs when he got the chance.

To the younger brother's relief, the crinkle of hard-earned money in Dean's pocket seemed to erase all residual bitterness linked to the day's unorthodox hunt. His big brother wore a content smirk all the way back to their motel room, and he didn't complain once about the smell of rancid swamp water that permeated the air.

Dean sauntered into the motel room, a slight spring in his step despite the ache in his ankle. He tossed his keys onto the nightstand with a satisfying clank that said, 'Dean Winchester has arrived,' and rifled quickly through his duffel bag for clean clothes.

"Don't use all the hot water," Sam teased, knowing full well that the motel had a water heater the size of Rhode Island and no other inhabitants but himself and his brother. As Dean strode past him toward the bathroom, the younger brother crinkled up his nose and waved his hand in front of his face with disgust. "On second thought, knock yourself out before the smell knocks me out, man."

"Oh, little brother, you're just jealous that you didn't get a smooch from Hogzilla's little friend, too," Dean quipped, raising his eyebrows suggestively. "I'm not the only one who hasn't been seeing any action lately, you know. In fact," he said, patting his wallet with a satisfying smack, "I think we should definitely go out tonight and see if we can't break this drought. I'm suddenly feeling lucky."

"Yeah, lucky if they make an aftershave strong enough to cover up your last date's funky perfume," Sam dismissed with a shake of his scruffy head.

"Bitch," Dean chuckled, and he tossed a rolled up pair of holey socks at his baby brother's head. The ball bounced off and onto the floor.

"Jerk," Sam reciprocated, scooping up the sock ball and pitching it back with some heat behind it only to have it connect with the closed bathroom door.

"Prick," Dean snickered, opening the door just far enough to shout the word and slamming it shut instantaneously.

Sam just shook his head, poking the inside of his cheek with his tongue, mouth agape, as he accepted his defeat and fell back onto the bed, arms splayed out to his sides.

He listened as Dean began his familiar shower ritual, turning on the hot water to get the steam started while he unpacked his shaving kit and started to undress. Sam reached for the television remote, intending to try to catch the news, when the bathroom door swung open with enough force to bounce back off the door stop, leaving the spring twanging in protest.

Sam threw his arms up and crossed them over his face, making a dive for the far side of the bed as he fully expected Dean to shower him with silly string or some other secret weapon he no doubt kept stowed away in his belongings. When no attack came, the younger brother peeked up over the edge of the bed warily and watched in surprise as Dean, shirtless and barefoot, stormed out of the motel room and into the parking lot without a word.

Sam leapt to his feet and followed in confusion. As he stepped outside himself, he saw that his brother had the trunk of the car open and was rifling around inside with a frantic desperation he couldn't remember having seen since they'd showed up to a werewolf hunt without their silver bullets that time. "Dean?" He asked, approaching apprehensively.

As Sam stepped up behind his brother, Dean slammed the trunk closed and stepped back quickly, nearly sending Sam sprawling for the third time that day. The older brother rushed over to the driver door and flung it open. He dove in halfway, tossing out the smelly towels he'd used to protect the upholstery after shaking them briskly, and began feeling inside the seat cushions and bending low enough to look beneath as well.

"Dean!" Sam insisted, his voice tinged with concerned agitation, "what are you looking for?"

Standing decisively, Dean pretended not to hear his brother's questions or even acknowledge the younger sibling at all. He just seemed to think hard momentarily, his hazel eyes rolling up as though to make a mental list of possibilities and he turned on his heel, hurrying back into the motel room.

By the time Sam came back into the room, Dean already had his shirt back on and was pulling his boots on over his sockless feet. He was beginning to stand, the car keys jingling in his hand, when Sam stepped in front of him, forced him back down into a sitting position and held him there with strong hands on his shoulders.

Sam bent forward at the hip enough to stare into Dean's panicked eyes, getting almost close enough to draw the gaze crossed in its focus. "Dean! What the hell is the matter?" He shouted.

Dean looked away, his chin trembling slightly. "My necklace," he whispered in obvious disbelief. "My necklace is gone."

Sam slumped back onto the opposite bed with an audible sigh. "Is *that* all? Damn, Dean! You scared the crap outta me!" He chuckled, running his hands over his forehead and through his thick hair. "I thought something was really wrong."

Dean looked at him incredulously. "Something is really wrong!" He snapped, going back to tying his boot laces. "Didn't you hear me? My necklace is gone! G-O-N-E, as in, not hanging around my neck where it's supposed to be. It must have come off when I got caught in the snare. We gotta go back and look for it."

"There's no way in hell you're dragging my ass back out there to mosquito central so you can look for your misplaced jewelry, Deanna." Sam flopped back on the bed and noticed

absently that someone had put glow-in-the-dark planet stickers all over the ceiling. "And you'll never find it out there, anyway."

Dean chose not to acknowledge his brother's attempt to downplay the situation. Dean was an expert at the old bait and switch ploy, and he knew that Sam was pressing his buttons to change the subject. "First of all," he grunted, tightening his second boot with a sharp jerk, "it is not *girlie*."

"How do you know?" Sam asked. "You don't even know what it is." He tossed the sock ball from their earlier tussle into the air and caught it again while he rolled his eyes at his brother's sentimental rant. "I'll give you ten to one odds that it's a goddess, though. That so makes it *girlie*, Dean."

The older brother looked slightly taken aback but only glared at Sam sideways from beneath half-closed eyelids while he knotted his laces with finality. "Okay, well, maybe I don't know what it is, but I know it's mine, and I want it back."

Sam continued to toss the sock ball indifferently. "Then go buy yourself a box of Cracker Jacks, cuz there's a better chance of finding another one in there than you have of finding that one out in the swamp. I mean, even if you didn't lose it in the water, a shiny thing like that would get picked up by any one of a number of animals that live out there. Hell, for all you know, one of the pigs ate it!"

He was tired and dirty, and as much as he hated to see his brother lose one of the few possessions to which he'd actually formed an emotional attachment, there was no way Sam was going back out there. Dean wasn't the only Winchester brother to inherit their father's stubborn streak.

The older brother stood abruptly and headed for the door, but Sam rolled off the bed and beat him to it, blocking the exit with his body. "Dean, you're being pig-headed about nothing. If it means that much to you, we can go out tomorrow and find you some other *girlie* charm to hang around your thick skull."

The older brother's eyes became desperate and his muscles tensed up as if he were preparing to physically toss Sam out of the way. Instead, he put both hands to the sides of his head, fingering his dirty hair, and began to pace about nervously.

"C'mon. This is not the end of the world," Sam said, holding up his hands in an effort to calm the bubbling tension. "I don't see what the big deal is about that necklace. We've got a whole trunk full of lucky charms and amulets, which we both know hold more superstition than function."

Dean got in his brother's face, and the wide-eyed glare that fixed on Sam reminded the younger Winchester of the way Dean had stared down Meg while interrogating the demon within her. At the time, Sam had thought the gaze was an expression of intense rage, a look at the darkest part of Dean Winchester that usually remained hidden along with all the light Sam knew was there. But Sam had seen the same look cross his brother's features when the Demon had been in Dean's face, cutting him to the core with its twisted words, and now he recognized it for what it was; desperation and fear. Sam wasn't any less frightened for his newfound understanding. This glimpse at his brother's barely masked fragility actually terrified him even more.

Dean's chin trembled as he drew close enough for Sam to feel the heat of his breath hissing out between clenched teeth. "The deal is that Dad gave that necklace to me, Sam. He gave it to me and made me promise never to take it off. Capital 'N', capital 'Ever'; NEVER, Sam, not even during sex."

"And Dad said *that*?" Sam asked incredulously.

Dean scrunched up his chin and shrugged half-heartedly. "Well, not in so many words," he conceded.

"And exactly how many words *did* he use?"

"Never, Sam. He said, 'What part of never don't you understand, son,'" Dean explained, his voice deepening to mimic his father's.

"Of course he did, Dean," Sam returned, refusing to back down. "Of course he gave it to you and told you never to take it off, because it's the perfect accessory to go with the angst, dysfunction, and sociopathic tendencies he gave you."

Either Sam's lack of intimidation or something the younger brother said seemed to break down Dean's desperate conviction. He backed up half a step with a thoughtful wrinkle forming in his forehead.

"Hey! I do not have sociopathic tendencies."

"Right, Dean," Sam conceded with a roll of his eyes. "If the world was populated by nothing but hot girls and kids under the age of twelve, you'd be a regular social butterfly."

"Yeah. . .well. . .that's beside the point," the older brother admitted, flustered. His eyes dropped, and he went back to pacing, fidgeting with his hands as if contemplating what action to take next.

Sam was as unsettled by Dean's loss of control as Dean was himself, and after the older brother had made three laps around the dinky room, Sam could take no more. He reached out and wrapped a strong hand around his brother's shoulder and halted the relentless motion. The tension in Dean's muscles pulsed through Sam's fingers like an electrical current.

"Geez, you're a mess," Sam sighed, finally grasping the gravity of the situation. "You really have to let this go, though. I mean, sure Dad told you never to take the necklace off, but I'm sure it was probably just another one of his little tests. You remember, like when he used to put those stupid troll dolls in our pockets and make us swear to protect them while he put us through some simulated hunt or something. He used to tell us the mission was failed if we lost the damned things. That's what this is all about, I'm sure. He just wants to see how far you'll go to follow orders, Dean. He's just making sure he can still control you."

Dean's eyes darted away from Sam's intense stare. "No, Sam. This is nothing like that. Nothing. And I'm gonna prove it." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell phone, opening it quickly and focusing his attention on finding the correct button to speed dial Dad.

"No. . .no," Sam protested, reaching for the phone between exclamations. "You're not going to call him. You can't be serious."

"Yeah, I'm serious," Dean retorted pressing the talk button and the speed dial. "Dad trusted me. He trusted me to keep that necklace. If it's missing, then I have to tell him."

Even with the phone in his brother's hand, Sam could hear the familiar voice mail message kick in. Dean didn't even try to mask his disappointment that their father hadn't answered, just waited for the tone as his eyes darted nervously about the room. "Dad," he said finally, "it's me, Dean. Something's come up. . ."

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Chalmers farmyard, outskirts of Honey Island Swamp

The incessant buzzing of cicadas in the cypress groves that surrounded the area couldn't drown out the agitated squeals of hungry hogs that emanated from the dilapidated barn. Nor was there a wildflower blossom sweet enough to cover the ungodly stench. The graying, ramshackle farmhouse that had been erected nearby was safely upwind of the barn, although it was hardly airtight and probably smelled just as bad, what with the pig farmers themselves living in it.

Those two buildings, along with a lean-to type shed that was slanted against the barn, pretty much constituted all of what constituted home for Bo and Cyrus Chalmers. The only vehicle in the yard was an ancient International brand truck that looked suspiciously like the

monster's toy from that movie, *Jeepers Creepers*. Painted on the side of the vehicle, in John Deere green, were the words: Chalmers Prize Tracking Hogs—Swump Recovery and Retreevull.

Thirty odd hogs, mostly of the wild variety with varying degrees of domestic markings, tussled at the trough as buckets of slop were poured in over their hungry snouts. If it were possible, the slop smelled worse than the hogs themselves.

Fish entrails, rotten eggs, and ham bones were only some of the recognizable atrocities mixed into the sludge. Some smaller bones still had tufts of hair and gristle dangling from them and looked suspiciously like road kill. Pigs are omnivorous and will eat just about anything, and the Chalmers boys were apparently more concerned about feed costs than about the quality of the feedstuffs they presented their animals.

Of course, the unorthodox diet made it impossible to ever butcher and eat their own hogs. The meat was sour and rancid.

Bo Chalmers, the younger of the two thirty-something-year-old brothers, leaned sadly against the pipe rail fence, scratching absently at the head of one familiar black-and-white pig. His bib overalls, identical to those worn by his brother, were grungy above the waist and completely filthy, coated in pig manure and mud, below the knee. Neither brother wore a shirt beneath the overalls, and the stark white tan lines beneath the straps suggested they probably did not even own shirts.

The Chalmers boys were remarkably similar in appearance beneath their matching ensembles as well. Bo was only a couple of inches shorter than Cyrus who also had a small scar on his forehead, but otherwise, they could probably have passed for twins.

Years of trudging through the swamps had made both men lean and strong with well-defined muscles in their backs and shoulders. Each also wore thick, dark hair in a long ponytail down his back which was stringy and sweat-encrusted, but they apparently held some vanity between them, as both were clean-shaven. If it were not for the context in which they were found, and if they didn't smile, revealing the effects of far too many years of poor dental hygiene, the brothers would probably be considered good looking.

Bo gazed forlornly into an empty pen in the corner as he scratched the head of his porcine pet. "We shoulda never used Petunia as bait, Cyrus," he sighed.

"We had to," the brother stated. "It was part of the deal. Sissy gave us twice our asking price to use Petunia. Apparently them boys we was after don't go after small game."

"But they killed her!" Bo cried, his voice cracking with emotion. "We raised her from a piglet. Hell, she was the closest thing to family you and me had left. There won't ever be another one like her."

"You're right, which is why I ain't givin' that necklace up 'til that girl comes up with an extra five thousand dollars. We need to be compensated for our losses, I think," the older brother grumbled.

"What good'll that do? Petunia's still dead. . ."

The sentiment was cut short as both men cocked their heads toward the sound of a small engine buzzing up the dirt road. They both recognized the pitch of the dirt bike's whine, and despite their grief, couldn't help but smile in anticipation.

They made their way out of the barn just in time to see the tricked out Yamaha dirt bike squeal into the yard. It bore down on them with little indication of slowing, but they didn't move out of the way. Several yards in front of the brothers, the bike's rider goosed the front brake enough to lift the back end slightly and swung the rear tire toward the waiting Chalmers boys, spraying them with dust as the motorcycle slid to a stop.

Both boys grinned maniacally, catching dirt in their rotted teeth, as the bike's rider kicked the stand down and pulled off her helmet to reveal loose, dark curls that hung to just above her shoulder blades. She shook the strands loose, the sun glinting off them like glitter dust.

The girl, a twenty-something beauty with full lips and olive toned skin, swung her leg easily over the back of the bike and set her heavy boots into the dust with enough force to raise small plumes beneath them. She obviously took her bike obsession seriously as she was clad from head to toe in leather racing skins, which must have been extremely warm in the Louisiana humidity. If she was too hot, though, she only hinted at the fact by lowering the front zipper from beneath her chin to that place between her breasts that revealed just enough cleavage to border on obscenity without crossing the line.

"Hey, Sissy," the boys drooled in unison.

The girl huffed audibly. "I told you morons, it's Sister or Wren, not Sissy." Her pretty face grimaced into an unflattering scowl as she spat the names. Just how many times did she have to tell these idiots? "So, did you get the item?"

Cyrus, being the older brother, took control of the situation and stepped closer to the girl with mock authority that was apparent in the downward slant of his gaze. "That depends," he teased, unconvincingly. "Did you get our money?"

Wren patted a zippered pocket on her hip so that the crinkle of paper could be heard beneath the leather. "A girl always keeps her word," she stated flatly.

"Well, we run up on some complications," Cyrus said. "We're gonna have to ask for more money."

The girl kicked one foot out to the side, jutted her hip and folded her arms crossly as she leaned back and glared at the boys from under her thick eyelashes. "Complications? What kind of complications?"

Cyrus was apparently unnerved by her 'in your face' attitude. He wasn't used to strong, confident women, which was probably why he and his brother couldn't keep from salivating every time they heard a dirt bike in the distance these days. Nothing like forbidden fruit to inspire hunger pangs.

"Well, uh, first off," he stuttered uncertainly, "them boys you sent us after slaughtered our prize pig. Petunia was like one of the family, and we're gonna require some compensation for our loss."

"Compensation, huh?" Wren smirked. "I didn't know you had that many syllables in your vocabulary."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," she waved in exasperation, shaking her head. The man was obviously just repeating something he'd heard someone else say. She at least gave him credit for getting it in the right context. "I can probably swing a couple grand extra for your girlfriend."

Cyrus grinned in surprised satisfaction. He hadn't really expected her to agree. "Yeah, that sounds fair, I think."

"And I need to hang out here for a couple of days, until I clear up some unfinished business. My partners and I agree that it's best for the necklace to remain secluded until the ritual is complete." She nodded her head toward the house. "So, you got a spare room in that Hilton? I'll pay extra, of course, for your trouble, but it'll take me a few days to come up with the additional funds."

The brothers looked at each other like they'd just been given twenty dollars and an amusement park pass. "Sure, sure, no problem, Sissy, uh, Wren," Cyrus agreed quickly as Bo nodded his consent.

"Great. Now where's the necklace? You did get it right?"

The boys' smiles faded quickly, and they looked to the ground uncertainly.

"Right?" Wren persisted. "I mean, we marked the charm just the way you instructed us to, and you swore those hogs of yours could find it anywhere in the swamp."

"Oh, they can," Bo agreed, his face beaming with pride as he stepped up beside his brother. "We trained them pigs ourselves. They can find anything once it's been marked. And them boys you sent us after didn't even miss that thingy."

Wren widened her eyes and opened her lips partially in a classic 'duh' expression. "So, where the hell is it?"

"Well, you see, that's another one of them there complications we mentioned," Cyrus explained. "We usually reward the hogs with food when they done good, so we don't feed them before we send them out. That makes 'em hunt better. Well, old Blossom got a little over-excited, I guess, and she kinda swallowed that necklace, string and all."

Wren's eyes narrowed in barely concealed rage. "A pig ate the necklace? You morons! I'm working on a time frame here. I need that necklace."

"Well, not to worry," Bo suggested, trying to soothe the angry girl, "it'll pass in two or three days. I'm gonna watch Blossom real close, and you'll get it as soon as. . ."

"Blossom, eh?" The girl asked. She strode past the brothers, brushing Cyrus' shoulder hard enough to make him stumble backwards, and walked into the barn, the brothers close on her heels. She leaned over the feed trough with a grimace on her face. "Which one is Blossom? Can you separate her out from the rest?"

"Uh, sure thing, Sissy," Cyrus said, barely keeping the groveling tone from his voice. "We were gonna do that anyway as soon as they finished eating."

"Do it now," she insisted, her voice cold.

"I'll do it," Bo offered. He grabbed a piece of plywood that leaned against the fence and entered the pig pen. Luckily, the hogs had finished eating and were just lounging about in the cool mud. He located the black and white pig and expertly herded her toward a gate with the plywood. When the pig reached the exit, Cyrus swung the latch and let it into an adjoining pen.

Wren approached the pen guardedly. She had no desire to go inside, but she sighed in resignation and stepped in anyway. She forced a fake smile across her face, trying to appear pleasant. "Is she friendly?" The girl asked, as though she were talking about a dog.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Bo beamed. "She's a regular pet, Blossom is." He knelt down beside the pig and scratched it under its chin, cooing to it gently as the gilt stretched its neck out in satisfaction. "She just loves when you scratch her like this," he explained.

"May I?" Wren asked, kneeling beside him in the straw. She didn't wait for an answer, just scratched the pig lightly, her other hand slipping unnoticed into the front of her leather suit. "Sorry, girl," Wren spat.

In the blink of an eye, sunlight reflected off the blade of an eight-inch dagger. The pig's blood sprayed out onto the ground, gushing from the cut that opened in its throat. Blossom never even had the chance to squeal. Her knees buckled, and she slumped over onto her side with a thud.

Bo cried in anguish but stepped back quickly as the blade flashed before his eyes. He scurried back, crab-walking to the fence until he felt his brother's strong hands reach around his arms and heave him to his feet. The boys gaped at the bloody scene in horror, speechless in their surprise.

"I don't have two or three days to spare," Wren explained as she slit the pig's warm belly and pulled the entrails out in a steaming heap. Rolling her eyes and wrinkling her chin against a gag, she felt around in the innards until she felt something hard pressing into her fingertips. Within seconds she produced the necklace and dangled it before the brothers. "Mission accomplished," she grinned sadistically. She glowered at the cowering brothers and the corpse of the hog at her feet. "Just add two sides of pork to my tab."

Looking at her treasure with satisfaction, she pulled a cell phone from her jumpsuit with her clean hand. She flicked it open and dialed without taking her eyes off the blood-smeared amulet. "Brother Burns, I've got the necklace. I'm commencing as we discussed." She paused momentarily as the voice on the other end of the line responded. "Yes. Three days from now it will be destroyed. Everything's falling into place. . ."

Motel Room

Dean's fingers twisted nervously in the dangling cord of the standard beige-colored, touch tone motel telephone. The television was on with the news blaring loudly enough for Sam to hear it in the bathroom where he was just finishing up his shower.

The older brother wasn't happy at all about their delayed response to the issue of his missing necklace, but he had to admit that he did feel better after his own shower. He hadn't realized how much of that swamp muck he'd brought back with him until he'd watched it run down the cheap motel tub in black rivers. He had to admit that he'd take rivulets of mud and gunk over trails of dried blood any day.

Sam had been right to convince him to at least get cleaned up and give their Dad a chance to answer his voice mail before they went traipsing off into the swamp for the second time that day. Still, Dean had the nagging feeling that every second that passed was a second they couldn't afford to lose. A sense of urgency and dread had been spreading through the very fiber of his being since the moment he'd looked at himself in the mirror and realized with horror that his everpresent necklace was missing.

Now, as much as he preferred the tight-dry feel of skin cleaned with motel soap to the feel of mud-encrusted body armor, he couldn't stop thinking that he should be doing something other than just staring at the cell phone on the nightstand and waiting for his brother to get with the program.

At least there was some satisfaction to be found in the fact that twining his fingers in the phone cord not only vented some of his nervous energy but managed to calm some of the trembling he'd begun to detect in his fingertips. Dean knew that Sam would have a regular belly laugh at his expense if the younger brother found out that his hands were actually shaking over the situation. God, he felt like such a girl. He probably deserved to have his baby brother tease him about the whole fiasco, but damn, he'd feel so much better if his phone would just friggin' ring already.

Sam emerged fully clothed from the bathroom, a cloud of steam rolling out behind him. He'd taken to bringing his clothes into the restroom with him during his showers after that unfortunate incident with the itching powder. It was probably a wasted effort on this occasion, Sam noted, since Dean appeared not to have moved an inch since the younger brother had closed the door behind himself. Sam would have laughed at the pathetic, lost way his brother was staring at the cell if it hadn't been so damned out of character that it worried the hell out of him.

"You know, staring at it isn't going to make it ring," Sam pointed out, trying to draw Dean out of his stupor.

The older brother didn't look up, but responded anyway. "Then maybe *you* should try, Psychic Wonder, 'cuz I can't sit here another minute and just do nothing."

"Well," Sam speculated, "maybe it's a good sign that he hasn't called back, yet. I mean, if it was really important, then he would've called by now right? You're, uh, we're probably just overreacting."

Dean seemed to consider that for a moment, turning his head toward Sam and letting it tilt sideways as his eyes stayed unfocused and contemplative. "Maybe. . ." he muttered under his breath, completely unconvinced but hopeful at the same time.

Perhaps it was Sam's presence that did the trick. After all, he and his father had never really gotten past the point of arguing with each other over every little thing. Quite possibly, John heard his youngest suggest there was no need for him to call and called just to spite him. The phone rang before Sam could speak another word.

Dean reached for the cell, rather grabbed for it with lightning speed, but ended up just pulling the motel phone onto the floor with a clatter as his fingers remained twined in the cord. He managed to get at least his left hand free in time to answer the call before it switched over to voice mail and pressed it to his ear urgently.

"Dad. . . Dad, I'm glad you called back. . ." Dean cradled the handset between his ear and his shoulder as he worked at untangling his fingers from the dangling telephone and listened to his father on the other end. "Yeah, it's true. I lost it, Dad. I screwed up, but I'm gonna get it back if I gotta go over ever inch of that swamp myself. . ."

Sam moved closer so that he could clearly hear at least one side of the conversation, though John's voice was so loud and urgent as it came through the receiver that he could almost hear the whole thing. The frantic tone his father was using nearly matched his brother's, and Sam couldn't help but worry that things were more serious than he'd allowed himself to believe.

"Louisiana, . . ." Dean answered, "Honey Island area. It's about an hour out of New Orleans. . . Yeah, we're not too far from there. . . Isn't that where. . .? Okay let me get a pen and paper."

Dean looked up at his brother, his hand mimicking a pen writing in the air, but Sam was already a step ahead of him, picking the motel pen off the floor where it had fallen along with the phone. Finding no paper handy, he ripped a page out of the notes section of the phone book and handed it to Dean.

"Shadrack Mann," Dean confirmed as he wrote. "And that's the same place we went to before, right? Right off the main road and through the cypress grove. . . Uh-huh. Yeah. I know the place. And he knows how to find it? . . ." Dean rubbed a hand over his brow where a slight bead of nervous perspiration had begun to form at his hairline and rested an elbow on his right knee. "Look, Dad, I'm sorry about this. I know you told me never to take it off, and. . ." He looked up at Sam with a surprised expression on his face. "Yeah, he's right here. . ."

Sam couldn't help but feel the anger boil up inside him as his brother tossed him the phone. He hadn't missed the way John had cut Dean off, and there were already enough open wounds between those two without Dad rubbing salt in by asking to speak to Sam. The younger brother's jaw clenched as he prepared to go off on Daddy, dearest, but when he put the phone to his ear, his expression changed to one of shocked apprehension.

"Yeah, sure I will," he said, his brow furrowing. "You know this would probably not even be an issue if you'd given us some idea what that thing is in the first place. For one thing, why is it so damned important that he not take it off? And why the urgency to get it back? He's lost it before. That skin walker in St. Louis wore it for like half a day before. . ." A worried glance at Dean didn't go without notice, and the older brother returned a questioning glare of his own.

"All right. All right. Yes, sir," Sam said, and the submissive tone of his voice only gave Dean more reason for concern. Finally, the younger brother clicked the phone shut and handed it back. "You about ready?" He asked, his voice suddenly more urgent than it had been all afternoon. Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and began pulling on his socks and shoes, not even bothering to sit down to do so.

That was a stupid question. Dean had been ready since before Sam had gone into the shower, but the older brother gathered Sam was just trying to prevent him from asking about the rest of the conversation. Dean wasn't naïve enough to try and convince himself that he hadn't been hurt that his father had asked to talk to Sam instead of talking to him. Nor was he crazy enough to believe that John would say anything to his brother that would make Dean feel any better about the snub, but damnit, if they were gonna talk about him behind his back right in front of his face then he wanted to know what the hell had been said.

"So?" Dean asked.

"So what?" Sam returned, feigning ignorance as he hopped on one foot while tying the opposite shoe laces.

"Don't give me that innocent, crap," Dean insisted, "you know so what. What did Dad have to say to you that he couldn't say to me?"

"Nothing, Dean," Sam said, not looking at his brother. "He just wanted to make sure we were both on the same page about going to find this Mann guy, that's all."

"Yeah, and I'm Betty Crocker," Dean snapped. He stood abruptly and grabbed his brother's shoulder, forcing the youngest to stop avoiding the conversation. "Look, I know you two think I got shorted in the brainiac department, but even I, idiot that I apparently am, got that there was more to that conversation than just ditto, dude."

Sam hated that his father put him in these situations, but he realized voicing any negative feelings to that effect would do nothing to heal the rift in their broken family. Instead, he studied his brother's face in an attempt to assess just how to choose his words. Finally, he slumped submissively, indicating that whatever he said next would most likely be the truth, and Dean released his hold on his shoulder.

"First of all, you are not an idiot," Sam said sincerely, "but that's a whole other can of worms. If you must know, Dad said that I'd have to take charge on this one, because you were too emotionally involved. There, are you happy, now?"

"Great," Dean exclaimed as he sat back onto the bed hard enough to make the springs squeak. "Now I'm not only the idiot son, but also the sensitive, girlie one. When the hell did that happen?"

"Dean!" Sam reprimanded sharply.

"Whatever, dude. Just wish I'd gotten the memo."

Sam sighed loudly. They really didn't need to be having this good son/ bad son debate right now. "There was something else."

The statement seemed to draw Dean out of his doldrums momentarily. "What?" He asked, almost hopefully.

Sam ran his hand through his still damp hair. "He said we have to hurry. He didn't say why, just that we have to get that necklace back as soon as possible. I might have been imagining it, but I kinda got the impression that failure was not an option. All I know is, if he says we need to go see this Shadrack Mann guy, then that's exactly what we're going to do."

Home of Shadrack Mann

Despite the fact that Shadrack Mann's less than humble abode was well off the beaten path, John's directions coupled with the fact that Dean remembered having been there once before when they'd been in the New Orleans area, found the boys pulling into the old man's drive early the next morning. Still, they were already both sticky with perspiration, being that the Impala had no air conditioning. For that reason, Sam didn't question the sheen of his older brother's skin, but it didn't escape his notice that Dean looked flushed and that he kept both hands wrapped tightly enough around the steering wheel to make the knuckles turn white.

The older brother was obviously more upset about losing the amulet than even he was willing to admit. At least, that's what Sam hoped was causing the physical distress that was becoming apparent in his brother's features.

"This is it?" Sam asked, nodding toward the wooden shack that reminded him of the Ingalls home from "Little House on the Prairie." Not that he'd ever admit to watching *that* show.

"Of course not," Dean said, glowering at his brother through lowered eyelashes, "I just thought we'd stop for tea and crumpets, Alice. Would you like to ring the bell for the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, or shall I just send a note with the dormouse?"

Dean flung the door open a little more abruptly than was usual, and Sam couldn't help but smirk. Ah, a pissed off Dean was such a literary genius. An under control Dean would never have let out that he'd read *Alice In Wonderland*, let alone remembered enough of it to actually reference it in conversation. Sam made a mental note to call him on it when they resolved this whole necklace issue.

Dean stepped out of the car and slammed the door as abruptly as he'd opened it. Sam didn't miss the fact that he wiped his hands roughly down his denim-clad thighs in an effort to

dry them. Sweaty palms, too, he noted. He just hoped they had gotten hot from gripping the steering wheel.

Dean approached the shack with marked apprehension, remembering the last time he'd been there. He looked over it to ascertain that it was just as he remembered it all those months ago when his father had brought him there and given him the necklace. He shuddered involuntarily as he recalled the jolt of electricity that had shot through him the first time he'd touched the amulet. Shaking off his anxiety, the older brother knocked gingerly on the thin door that hung lopsidedly on sprung hinges.

"Come in, Firstborn," a rickety voice called from within. "I've been expecting you."

Sam looked at his brother in confusion at the title by which he'd been addressed.

"Don't ask," Dean dismissed as he opened the door, fearing that it might actually come off in his hands.

The interior of the hut was in as great a state of disrepair as the exterior, but it still held a certain hominess to it that did not go without notice. It might have been due to the rich perfume of incense that wafted through the single room abode. Might also have had something to do with the dozens of wind chimes that hung from the exposed rafters, they supposed. There was a definite air of reverence for nature and simplicity that the boys recognized as tribal in origin; probably South or Central American, they guessed.

At first they did not see their host, but a tinkling of glass beads drew their attention to a curtain made of what looked like pieces of tree amber. From behind the beads, a crooked little man rose stiffly from his hidden cot and stepped out.

"Ah, Firstborn," the man rasped. "You've come about the amulet, have you not?"

"Yeah, uh, yes," Dean answered, uncertainly. "With all due respect, how did you know it was me?"

Sam understood the question. The man before them was obviously completely blind. Both eyes were white with scars or cataracts, and they were barely visible from behind the strands of snow white hair that hung over the opaque orbs.

"The same way I know why you're here," the old man answered, "the necklace told me."

Sam laughed, more in awe than disbelief. Far be it for him to question the mental powers of another human being, but communing with inanimate objects was an ability he'd never heard of before. "Really?" He asked.

"Hell, no," Mann dismissed with a wave of one gnarled, arthritic hand. "I recognized the sound of the car. It's not like I get a lot of visitors out here, you know."

Sam laughed out loud, then. He couldn't help but like the old guy's spunkiness. Shadrack looked to be at least a hundred years old, and to still be that sharp mentally and able to live on his own was no small feat. "Shadrack Mann, I presume," Sam said, introducing himself. He held out his hand to shake but realized in embarrassment that the old man couldn't return the gesture, and pulled it back uncertainly.

"In the wrinkled flesh," Mann said with a nod. "And don't bother telling me who you are, because I won't remember anyway." Turning to Dean, Shadrack seemed to glare up at him accusingly through his clouded eyes. "And you, Firstborn, you've been separated from the amulet, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Dean admitted, scratching the back of his head apprehensively. "I don't. . ."

"How long?"

"Sir?" Dean asked.

"How long since you were separated from the amulet?" Mann reiterated with enough bite to his words to indicate that he despised having to repeat himself.

"Uh, I don't know for sure," Dean answered honestly, "Probably eighteen, twenty hours at most," he guessed.

"That is unfortunate, Firstborn. Here," the old man put his hand on Dean's elbow and guided him over to a hard wooden stool, "you should probably be sitting."

"No, that's all right. . ." Dean began, protesting the attention.

"Nonsense!" Mann snapped, and despite being completely blind, the man slapped Dean's objecting hands down with remarkable accuracy. "Foolish boy. When an old man offers you his only seat, you just shut up and take it or you'll hurt his geriatric feelings. Now sit, before you fall down."

Sam picked up on Mann's concern and noticed that his brother's color had paled markedly since they'd gotten out of the car. "Dean, maybe you should listen to him," he suggested, moving to his brother's side protectively.

"But I don't. . ." Dean's mouth snapped shut mid-sentence, and he inhaled sharply.

"Dean?" Sam asked.

The older brother's face went ghostly white, and he sat down hard despite his prior protests. He braced his hands on both sides of the stool as the room spun around him. A sound like grease sizzling in a skillet seemed to fill his head, and black spots danced before his eyes. He felt Sam's strong hands latch onto his shoulders and heard his brother speaking urgently, but couldn't tell what he was saying. "What the hell. . .?"

* * * *

Every organ in Dean's body seemed to lurch in one direction simultaneously, and had he not been sitting, he probably would have fallen just as Mann had predicted. For several seconds, he could concentrate only on breathing as he waited for the world to right itself around him. Lord knew he couldn't right himself.

Within a few moments, the spell passed, and Dean looked around in confusion, taking deep breaths and waiting for his stomach to settle.

"What'd you do to him?" Sam asked accusingly. He glared disapprovingly as Dean slapped away the one hand that remained on his shoulder.

"I did nothing except foretell the normal consequences that arise when the guardian is separated from the amulet," Mann explained calmly. "And I foresee much worse consequences should the two not be reunited, and quickly."

"Whoa, what are you saying?" Sam asked, stooping to look in the old man's eyes. "That losing the necklace is having a physical affect on my brother? How can that be?"

"First of all," Shadrack said, "the amulet is not lost. It is stolen."

"Stolen?" Dean asked, finding his voice again. "Who'd want to steal it?"

"And why?" Sam contributed.

The old man chuckled softly. "Oh, you are truly naïve. I warned John Winchester that this was a responsibility not to be taken lightly, and somehow he convinced me that you would be a suitable guardian, Firstborn. Your lineage . . . uh, well, you have no idea just what it is you have been entrusted with. That is truly unfortunate."

"Well," Dean snapped, "instead of telling us how much we don't know, how about you clue us in. And since I'm not anxious to do the whole spinning room scenario again, I'd appreciate it if you just cut to the chase, starting with what the amulet is and why someone would steal it."

Mann nodded in agreement. Perhaps now was not the time to go all Yoda on the poor boy. Time was of the essence, after all. "Yes, yes. You're right. I will tell you what I can."

The old man leaned across his thick kitchen table, obviously wishing that he were the one sitting down. "I do not believe that there is anyone, anyone human anyway, that still knows the true nature and power of the amulet, Firstborn. What I know of it has been handed down through many generations, and it is only what we were allowed to know. Some secrets are not for mortal ears, I fear."

Mann took a deep breath and continued. "All we know for certain is that it is ancient, older than Christianity or your Christian God, and it is extremely powerful. It is one of only a few

trinkets and charms that remain of a religion of which there are very few human acolytes. The amulet and those scant other baubles that are scattered across the earth are the only remaining connections between that lost power and this world. There are those among us who would seek to destroy them for the purpose of breaking that connection."

"So, what are we talkin' here?" Dean asked. "If you don't know that much about the amulet, then how do you know if it's a force of good or a force of evil?"

"We know it is a force of good, because those who would destroy it are evil," Mann stated matter-of-factly.

"Right," Dean agreed sarcastically, "Because we know bad guys never try to off each other." He paused momentarily, trying to keep from getting too impatient with the man's cryptic rambling. He wasn't too keen on being pegged the emotional, girlie one. "Look, all I'm saying is, I want to know if I'm fighting for the good guys here."

"This is not about you, Guardian. This is about the connection to the power that you are sworn to protect. As it is, the lines between good and evil are greatly skewed. These are times of chaos. There are those among us who would choose to go against the ancient establishment and those who would uphold it. You are one of those who would uphold it. However, there are many who have yet to choose or to be chosen. You can trust no one. You have been chosen, and you are sworn to protect the amulet."

"Yeah, only I don't remember swearing to anything," Dean said.

"No, you didn't," Mann agreed. "Your father came to me. He'd heard about the amulet and that it was in need of a guardian. It can only be worn by a firstborn son, you see, so your father asked that I, as the last of my people, make his son the new guardian. He assured me that you could be trusted and that you would protect it with your life. As I had no other potential guardians in mind, I agreed." He paused before continuing. "Certain steps were taken to assure your loyalty, I'm afraid."

"What kind of steps?" Sam asked. His latent anger with his father resurfaced with a vengeance.

Mann ignored the younger brother and focused solely on Dean as he continued. "The amulet is bound to you, Firstborn. I'm sure you felt it the first time you touched it. There was a connection, was there not?"

Dean nodded slowly, "If you mean 'connection' as in the friggin' thing zapped me, then yeah. I felt it all right."

"Wait, wait a minute," Sam interjected, refusing to be ignored, "bound to him how?"

"Their fates are intertwined," Shadrack admitted. "If the amulet is destroyed, then the part of the guardian to which it is bound shall also be destroyed."

"Wonderful," Dean said, clapping his hands against his thighs and rubbing his sweaty palms dry. "And what part would that be? 'Cuz I gotta say, I'm pretty attached to them all."

"The best part, Firstborn."

"Rri-ight," Dean said with an exaggerated nod. "Couldn't be my pinky toe, or maybe those muscles that are supposed to wiggle my ears. Never could get the hang of that whole ear wiggling thing, so yeah, I probably don't really need those."

"Dean!" Sam reprimanded. "This is serious."

"Oh, thanks for pointing that out, College Boy," the older brother sassed. "I kinda missed the whole part about my life being volunteered to protect something without my consent. But thanks for pointing out that it sucks out loud. I never woulda got that one my own."

Mann huffed in offense and took a step back, crossing his arms in a put out fashion. "I am disappointed, Firstborn. It is a great honor to be chosen as a guardian. My people once offered their sons by the dozens. Only the best was chosen for the privilege, and only after the completion of many grueling tasks of worthiness."

"Excuse me for doubting your people, Mr. Mann," Sam said, "but when something is considered a privilege it usually implies that there is some sort of benefit to the person who has it. What is the privilege of wearing the necklace other than the obvious fashion statement?"

"It is an honor, first and foremost," Shadrack explained, "but there is also a certain element of protection bestowed upon the guardian. The guardian protects the amulet, and the amulet, in turn, offers protection to the guardian."

Dean and Sam both laughed aloud at the implication, their eyes locking in mutual amusement.

"Uh, yeah," Sam said skeptically. "Dean this is Mr. Mann, Mr. Mann, my brother Dean," he introduced. "I don't believe you two have met, because there seems to be some confusion. Your guardian is supposed to be protected by the amulet, or so you say, but my brother spends more time beat to hell than anyone I know."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, pointing toward his brother proudly. "What he said."

Mann did not seem impressed with the boys' logic. "Perhaps you have been injured while wearing the amulet, Firstborn," he granted, "But are you dead?"

"Uh, no," Dean said. "Sitting right here, alive the last time I checked, anyway."

"Then how do you know that you have not been protected?"

"I don't, I guess. . .but," Dean seemed to forget what he was about to say, and he reached for the edge of the table as the beads of perspiration on his forehead began to roll down his cheeks. Sam put a hand on his brother's shoulder and felt an unfamiliar thrum beneath his fingertips that had to be more than just nervous energy.

"You all right, man?"

"Yeah," Dean dismissed after a few moments, "but that spinning room, twisting guts trick is getting real old, real fast." He lifted his head slowly as if he didn't trust it to stay atop his shoulders and looked to their host. "Okay, so enough of story hour. Dad said you could help me find the amulet. So let's get the show on the road, already. Is there a locator spell or something?"

"You do not need a spell, Guardian," Mann said with amusement. "The amulet is calling you. The fever and the dizziness are part of the connection you share. Heed the call and the necklace will lead you to it."

"So, what?" Sam asked. "We just drive around and wait for some kind of supernatural phone call to tell us where to go? It could be on a plane to Timbuktu for all we know."

"No. They would not have taken it far from where it was stolen," Shadrack surmised. "The amulet has ways of making itself known, and whoever has it would not want to draw attention. Time is of the essence as well. The amulet must burn three days in a black flame to destroy it. If those who have it intend to do so, then they will not wait to begin the ritual. I do not have to tell you what will happen if you do not recover the amulet before the three days are up."

"Three days, huh?" Dean sighed. He reached for Sam's shoulder and pulled himself up off the stool with a grunt of exertion. "I guess we better get a move on, then."

"Good luck, Firstborn." Something in Mann's tone suggested that Lady Luck's appearance was being demanded rather than requested. And damn if that wasn't unsettling.

Impala, night of second day.

"You're sure this is the right way?" Sam asked, chewing at his thumbnail nervously. He cast a worried, sideways glance at his brother who, despite swearing never to let Sam drive his car again, had consented to do just that with barely a whimper of protest. Now they both pretended to be listening absently to the haunting strains of Queen's "A Kind Of Magic" as Dean sat hunched forward in the passenger seat with his hands clasped between his knees, sweating profusely.

Sam was really beginning to hate that damned necklace for what it was putting his brother through, and he vowed silently to give their father a swift kick in the pants the next time their paths crossed for contributing to the problem.

"As sure as I *can* be," Dean muttered unconvincingly. "This whole follow the yellow brick road scene is usually your mojo working."

"I know, it's just. . .well, we've been driving around for hours now, and I hate to say it, but I think we're lost. If we don't find anything soon, we're gonna have to look for a gas station or something," Sam explained. "How you doin' otherwise? Is it getting worse, better? Any change at all to give us a clue that we're even going in the right direction?"

"Look," Dean explained, his teeth barely separating to release the word, "I already told you I'm not sure. Do you really need me to list off all my symptoms so you can second guess me? Because I'm doing plenty of that on my own, here."

"Sorry. . ." Sam offered. He knew how frustrating it was to have the answers at your fingertips only to find them scattered and jumbled like jigsaw pieces poured haphazardly onto the floor. He knew better than to question Dean's judgment. When it came to going with his gut, his brother was an expert with twenty years of field experience.

Dean accepted his brother's apology though Sam knew not whether it was because he believed it to be genuine or if it was just because Dean was in no mood to argue. At any rate, they fell into an uneasy silence as the Impala sped down unfamiliar backroads in the tarry pitch of night.

After several long moments, the older brother began to shift nervously in the passenger seat, and Sam searched his face for any suggestion that his condition might be worsening. In the darkness, the pale sheen of sweat on Dean's brow gave the elder a glow of near bioluminescence whenever the moon chanced to peek from behind the clouds and filter through the window panes. Still, Sam did not see any fresh discomfort on his brother's face, only the faraway look of deep thought.

"We're gonna get it back," Sam offered as reassurance. "I promise."

Dean looked a little puzzled at the words. Obviously Sam had guessed wrong as to what his brother had been thinking about so intently. "Oh, yeah. Sure, Sam. I know that. I mean, I think I know that this is all going to work out. It's just. . ."

"Just what?"

"Well, what that old guy said back there, about the necklace protecting me. . .I know we kinda laughed it off, but do you think it could be true?" Dean asked, searching his brother's face earnestly.

Sam shrugged lopsidedly, keeping one fist on the wheel as he continued to chew at the fingernails of his right hand nervously. "I don't know. Seems kinda far-fetched to me. I think I'm still pretty much at a loss as to how you can spend so much time with the snot beat out of you if you're supposed to be under some kind of protection."

"That's just it, though," Dean said with sudden conviction, "Mann called it. He said, I might be beat to hell all the time, but I'm not dead. You gotta admit. . .some of the crap we've been through. . .by all means and rights, I probably should be- dead I mean- don't you think?"

Sam chuckled low in his throat, the laugh never actually leaving his chest. "Yeah, maybe, but that's not a real strong argument. That's like saying I've never been hit by lightning, therefore I must have an electrical ward on me. It's false logic. You know that."

"Only I *have* been hit by lightning. Or did you forget?" Dean pointed out. "And it's not like we don't spend a lot of time flying kites in thunderstorms, little brother." Dean leaned back in the seat, letting his head fall against the headrest.

"Yeah, but. . .still. You don't really believe that necklace has ever saved your life, do you?"

Dean was silent entirely too long to suggest that he wasn't seriously contemplating the idea.

"Dean?" Sam asked incredulously. "You don't, do you?" When Dean still didn't answer, a thought dawned on him. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

The older brother's gaze shifted to his folded hands, where his thumbs were now wrestling each other rather heatedly. "Nah. It's probably nuthin'," he finally dismissed, focusing out the window into the darkness once more.

"What's nothing?" Sam insisted. "You can't get all quiet and introspective on me and then tell me it's nothing, man. You don't do quiet and introspective. There's got to be something going on with you. So spit it out."

Dean's gaze never shifted, but he swallowed hard enough for Sam to see his throat move from across the car. He paused a few seconds longer, then seemed to reach a decision. "Do you remember the car ride to the hospital, after that whole thing with the demon, and the accident, and everything?"

Sam shuddered involuntarily. "Yeah. . .how could I forget?" He answered. "What about it?"

"I saw something," Dean said flatly. "It was probably just a hallucination, you know, from the blood loss, but I thought I saw something."

"What?" Sam demanded, taking his eyes off the road momentarily to glare at his brother for being so friggin' cryptic.

"A reaper." The older brother didn't infuse any emotion into his voice whatsoever, just admitted to seeing the face of Death as though he'd only glimpsed a shooting star.

"Whoa, whoa," Sam said, latching both hands tightly on the steering wheel to keep from driving off the road in his surprise. "You saw a friggin' reaper? And you never mentioned this before?"

"Like I said, I thought it was probably a hallucination," Dean shrugged. "But after what Mann said, I'm not so sure."

Sam let the idea sink in for a few seconds. "Well, what did it do then?"

"That's just it," Dean said. He finally turned his gaze to meet Sam's, and his hazel eyes were glassy with wonder. "Nothing. It didn't do anything. It just looked at me, and I looked back, looked right at the damned thing, and it didn't do anything."

"Maybe it just wasn't your time," Sam suggested.

"No," Dean argued. "That's not how it works. Reapers don't just hang around and wait for some dude to kick off. They know when your time's up. They don't show up until then, and I'm the only one who saw it, so it had to have come for me. It doesn't make any sense that it would have been there and done nothing."

"So, what? You think it was scared off by the necklace? 'Cuz it seems to me like that one in Nebraska didn't have a problem with it."

"Firstly, the one in Nebraska was under a spell, Sam. It had to do what it was told," Dean pointed out. He'd obviously considered that argument himself. "Secondly, Mann said that the forces are all off balance. He said some powers are trying to gain control by asserting themselves against the establishment and that many had still to choose sides. It's possible the necklace does have some sort of power and that this particular reaper was repelled by it."

Sam went back to biting his nails. He hated when Dean made sense, especially when it was an argument that Sam didn't want to be having in the first place. "Let's say that it did repel the reaper. What does that make you, then? Some kind of immortal?"

"No, I don't think so, and let's just say, God I hope not. I'm so with Queen on the whole 'Who Wants to Live Forever,' front," Dean denied tiredly. "All it means is that maybe the necklace does protect me somehow, and that maybe, just maybe, one reaper out of all the reapers out there let me go because of it. So, that just tips the odds in my favor, I guess, like handicapping a horse race."

Sam sighed heavily as he considered the thought. Then, he shook his head slowly. "Well, I hate to say this, man, but I hope that old guy was wrong."

Dean's face knotted in confusion. "Why?" He asked incredulously. "Don't you think we could use a little protection in this line of work?"

"Sure we could," Sam agreed.

"But. . ."

"But we don't need you running around throwing yourself in front of things backed by some sense of false security," the younger brother snapped. "You're already entirely too careless, and I'm sick to hell of scraping pieces of you off the pavement."

"I do not throw myself in front of things, Sam," Dean denied with an expression that said he clearly couldn't believe his brother would even suggest such a crazy thing.

"C'mon, dude," Sam argued. "Don't think I haven't caught onto the whole double standard you live by when it comes to self-sacrifice."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What I'm talking about is the way you refuse to let Dad or me put ourselves in harm's way to take out the demon, but you never hesitate to throw *yourself* in the line of fire. Don't think I didn't notice the way you conveniently dropped your pocket knife back in Chicago when Meg was getting a little too close to me. That knife is practically an eleventh finger to you, big brother. I know there's no way you dropped it by accident."

"Whatever, dude," Dean said, waving his hand in Sam's direction as if to brush him off.

"Yeah, '*whatever*', classic Dean Winchester speak for, I don't have a comeback for that one, 'cuz it's the friggin' truth," Sam retorted. "And that night in the cabin, with the demon, every time the thing so much as breathed in my direction, you just had to open up your big damned mouth. I knew what you were doing, Dean."

"That's different," Dean said, his voice nearly a whisper.

"How?" Sam insisted. "How is it different if you draw attacks on yourself than if I take the SOB's on point blank?"

"Because you do it to take out the demon, and you don't care if you get hurt in the process," Dean snapped, his anger boiling to the surface. "I don't give a damn about the demon, Sam. I just do it to protect you. And yes, I would do anything to keep you from getting hurt, but unlike you, I would never throw myself out there without thinking of you or Dad first. Never."

"I know," Sam said, his bluster suddenly deflated. His voice was barely audible, and once it drifted away, there was nothing but silence to replace it for several long minutes.

"I just hate seeing you hurt," Sam finally ventured quietly. "Getting yourself killed. . .it's never gonna make Dad any prouder of you than he already is, Dean. And as for me, I don't need you to die for me. . ." The younger brother paused a good long while, almost deciding to leave off the rest of what he'd been about to say, but finally deciding they'd waded in too far to keep from getting their heads wet. It was sink or swim time. "I don't need you to die for me, Dean. I need you to live for me."

The statement hung in the air, underlined by the growling purr of the Impala's engine. The older brother turned his head to fix both eyes on Sam who, for once, was actually keeping both eyes on the road in an attempt to avoid him.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Dean asked.

Sam took in a good, deep breath and held it for what seemed an eternity before letting it slide out slowly. "What it means is. . .the demon was right."

"Right about what?"

"He was right when he said we don't need you like you need us, Dean," Sam explained, and before his brother could misinterpret his words, he finished, "we need you *more*."

"Oh, God, we're not getting all chick flicky again, are we?" Dean whined. "Cuz I'm not in the mood for hugs and crap. I just want to get my necklace and get the hell outta Dodge ASAP."

Sam would normally have chuckled at his brother's blatant attempt to hide the fact that he'd been touched on some deep emotional level by Sam's words. But Sam felt the need to continue. He was sinking, and until he dropped some of the weight, his head was going under.

"I wanted to do it," he said, not taking his eyes off the road, leaving Dean to stare at just his tense jaw muscles.

"Wanted to do what?" The elder asked.

"I wanted to pull the trigger," Sam admitted. "That night in the cabin, I knew that was Dad, and I knew that if I pulled the trigger he'd die, but all I could see was what that bastard demon did to Mom, and Jess, and then. . ." he choked back a sob, "what it tried to do to you. . . I wanted to pull the trigger so friggin' bad, I could taste it, Dean. And I would have, if it hadn't been for you."

Dean hung his head and just let his brother get whatever baggage he carried off his chest and out into the open. "Sammy. . ." He offered by way of reassurance, since he was at a total loss for words.

"I know now, because we're all alive and hindsight is twenty-twenty, that you were right, Dean," Sam continued. "I would have regretted it if I had pulled that trigger, and I'm glad you stopped me." He paused while the rest of his thoughts translated into words. "You think it scares *you*, the things that you'd do to protect me and Dad. . . Well, it scares *me* what I might do without you. Sometimes, I think that of the three of us, you're the only one doing this for the right reasons. And as long as you're here to remind me what those reasons are, I can do this. But don't think for a minute that I don't need you, or that Dad doesn't need you, because without you. . . I don't even want to think what we might be."

The silence that followed was short-lived, and Sam caught a muffled noise coming from his brother. At first, he thought Dean might be fighting to maintain his tenuous emotional control, but he turned his head and realized that his brother was gripping his head between his hands and biting his lip against a groan of agony.

"Dean?!" Sam reached a hand over and placed it on his brother's shoulder, alarmed by the waves of heat rolling off of him. "Hey, man, you want me to stop?"

Dean just shook his head, and took several deep breaths, finally sitting back up. "No, don't stop." He searched the darkness, squinting his eyes as if looking for something in particular. "Up here," he indicated, pointing to a nearly concealed T-intersection in the road. "Turn right up here," he said, and the conversation was all but forgotten as the brothers focused once more on the task at hand.

Impala-morning of Day Three

Seventy hours into the ordeal of the missing necklace found Dean pale and silent. The pale part, Sam was becoming accustomed to, but the fact that his brother had been nearly mute since their little discussion the night before had him feeling apprehensive. Both Winchesters knew that their time to recover the missing artifact was drawing short, and they were no more certain as to its whereabouts than they had been when they'd left Mann's hut.

Dean had fallen into a fevered stupor hours earlier, and Sam found himself driving with one eye on the road and the other on his brother, uncertain as to whether Dean would still be able to tell him when they needed to change course. As far as Sam could tell, however, they were on the right track. They were still in the middle of nowhere, but the fact that there was actually a dirt road to follow offered at least the faintest hope that there was someplace worth getting to beyond the spans of rancid swamp water and trailing Spanish moss.

"You hangin' in there, dude?" Sam asked casually, trying not to let his concern creep into his voice.

Dean nodded noncommittally but didn't offer to speak.

"Are you seeing this?" Sam indicated the road in front of them. There was a fresh coating of dust on the foliage lining the trail, and tire tracks were clearly etched into the earth. "Looks like there's actually someone else driving around out here. And, if I'm not mistaken,

we're not too far from where we met up with Hogzilla and her groupies. If Mann was right, whoever took the amulet might have been holed up back here the whole time. I mean, you can't get more secluded than this, right? And if you don't make tracks, you don't have to cover 'em."

"I'll tell you one thing," Dean said, breaking his silence with a slightly breathy and tired voice, "We get this bitch back, I'm gonna find a way to get a GPS chip on it. The whole, 'use Dean's body as a divining rod' crap is getting old."

"But we're close, though, right?" Sam asked.

"Seems like," Dean offered. "I still feel like I'm on fire, but at least my guts have stopped twisting around. I'm guessing that means we're going in the right direction. Just step on it, huh."

Sam complied, and the Impala lurched forward. The additional speed allowed them to encroach on the vehicle they had only suspected to be preceding them on the road, and when they rounded a bend in the road, a glint of sunlight off of silver prompted Sam to take his foot off the accelerator. A few moments later, a group of rundown buildings came into view, and the Impala was eased onto the shoulder. It was the first sign of civilization, if it could be called such, which they'd seen in hours. The odds seemed fair that they'd reached their destination, and all urgency aside, it would be careless to drive in without doing at least a little recon.

"Looks like the end of the road, bro," the younger Winchester suggested. "You thinkin' this is the place? 'Cuz I don't foresee finding anything beyond this point but more wild pigs."

"Only one way to find out," Dean grimaced, opening his door and stepping out. "And I don't think driving into the yard would get us anywhere fast." He adjusted the waistband of his jeans as he checked the safety on his .45 and tucked the gun safely against his spine. "You packin'?" He asked.

Sam grinned as he raised his Glock, double checked the safety on it as well, and mimicked his brother's motion to conceal the weapon. "Got your back," he smiled.

"Yeah, well you better hope we find what we're looking for," Dean commented bitterly, "Or I got a feeling you're gonna be draggin' my back, my front, and everything else right the hell outta this hole. Oh, and if that happens, I want you to keep my right boot," he smirked as he made his way stiffly through the brush toward the farmyard.

"First of all, don't talk like that," Sam said, stalking along behind his brother. "Second, why your right boot?"

Dean approached the edge of the clearing and pressed his back against a giant cypress tree as he peered warily around it toward the buildings in the hollow. "Cuz I want you to be wearing it when you kick Dad's ass for getting us into this mess in the first place," he sneered.

Sam laughed, hunkering down beside his brother to scout out the location. "Count on it," he agreed.

They both craned their necks to scan their surroundings, taking care to stay concealed themselves. From what they could make out, they were on the back side of the farmyard. The road they'd been on wound around and approached the front about another quarter of a mile up. All they could see clearly was the graying clapboard house, what looked to be a barn, and some monstrosity of a truck parked between the two. The trail of dust in the trees behind the place indicated that the car they'd been following would be pulling up in front of the house shortly.

"Dude," Dean asked, "can you make out what it says on the side of that truck?"

Sam stretched out along the tree, because he had the better angle to view the vehicle, and barely suppressed a snicker of disbelief as he took in the haphazardly painted words.

"Tracking hogs," he said with a shake of his head. "You ever hear of such a thing?"

"Well, I've heard of people using pigs to dig up truffles, so I guess they must be good at sniffing things out," Dean surmised. "And in country like this, hogs probably fair better than dogs, I guess."

"Hey, you don't suppose. . ."

"That Hogzilla and all her little friends were part of the whole setup?" Dean finished. "The thought isn't that far-fetched when you think about it. And that little black and white one went right for my neck," he realized. "I'll bet that's when they got the necklace."

"Yeah, but how'd they get the trail, or the scent, or whatever?" Sam wondered.

Dean was about to shrug in response when his mouth dropped open slightly, and he pointed toward the farmyard with a clear expression of 'duh' written on his face. He rolled his eyes in exasperation and tossed his hands to the side as Sam followed his gaze.

"I don't believe it," Sam said. "Burns?"

"Looks like," Dean stated. The elusive car that had been hidden in the background the last several miles pulled up in front of the farmhouse, and damn if it wasn't a silver Nissan 350Z. That had to be more than a coincidence.

"Wait, Daniel Burns, the tour company exec? He set this up?" Sam's face wrinkled with incredulity. "How?"

Dean chewed on his lower lip for a second then rolled his eyes as he made the connection. "Remember when we met him for lunch the other day to set up the gig? Dude, he spilled that beer on me and made that whole scene about wiping it off. I think he even said something about ruining my necklace. Give you ten-to-one odds he marked it somehow so the hogs would be able to pick it up out here."

"So, the whole thing was a setup just to get us here, as far away from civilization as possible, and steal the necklace, banking on us never being able to find it in the middle of the swamp," Sam agreed, letting his head fall back against the tree trunk with a thud. "I can't believe we got played like that."

"Yeah, well it's the last time I let you call the shots, little brother, paying gig or not. . . Damn!" Dean exclaimed as something else occurred to him.

"What?"

"I'll bet that check he gave us won't even clear the bank."

"Just perfect," Sam sighed. "So whattya think he's doing out here? Collecting his prize or just checking to make sure the ritual's been completed?"

"Either way, I think the necklace is down there somewhere," Dean suggested, nodding toward the homestead. His eyes widened appreciatively as he noticed some movement in the dooryard. "Hel-lo," he smirked and almost sauntered seductively out from behind the tree, forgetting momentarily that they were in recon mode.

"Dean!" Sam reprimanded, grabbing his brother's wrist and jerking him back down.

"Dude, what the hell?" One glance from behind the rough trunk and Sam couldn't help but grin himself. "Well now, didn't expect to see *that* out here."

"MM'mm," Dean grinned, lust coloring the tops of his ears despite the flush of fever. "Now what do you suppose a girl like that is doing in a dive like this?"

"Scouting out a partner for her mud-wrestling tag team," Sam suggested, raising his eyebrows. "Seriously though," he continued, switching gears quickly, "All that leather and not a hair out of place in this humidity, I think it's safe to assume she's not from around here. Chances are she's with our friend Burns, which means she's one of the bad guys, man. Sorry to ruin your fun. Then again, I bet your last girlfriend might still be waiting for you out in the barn."

"Oh, you're a riot," Dean sneered. "So, Burns and hot girl aren't from around here, then where are the owners of this fine establishment?"

"I think I got one suspicious looking guy snooping around this side of the house," Sam noticed. "Yeah, looks like a local, kinda built, but I don't see any weapons. You see him from your position?"

No answer.

"Dean?"

* * * *

Bo Chalmers crept around the back of the house, unaware of the eyes watching him from the overgrown rise above him at the perimeter of the property. He had only one objective in mind, and that was to figure out what Wren was really up to. Sure, she'd promised that whatever crazy-assed ritual she was performing inside would be complete in a couple more hours and that she'd hand over all the money she owed them before she left, but Bo had a bad feeling about that girl.

He'd been a hog farmer all his life, and as many times as he'd slaughtered animals, all part of the job, he'd never been able to do so with the cold indifference that Wren had exhibited when she'd murdered poor Blossom. And Cyrus might be blinded by her pretty face, but Bo hadn't missed the fact that she'd only offered a couple thousand extra for the loss of Petunia, not even half what Cyrus had sworn he'd get.

No, Bo didn't like Wren one bit. He might be a country bumpkin with a little of nothing to his name, but he had his pride, his family, and his home, and he wasn't about to stand by and let some city girl and her mysterious business partner walk rough shod over him. All he needed was some idea as to what the girl was really up to. He leaned closer to the corner of the house, careful to stay hidden from the two strangers who were conversing in the front.

"Brother Burns," Wren greeted, and Bo could hear but not see as the two exchanged handshakes. He heard her leather glove come into contact with the man's bare hand but didn't see that it was a non-traditional clasp that they shared. They curled only their fingertips around the other's to the second knuckle as though they were going to thumb wrestle rather than introduce themselves. Then the left hands cupped the right elbow of the person across from themselves as heads were nodded quickly in a half-bow that didn't extend below the shoulders.

"Sister," the man greeted. "I trust the ritual is nearly complete?"

"It is," she answered promptly, "no thanks to the morons you hired to retrieve the amulet for us. One of the pigs actually swallowed the damned thing."

"And how did you get it back?"

"Little yankee ingenuity," she smiled, drawing her knife smoothly out of its sheath and letting the light dance across the blade.

"Well then, I see I sent the right person for the job, my sister. You will be rewarded for your quick thinking just as soon as we get the amulet back to the powers that be and ascertain that its essence has been destroyed. You were able to determine its authenticity?"

"To the best of my ability," Wren answered. "All gods and goddesses from that time period are represented in the texts as horned figures, but it is definitely old enough to fit the bill. That and the fact that the damned thing zapped me when I tossed it in the fire seem to confirm that it's genuine."

"Excellent work. The higher ups will be more than pleased," Burns said with obvious satisfaction in his voice. "And the guardian hasn't given you any trouble?"

"Haven't seen or heard anything of him," Wren said with a shrug. "Either he didn't know what he had or he's been distracted by the separation sickness. Of course, this close to the completion of the ritual, it's unlikely that he's even standing. Gotta love those ancient binding rituals. Destroy the object, destroy the guardian. Kind of poetic, if you ask me. Anyway, it's highly unlikely that he or the brother will be able to stop the ritual from reaching completion. And will I ever be glad to get the hell out of here," she said, rolling her eyes and shuddering.

"Speaking of which, where are our gracious hosts?" Burns asked.

"They've been playing flies on the wall since I offed their precious little piggy. Pig farmers," she scoffed. "I think there is definitely something unhealthy about their relationship with the squealing little buggers. You'd a thought I cut their wife or their sister the way they acted. I trust you're gonna give 'em what they got comin' for all their trouble," she suggested, smirking wryly.

Burns pushed his suit jacket aside enough to reveal the pistol he had holstered beneath his arm. "Everything they got comin'," he agreed.

Bo didn't need to see inside the man's jacket to know that Burns wasn't showing Wren his pocket book. The farmer gritted his teeth and squinted his eyes in defiance. He didn't know what was so special about that necklace, but he'd already lost two members of his family over it, and he'd be damned if he let Wren and that man get away without paying. He wasn't afraid for his life. He and Cyrus had plenty of guns themselves, and they weren't just gonna lie down and let themselves be taken out. No money, no necklace, it was as simple as that.

Bo may have been a big clumsy-looking fellow, but he was also a hunter and a tracker with years of experience. He had no problem whatsoever stealing into the house through the back door and snatching the glowing necklace out of the embers of the black flame, unaware that he'd saved it in the nick of time. He doused it quickly in a bucket of water that was placed on the floor to catch the rainwater that leaked through the ceiling, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and stuffed it deep inside the pocket of his overalls.

Hearing the voices of Wren and her gentleman friend approaching, he exited the house as quietly as he'd entered and disappeared in the undergrowth as he headed up the ridge.

* * * *

"Dean!"

Sam spun around as quickly as he could without becoming entangled in the vines and hanging moss, struggling against the tendrils of reaching greenery to get to his brother.

Dean had his back pressed tightly against the tree. His teeth were clenched and his eyes were threatening to roll back in his head as his body was seized in spasms that seemed to involve every major muscle group, causing him to gasp shallowly through the spaces in his teeth. His chest heaved, and his back arched as the beads of sweat poured down his temples and dripped off his bulging jaw muscles.

"Geez," Sam hissed, reaching out to help, though he wasn't entirely sure what he could do. He placed a hand on Dean's shoulder, only to draw it back as his brother winced away. His skin was hot to the touch despite the layer of evaporating sweat that coated every exposed portion.

"Don't touch me," Dean gritted out, raising just his right hand off the ground as his left fisted in the dirt beside him. "Just give it. . . a minute."

Sam had to refrain from reaching out again, unable to take the pained expression that contorted his brother's face. Mentally, he forced himself to wait it out as Dean asked, but he knew that if the spell didn't pass quickly, lack of oxygen would become a concern. This attack was more intense than any of the prior episodes, and Sam could only hope that it was due to their proximity to the amulet and not the possibility that the ritual had already been completed.

Within a few minutes that seemed like hours, the spasms relaxed enough for Dean to breathe, and the older brother slouched back against the tree trunk with a groan. He squinted at Sam through half-focused, gleaming eyes. "We gotta get that thing back, Sammy. Now."

"We will," Sam assured. "Think you can. . ." Before he could complete the question, his head whipped around and his hand reached for the gun in his waistband. He put his finger to his lips in a shushing sign as he glanced at Dean out of the corner of his eyes. There was something moving in the underbrush, something big, and it was coming fast.

Moving protectively around to his brother's side of the tree, Sam placed himself between the threatening object and Dean, his pistol drawn and lifted to his chin in preparation for an attack. Both brothers tensed noticeably as the sound of snapping branches and rustling leaves drew ever closer. As the unknown assailant approached, the sound of heavy, panting breaths, punctuated the thudding footsteps.

Drawing a bead on the swiftest moving branches, Sam crouched down beside his brother and pulled the hammer back with a click. Dean could see the younger brother's pulse jumping beneath his ear, and if his own fingers weren't still trembling and his vision still blurred on the edges, he'd have reached for the .45 to offer backup.

Sam sprang to his feet. "Hold it right there," he said coldly, and a grimy-looking man with a long ponytail almost stumbled over the brothers before lifting his hands in surrender, eyes wide with surprise.

"Whoa, I ain't armed," the man stammered.

"Good, then I won't have to shoot you," Sam said. "Turn around and keep your hands over your head. You got any friends out here?"

"N-no," Bo answered. "No one knows I'm out here."

"So what are you doing sneaking around in the trees then?" Dean asked, standing slowly and leaning heavily against the tree. "And don't give me any crap about communing with nature, 'cuz dude, I can smell enough of you to know that you need that like I need backstage passes to a Gavin DeGraw concert." Dean waved his hand around in disgust, though he kept his eyes focused on the ground to keep the world from spinning and one hip dug into the bark for support.

"I was just going to look for my brother," Bo answered. "I overheard them folks down there talking, and I got something I gotta tell him."

The three of them jumped noticeably as the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being armed cracked from behind them.

"Well, you found me, little brother," a grainy voice rasped. Cyrus Chalmers stepped out, shotgun in hand, and leveled the weapon at Dean. "I don't know who you boys are, but pulling a gun on a fella's baby brother ain't how we says hello in these parts," he growled. Cyrus kept the gun pointed at Dean and directed his voice toward Sam. "Drop the pistol and step around by your little buddy here, and I won't make this any harder 'n it has to be."

Sam clicked the safety back on the Glock and dropped the pistol in the undergrowth. He heard it land softly in the thick carpet of moss and raised his hands. Stepping cautiously, he moved around in front of his brother and stopped with his body partially shielding the anticipated blast from reaching Dean. "Look, we don't want any trouble. We're just looking for something that we lost," Sam said calmly.

The sound of a shriek pierced the thick air, and all four men looked down into the hollow just in time to see Wren emerge from the house.

"It's gone!" The woman shouted. "The necklace is gone!"

* * * *

Bo Chalmers became noticeably panicked by Wren's shriek. He'd planned to be much further away before the necklace turned up missing, and failing that, he felt the sudden urge to skedaddle lest he be caught red-handed. He'd seen the lengths that girl would go to in order to get her hands on the prize, and he hadn't had a chance to garner a weapon for himself.

He took a few hasty steps backward up the ridge toward the protection of his brother's shotgun as he kept his eyes fixed on the farmyard below. In the process, he tripped over an exposed root of the tree against which Dean still leaned precariously.

At the instant Bo lurched into Dean, the older Winchester brother felt a familiar charge pulse through his nervous system. The trembling in his arms and legs subsided, and if it was possible, he almost felt the fever break. At the same time, the world became sharp and bright around him as though someone had just adjusted the pixilated images in a digital photo.

He straightened, no longer requiring the support of the tree to remain upright, and took what felt like the first full breath of air he'd had in days. Only the stench of the sweaty farmer and said farmer's shotgun toting brother kept Dean from wrapping his arms around the dude and frisking him right there. The guy had his amulet. He'd never been more certain of anything in his life.

Dean felt the cold steel of his .45 pressed comfortingly into his back and fought the urge to draw. He could probably grab the clumsy pig farmer around the neck and use him as a shield,

but Sam would still be caught unarmed in a redneck sandwich. That was a risk Dean wasn't ready to take. He hadn't had enough time to size up his opponents, and it was possible they were really no threat at all. Anyone could look menacing behind a loaded shotgun.

As Wren's voice rose in panic from the farmyard below, expressing her rage at losing the necklace, Dean raised his eyebrows snarkily. "Funny, seems like that's happening a lot around these parts. You boys wouldn't happen to have a jewelry smuggling operation of some sort going on out here? Kind of an Indiana Jones meets Deliverance scenario? Cuz I gotta say, that whole pig farmer disguise is choice. Have you met my brother?" He asked, nodding toward Sam. "He's got a thing for costumes, too. Maybe we could trade secrets sometime, but first . . ." His eyes narrowed accusingly, "How about you give me back my necklace."

"Dean . . ." Sam reprimanded, tilting his head. His eyes clearly said, 'stop pissing off the guy with the gun.'

"Dude, this guy's got my necklace, and I want it back," Dean explained.

"You accusing my brother of stealin', boy?" Cyrus spat, raising his shotgun menacingly. "If anyone owes anybody anything here, I'd say it's you boys who owe us for slaughtering our pig. This here's their swamp, and they was just protectin' their territory and doin' their job. You didn't have to kill none of 'em," he said, voice cracking.

"Oh, please," Dean grumbled, tilting his head back from side to side until his neck popped loudly, "this is about us taking out your overfed girlfriend? Well, we had a contract with one Mr. Daniel Burns that gave us license to do just that. Seems your little sweetheart was scaring away the tourists, though, why anyone would want a tour of Satan's backyard is beyond me. But the necklace wasn't part of the deal, so we'd kinda like to have it back. You got a problem with the terms of the agreement, I'd say take it up with those folks down there," he suggested, pointing toward the interlopers below.

"Those fine professionals can put their money where their mouths are," Cyrus sneered. "You look to me to be all mouth, pretty boy."

"Hey, I resemble that remark," Dean retorted, cringing as Sam elbowed him in the ribs sharply. "What?!" Dean snapped. "Uncle Jed and Jethro here wanna play with the big dogs, maybe what they need is someone to tell 'em they're gettin' screwed. 'Cuz if they think for one minute that they're gettin' paid for any of their time or trouble, they got another think comin'. And if no one's gettin' paid, then I'm gettin' what's mine before the hammer falls."

Dean opened his mouth to continue his rant but was interrupted unexpectedly by Bo.

"He's right," the younger Chalmers brother ventured, not taking his eyes from the forms of Wren and Daniel as the two moved frantically about the farmyard, no doubt searching him out.

"You got somethin' to say, little brother?" Cyrus asked, uncertain as to whom Bo was talking.

"Yeah, Cyrus," Bo said, still not turning. "I heard them folks talking down there, and all they care about is that damned necklace. They ain't gonna pay us one red cent. I'm sure of it."

Cyrus lowered his shotgun slightly, taken aback by his brother's words. "Did you hear 'em say they wasn't gonna pay?" He asked.

"No, not exactly," Bo clarified. "I heard 'em say we were gonna get what we got comin'," he said. "But the way they said it, Cyrus . . . I'm sure they weren't talking about money."

"Well . . . so . . . well," Cyrus stammered, "you ain't the businessman in this here family, little brother. I am. That's why I handle the money end of things, and you feed the pigs."

"Yeah, way to run the family business," Dean grumbled sarcastically.

"Shut up!" the older Chalmers brother snapped, raising the shotgun up again.

Dean took half a step back, arms uplifted as he raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. "Dude, watch where you're pointing that thing." Of course, he didn't miss Sam's grumble of disapproval as his younger brother ducked his mouth behind his hand and uttered something the television censors would probably have had to dub over in editing.

"Shut your smart mouth, boy," Cyrus ordered, unknowingly echoing the censored version of Sam's garbled sentiment. "You got so much to say about our business associates, then maybe you ought to say it to their faces," he suggested, motioning with the shotgun toward the farmyard. "I think it's time we introduce our guests to these party crashers," he suggested to his brother. "Bo, get your ass back here and let your big brother handle this."

Bo looked at Sam and Dean with an expression of guarded fear and understanding that said he knew the Winchesters were the innocent victims who would pay for his indiscretion, and he was sorry. But Cyrus was his family, and Bo could tell that Sam and Dean understood about family. The younger Chalmers brother stepped obediently behind his elder.

Dean felt the amulet move away from him, and a wave of panic swept over him like nausea, as though the thing to which he'd been unwittingly bound had latched onto him in those moments of proximity and was now clinging with a desperate ferocity that dwarfed its former ties.

A flash like lightning moved up through his central nervous system, starting with the tiny but sensitive sensors in his toes and streaking upward, leaping every synapse in his body and exiting the top of his head. Unable to control his body, Dean felt his knees buckle and tried to reach a hand onto the tree bark to stop his tumble, but his legs continued to fold, and his arms refused to obey his commands. His throat tightened around his trachea, and his ribs clamped down around his lungs as though every molecule of oxygen were being wrung from him by force.

Sam was standing close enough to his brother to realize what was happening and slink an arm around Dean's waist before he could hit the ground. Within the span of few seconds, he felt his leg muscles groan and his back twist painfully as his brother's full weight settled into his awkward grasp. Sam was pulled sideways and almost headfirst into the tree in his effort to slow Dean's collapse, but just as he felt he'd be forced to let go or fall heavily atop the elder, Sam felt Dean's muscles flex and heard a heaving breath burn into his brother's throat.

"Dean, dude, help me out here," Sam exhaled through gritting teeth. After a few more tenuous seconds, the older brother managed to right himself and force a hand onto the tree after which he promptly shrugged off Sam's help.

"Pretty boy got a problem there, fellas?" Cyrus asked cynically.

"Yeah," Sam snapped with a squint to his eyes that said, 'brilliant deduction, moron.' "He needs to get his necklace back. And he doesn't have time for this redneck picnic."

"Well then, see there. We best be gettin' back down there and clear this whole mess up then," Cyrus chided.

"Cyrus . . ." Bo ventured, hesitantly stepping out from behind his brother.

"Shut up!" The elder brother snapped, holding up his hand. "Get your ass back there, and stop interrupting. I can handle these two city boys." He gestured wildly with the shotgun. "Get him up, long legs, and let's get this show on the road," he ordered, glaring at Sam.

The younger Winchester fisted a hand in the back of Dean's sweat-soaked t-shirt and tried to lever him away from the tree, a motion to which Dean responded irritably. The older brother pushed Sam's elbow away, losing the grip, and wobbled on his own unsteady legs. "Let's finish this bitch," Dean huffed, and he began moving unsteadily through the underbrush toward the farmyard.

Wren and Daniel saw them traipsing down the hillside and were armed and waiting when the two sets of brothers broke through the underbrush. As soon as Dean stumbled into the clearing, Wren had him by the collar of his t-shirt, the blade of her hunting knife pressed into the soft flesh of his neck. A trickle of blood slid into the divot at the center of his throat where neck and clavicle met, as he swallowed convulsively against the razor sharp weapon.

Sam moved instinctively to reach for the gun he knew Dean still had tucked into his jeans but was stopped by the sharp prodding of the shotgun into his back.

"Well, if it isn't the guardian," Wren sneered. "I gotta hand it to you boys. We never figured you'd have the brains to track us down. Looks like the old geezer chose a worthy watchdog for his trinket, after all." She jerked Dean forward 'til his forehead was nearly pressed into hers and cut off any protests he could vocalize with the cold steel of her blade. "You don't look too good, Guardian." She pressed a leather-gloved hand to his forehead, wiping the layer of excessive sweat from his brow and noting the tremble that pulsed through him beneath her fingertips. "Guess it's safe to say you haven't got what you came for, huh?"

With a lusty sneer, she moved her face closer to Dean's staring into his watery hazel eyes so intently that her own dark eyes went slightly crossed. She opened her mouth slightly as though to force a breathy kiss upon his lips, but laughed instead and shoved him hard to the ground. Weakened by the separation sickness that had heightened exponentially after the near reunion with the amulet, Dean sprawled at her feet, unable to catch himself or stop her from moving onto Sam.

Sam became sandwiched between the girl's trusty knife and the pig farmer's jabbing shotgun barrel. His eyes darted to Burns who backed up the fiery beauty with a pistol cocked and at the ready. Sam's breath rasped past the intruding blade as Wren leaned into him as she had his brother, searching his soulful eyes for any trace of deception.

"What about you, young Winchester?" She asked. "You wouldn't be keeping anything from your big brother now, would you?"

Sam's upper lip curled back in half a sneer as Wren's petite fingers worked into his hair and yanked his head back. "You got anyone else with you, little brother?" She breathed into his ear. "Cuz someone's got my necklace, and if it ain't you, and it ain't big brother, then you must have an accomplice somewhere. And I worked too hard to get that little trinket to let it go this close to completing the ritual."

She looked into Sam's eyes as they darted back and forth worriedly, and she knew he was weighing his options for escape, just waiting for the right moment to counter her grip. She wasn't going to give him the chance and tightened her fingers in his hair as she prepared to finish him off. He was nothing to her but a distraction.

From the corner of her eye, Wren saw a flash of movement. At the same second, she felt Sam twist out of her grip and fling her backward toward Burns with a grunt. Turning her head angrily, she saw Bo Chalmers dash across the farmyard toward the pig barn. "Damn!" She shouted. "The hick boy's got the necklace!" She sprinted after him, knife still gripped tightly in her fist.

Burns pivoted, gun drawn, and tried to get a bead on the fleeing farmer. Before he could pull the trigger a deafening blast rang through the clearing, and he fell back into the dirt in a bloody heap.

Sam crouched to the ground behind Dean who'd already managed to get the .45 out of his waist band and had it drawn on Cyrus Chalmers. The older farmer looked pale and shaken as his hands went limp around his still smoking shotgun. Seizing the opportunity, Sam leapt forward and snatched the weapon from his shocked grip with no resistance whatsoever.

"You all right?" Dean asked, keeping the pistol drawn with a two-handed grip in an effort to stop its infernal shaking.

"Yeah," Sam sighed. "You?"

Dean grimaced and moaned slightly as he forced himself to his feet. "I'll be a helluva lot better once we get that necklace back," he admitted, and Sam didn't miss the pained tremble in his voice.

Sam reached his hand down to help his brother to his feet, and they both made their way over to Burns. The businessman's wide-open eyes stared lifelessly into the crystal blue sky, and the brothers looked at each other knowingly before glancing passively at Cyrus and heading in the direction in which Wren had pursued the other Chalmers brother.

The high-pitched squealing of Hogzilla's groupies, as Sam couldn't refrain from calling them in his mind, drew the boys into the hog barn, Sam leading. Dean bumped roughly into his brother's back as Sam halted in the doorway of the reeking enclosure, his arms spread out to the side as though he were preventing a child from running into traffic.

Dean ducked beneath Sam's arm and halted beside him in the doorway, a plan of action failing to form.

Bo Chalmers had been caught from behind by the knife-wielding, leather clad hottie, and he was bent over the rail of the hog pen, his right hand reaching out as far into the enclosure and away from Wren as he could stretch it. He was stronger than she by at least a hundred and fifty percent, but she still had the infernal knife and knew how to use it.

Wren pressed up behind him, her gloved hand knotted into his greasy ponytail so that his head was stretched back, exposing his neck to her razor-sharp blade. A thin trail of blood dripped down into the hog trough, sending the hungry buggers into a squealing frenzy.

Sam raised Dean's pistol and took aim, his mind struggling with the question of whether he could actually shoot the very human girl.

"Let him go," Sam instructed, his voice taking on the perfect tone between authority and placation.

"Oh, I will," she huffed through gritted teeth, "just as soon as he hands over my amulet."

"You mean MY amulet, don't you?" Dean corrected, bracing a hand against the doorjamb as Cyrus rushed past him with the shotgun in tow.

"Bo!" The older Chalmers boy shouted in surprise. He cocked his shotgun and stood beside Sam. "You let my brother go, you bitch!"

Dean couldn't help but smirk. *There but for the grace of whatever God separates the men from the rednecks. . .*

"I'm not leaving without the amulet!" Wren spat, drawing the knife deeper into Bo's flesh, an action that elicited a raucous squeal from the hungry hogs.

Bo trained his eyes as far to the side as he could so that he could see his brother and the two Winchesters caught in the standoff. "She's gonna kill us whether we give it to her or not," he gasped. "I heard her and that other fella talkin'. Just shoot her."

Wren yanked back on his ponytail, cutting off any further vocalizations.

With a surprised grimace of pain, Bo opened his clenched fist, and the amulet dropped into the frenzied hoard of hogs. Realizing that he'd lost his only bargaining leverage against the hellcat on his back, he squirmed, oblivious to the cutting blade, and hip-tossed her into the muck.

He immediately clasped a hand over his bleeding throat. "You want it so bad, then find it your damn self!" He spat.

Cyrus rushed to his brother's side, and Dean and Sam rushed to the rail, trying to see the amulet in the muck.

Wren plucked herself from the slop, screaming in rage and disgust. She was coated from head to toe in muck, and as she spun around, searching in vain for the lost treasure, she spotted the trinket on the edge of the wooden trough and wrapped one hand around it.

She turned to make a dash for the far side of the pen in an attempt to evade the four men that awaited her on the near side, when a large hog with long, curling tusks, crazed by the scent of blood, latched onto her calf and pulled her back into the trough.

Within seconds, the rest of the pigs piled onto her tiny form, trampling her into the mud as she struggled to free herself, gagging and coughing on the tainted liquid that pooled into her mouth and nose.

Sam realized what was happening, and his instincts screamed at him to protect human life, no matter how low on the humanity scale it might be. He leaped the rail like a pole vaulter, bracing one arm on the top bar and swinging gracefully into the pen. He grabbed a shovel that

was braced against the side and began swinging it wildly. Several times he lost his footing in the slippery mess and fell into the mire himself.

At last, he managed to get a giant hand around one of the fallen girl's boot clad feet, and he dragged her out from under the pigs' trampling hooves, not stopping until he'd reached the gate. He kept the pigs at bay with the shovel in one hand while he stooped and lifted Wren with his other arm, flinging her ungracefully onto the dirt outside.

He leapt back out himself, and knelt beside her still form, but shook his head sadly. He couldn't put his fingers to her neck and find a pulse, because there was no neck to feel. Her throat had been completely ripped out, and her eyes were glazed over in a death stare.

Sam looked up at the other three men, who met his stare knowingly, Dean offering an apology with his hazel eyes that Sam knew stemmed from his desire to protect his little brother from just this kind of pointless tragedy. Sam just wiped a dirty hand across his mouth and brow as his breath evened out and his thoughts came back into focus.

The younger Winchester saw the dead girl's one hand was still clenched tightly. She'd lost her knife, the one thing that could possibly have saved her life, but had somehow managed to keep a hold on the blasted amulet. Some people's priorities. . . Dean was right, people were just crazy.

Sam pried the girl's hand open, and in closing his fist around the amulet, caught the finger of one of her leather motorcycle gloves in his hand. It slid off easily, slicked with the mud. As her pasty white hand flopped limply to the ground, Sam glimpsed something that seemed oddly familiar and out of place.

He lifted the hand curiously, and then caught his brother's eyes. "I don't believe it," he groaned, drawing Dean's attention to the corpse hand. "Recognize this?" He asked, leadingly.

Dean knelt beside his brother and picked up the appendage gingerly, having had more than his share of mud baths in the last few days. It didn't take him more than a second to recognize the tiny tattoo on the girl's hand. "It's the same one Burns had," he said, tossing the hand down angrily. "Just beautiful. I wonder how many more there are?"

Sam shrugged sadly. "Well, if there are more, then we have to get outta here before they come looking." He glanced at the amulet in his hand and thoughtfully brushed most of the mud off on his jeans before tossing it to his brother. "At least we got what we came for."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, smiling gratefully as he snatched the trinket from the air. He turned to Bo and Cyrus, the older brother tending the younger's wound on the far side of the pen. "Uh, it's been fun, dudes, but we really can't be stayin' for dinner," he waved dismissively.

The Chalmers boys barely acknowledged him with a nod, as Sam memorized the tattooed symbol and stood to leave, a thoughtful expression on his dirty face. Large sums of money and inconspicuous tattoos reeked of organization. *What the hell have we gotten into? A cult? Crime syndicate? And what the hell did they know about the damned amulet?* Some answers would have to wait for another day, he decided as he followed Dean out of the barn.

Stepping out of the barn into the harsh sunlight of early afternoon, Dean squinted down at his amulet with a newfound reverence sparkling in his eyes. Sure seemed like a whole lot of trouble for such a little thing. The fact that he still knew nothing about it, other than the fact that he sure as hell didn't want to lose it ever again, weighed heavily on his mind, but for now, he was content to have it back and to get the hell out of this swamp as far and as fast as possible. He tightened his fist around it protectively and sped up his footsteps, eager to get the show on the road.

"So, whattya think they'll do with the bodies?" Sam asked, nodding toward Burns' fallen corpse in the dirt.

"Well, if they're smart, probably feed 'em to the pigs," Dean suggested, "and keep the car as payment."

Sam laughed, shaking his head, because, despite the ridiculousness of the suggestion, he had no doubt in his mind that it would probably end up playing out just that way. Redneck

logic wasn't exactly part of the required Stanford curriculum, but sometimes, it made more sense than anything he could learn in law school.

Sam glimpsed his brother gazing down at the amulet as they walked back to the car. "You know, I'm beginning to really hate that thing," he said, brushing off mud in great dried flakes as the sun baked it onto his skin.

Dean looked at him thoughtfully, as though he might agree with his brother for once and then let his eyebrows twist unevenly. "You're just jealous, cuz you can't have one. You know, being only the second born and all," he teased.

Sam fielded the remark with ease, and thought about it for a second. "You ever wonder about that?" He asked.

"About what?"

"Well, about why it is that I got the freaky visions and spoon-bending crap, and you didn't?" He clarified. "I mean, seems like the powers that be woulda gone for the firstborn," he speculated.

"Why ask why?" Dean answered dismissively. "It is what is, and I don't think it works that way." They trudged on for a few more yards before Dean continued. "Besides, if I had gotten the powers, I'd have been totally screwed," he stated.

"Why?"

"No super awesome big brother to watch my back," he answered, a wry grin twisting his lips. Sam could tell he was already feeling much better now that he had his prized possession back.

"Well, you'd still have me," Sam pointed out.

Dean chuckled. "Oh, thanks for playing *Life's a Bitch*. Sorry, you didn't win our grand prize of one super awesome big brother, but as a consolation prize, you'll be taking home a trusty geek boy sidekick and the *Life's a Bitch* Home Edition Board Game," he snarked with barely a pause, and Sam wondered how long he'd been waiting to use that one on him.

Sam shook his head. "Well, it's nice to see your ego hasn't been damaged by this whole fiasco," he countered.

Dean spun around and continued walking backwards through the brush as he addressed his brother's comment. "What, you're saying I'm egotistical?"

"It is what it is," Sam returned, taking pride in throwing Dean's words back in his face.

Dean turned back around and craned just his neck backward to continue talking to Sam. "Well, just remember that the next time some creepy crawly has got you by the neck and you need your egotistical big brother to save your scrawny ass," he sassed.

"I don't know," Sam said, sounding bored with the conversation. "I was thinking I might call those guys from TAPS."

"Bitch."

"Jerk."

The End