

## WHEN THE WAR COMES

### **Undisclosed Location**

Sweat dripped off the faces of the men that sat cramped together in the small meeting room, the assembly quarters far too small to accommodate their number. They had all gathered for the same purpose, and each man wiped the moisture from his forehead in apprehension, tingling with excitement as they awaited their leader.

Tense acquaintances and fresh new alliances were formed within the daily expanding group as more hunters joined the fight, but the overwhelming sense of purpose and duty had formed camaraderie among them, regardless. Weak, fledgling bonds and former disputes were given less importance than the strength they all stood to gain against the common enemy. Today, they were united.

The air was thick with the heavy scent of whiskey mixed with the hint of gun powder and leather as the older hunters, their gray hair, beards, and well-worn faces conveying their stint in battle and a wealth of knowledge, took their seats along the far wall, drinks held idly in their hands. Their empty, tired eyes watched the young counterparts to their impending mission drink and celebrate recklessly, their chatter booming through the small space. No man doubted that youth and agility were certainly assets they could draw upon, although the breakneck tendencies of the inexperienced younger members laced fear into the hearts of many. This was not a time to fail because of carelessness.

A sliver of light pierced through the dim room at the creak of the main door, and every man turned, voices falling silent as they watched two men appear through the entryway. Their hearts swelled as the first man was revealed to be their leader and then hardened again when a dark-haired stranger sauntered in behind him.

"Afternoon," their leader greeted, his damaged voice but a harsh whisper, his badge of courage earned breathing fire demon destruction at very close range. He gestured for the men to relax but listen. "I would like to introduce John Winchester, a man I've known for some time. He has come to join our fight, and we're very fortunate to have him."

John nodded a greeting, and a loud welcoming cheer echoed through the room, the expanse of which filled quickly with the clinking of shot glasses and shouted orders for more. A wry smile appeared on both John and the leader's faces. John stepped aside, leaning against the wall as he watched how, with just a clearing of his throat, the commanding hunter fought to regain the silence. A slew of older hunters began issuing orders for quiet and order, their respect for the man obvious. When the room fell silent yet again, the leader smiled at his compiled army, vibrating with anticipation of his announcement.

"Men," he began, the raspy susurrant captivating every man's attention, "it has been a long road and we have lost many in our fight. But in this hour, the tide has changed."

A slew of whispers and questions hit the air and were silenced by a wave of the hand from their leader. "As you know we lost two good men when they attempted to scout out our enemy, their bodies were left displayed to strike fear in our hearts. But when we recovered the bodies, we were rewarded with information." The speaker held up a small piece of crumpled paper stained with spots of crimson. "They left us coordinates. I searched them out this morning and it is with pride that I tell you—we have found our enemy."

John Winchester's eyes widened in skepticism and disbelief. He had hunted this demon for years, and while his past ally was declaring that an end was in sight, he had to admit it seemed sudden. Why had none of these scouts been mentioned before? The other men, however, appeared prepared for a fight, and the excitement became tangible as the voices grew louder and shouts of readiness and battle filled the air.

"Now is the time," the leader stated quietly, his eyes scanning the crowd slowly. "The war has come."

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John swallowed the shot of whiskey, relishing in the dull burn as the amber liquid rolled down his throat. His eyes had yet to leave their self-appointed leader, and upon seeing the man turn to head outside, John quickly rose, his long strides catching up as he exited the building.

"That was quite a speech you gave in there," John commented with a smirk. His voice held an edge of questioning. "Can't help but wonder if it was all on the up-and-up, though, or if you might just be warming up for a career in politics." He looked down briefly, aware that his friend was probably not used to being questioned, based on his observations of the rest of the growing crew. "I mean, I've know you for years, and you never once told me about those scouts."

"There wasn't much to tell," the man replied, rubbing a hand over the scar lining his neck gingerly. "It is not wise to dwell in failure, John."

John scratched the stubble lining his chin, his deep brown eyes locking on his fellow hunter's form. His comrade's attention was distant, focused on the surrounding wall that encased their hideout. "Zack."

The man turned, a weary smile on his face, reading the desperation in his comrade's expression. "What do you need?"

"I need your word that my boys stay out of this fight," John answered, running his hands through his hair. "Look, you're the only one who really knows about them, and you're calling the shots here. I need your guys to lay off and let Sam and Dean handle their own work."

"Your boys are men, John," Zack's gravelly voice chided. "Don't you think that is their decision?"

John clenched his jaw, his body going rigid with frustration. "After what happened last time - No, it's not their decision."

Zack nodded thoughtfully, his lips forming a tight line. "They think I'm dead. Most of the hunters in their realm do as well. If that's what it takes to get you fighting by my side, John Winchester, then it shouldn't be a problem."

"Good," John sighed, his nervous hands sliding into the pockets of his jacket. "I'm gonna have to call them soon, keep them busy."

"Do what you must," Zack stated absently, his gaze returning to the wall as John nodded and turned to walk away. A sea of loud voices flooded the outside as the father re-entered the hunters' headquarters.

Zack breathed in the afternoon air deeply, finding his center before reaching into his jacket and pulling out his worn cell phone and dialing. John wasn't the only man with work to do.

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Dean eased the Impala into the motel parking space directly in front of their room, wiping a hand across his face and grimacing at the wetness there. "Look, Sam, all I'm saying is that if you want a woman to pay attention to you, you might want to lose that 'I sweat, therefore I am' scent you got going on."

"I'm not the one who suggested a ten mile run, Dean," Sam griped, groaning as he cracked open the passenger door and moved his sore, screaming body out of the car. "What was with that damn trail anyways? Uphill on the home stretch?"

"Ah, you're getting soft on me, Sammy," Dean teased breathily, pulling at the damp collar of his T-shirt as he trudged to the room. "Your heart rate is supposed to go up. Why it's

called exercise.”

“And people wonder why the majority of the population just doesn’t care,” Sam commented through a deep exhale. He jiggled the door handle and looked at Dean in desperation. “Key, bro. C’mon.”

“I’m coming,” Dean muttered, wincing as he reached for his wallet, retrieving the motel key and unlocking the door, his face twisted from his body soreness.

“Seems I’m not the only one who’s not in shape,” Sam laughed, nudging his brother in the ribs and eliciting a shaky scoff from Dean as he brushed past him and flopped down on the far bed.

Dean shook his head as he sank down on the edge of his bed and slowly lifted a leg that now seemed to weigh several hundred pounds in order to remove his shoe. “You are the one who’s going to shower first, though.”

“No,” Sam murmured, shifting slightly and carefully as his whole body felt like it was on fire, his head buried in his pillow.

“Sorry, bro,” the older brother snarked, dropping the heavy leg with a thud and lifting up the other one with equally exorbitant exertion, his arms protesting the motion as he reached for his second shoe. “But if I let you sleep there for even ten minutes, they ain’t never gonna get the smell out of those sheets.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious,” Sam slurred, his voice muffled by his comfortable head rest.

“Sam, seriously, dude,” Dean laughed, reaching over and swatting the younger brother’s foot. “Just leave me some hot water.”

Sam slid up slowly, his hair askew and a glare on his face. “No way in hell.”

“Don’t be like that,” Dean drawled, throwing a clean shirt in Sam’s direction. The younger man caught it and trudged wearily to the bathroom, stopping at the coffee table to retrieve a fresh pair of jeans from his pack, his eyes falling on Dean’s phone.

“Hey, you got a message,” Sam stated, selecting a pair of pants from his grand total of three.

“Yeah?” Dean asked curiously, grunting to a stand and shuffling over to the table. He retrieved his phone, eyes studying the screen. “Well, somebody loves me.”

Sam rolled his eyes and groaned, moving in closer to peer over his brother’s shoulder. “Who’s it from?”

“Dude, get in the shower,” Dean complained, scrunching his nose in disgust and jerking away from Sam’s prying eyes.

“You smell like a sweat shop too, you know?” Sam shot back, crossing his arms in defiance. “Who called?”

“Nobody,” Dean said with a cocky smirk. “It was a text.”

Sam sucked in a breath. “From Dad?”

“No number. So, yeah, probably,” Dean reasoned, dropping the phone down on the table and glancing over at his brother. “Coordinates. He’s giving us another run around. Can you believe that?”

“We don’t know that,” Sam stated thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s where he is?”

Dean barked a laugh, his eyebrows quirked in amusement. “Yeah, Sammy.”

“Look, Dean, I’m pissed too, okay?” Sam offered, ducking his head to establish a sight line connection with his brother. “But we need to check this out. We don’t know if it’s a real gig or not.”

“Yeah, man, I know,” Dean sighed, scratching his head idly. “You pretty much ready to go? I mean, after you shower that is. You’re not getting back in my baby reeking like that.”

“Shut up,” Sam muttered, turning on his heel and heading toward the bathroom. “And yeah, I’m ready. I’ll research those out when you’re in, okay? Find out where we’re heading?”

“Works for me,” Dean stated, rummaging through his own pack and waving Sam off to the shower. He heard the soft click of the bathroom door, and snapped his head up. “Hot

water!"

The cry pierced through the worn wood separating the brothers, and Dean nearly knocked it down when Sam's petulant reply flew back at him.

"Yeah, right!"

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They were ready in less than half an hour, Dean sulking in the driver's seat, body still damp from the ice water shower and Sam sitting comfortably in the passenger, wringing the flicks of water out of his long shaggy locks.

"This better be a real case," Dean snapped, selecting his musical choice for the beginning of the drive, and clenching his jaw when Sam shook his head, droplets of water flinging onto Dean's face. "Dude, that gets on the leather..."

"I know, I know," Sam placated, twisting the stolen motel towel in his hands.

"Not sure you do," Dean threatened, eyeing his little brother carefully before reaching over and smacking the back of his head playfully.

"I think I got the point," Sam shot back, rubbing his head and feigning hurt. "And I don't think Dad would do that again, Dean."

"Hope not," Dean muttered with a sigh. "Then I might have to kick his ass."

"Ha! That'd be fun to watch," Sam laughed, shaking his head when he saw the CD Dean had chosen. Switching expressions quickly, he issued a begging glance for Dean to pick another. "I think I'd sell tickets."

"You'd be right next to me," Dean stated with finality, inserting the CD despite Sam's protest. "Tag team, only way we stand a chance."

"He'd still kick our asses," Sam murmured truthfully, a frown on his face as Blue Oyster Cult pounded out of the speakers.

"You do your homework, Sammy?" Dean asked, turning onto the highway exit.

"Yep," Sam replied, patting the top of his laptop lovingly. "Got it right here."

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"Oh, this is just...peachy," Dean grumbled, pressing his lips together hard enough on the "p" to make a noise like cracking chewing gum as he spat it out. The word was obviously not his first choice phrase, considering he'd spoken in mostly four-letter words the entire drive up there. He smacked his hands against the steering wheel indignantly and stepped out of the car, taking in his surroundings, and shutting the door as solidly as he could while refraining from actually slamming it.

That would just be abuse. The car was the only Winchester not allowed to take any of that.

It wasn't the Impala's fault that the entire facility the mysterious coordinates had led them to was surrounded by a ten-foot, chain-link fence. "I thought you said this was a school, not a friggin' prison," he scowled, stalking around to the trunk which, like the rest of the car, was semi-hidden in the dense underbrush.

"Military school," Sam corrected. "Might as well be prison. Some very rich people spent a whole lotta cash to send their spoiled brats here for some tough love." He looked at the towering fence appraisingly, almost kinking his neck as he pointed his chin to the top.

"Kinda makes you glad Dad never took Aunt Cindy's advice about sending you to one, doesn't it?" He asked, cocking his eyebrow expectantly as Dean frowned dubiously at the task before him. "Not that we needed military school with our own flesh-and-blood drill instructor sleeping in the next room."

"Yyyeah," Dean said distractedly, not nearly as quick to jump to his father's defense after

the wild goose chase he'd sent them on a week earlier. The fact that the old man was apparently back to sending them coordinates again instead of addressing them directly was almost a slap in the face after all they'd been through in the last year.

Dean grasped the chain links in one hand and gave the fence a shake. Not even a wiggle. He guessed the support poles had to be embedded in concrete to keep the wire stretched that tightly over the years of abandonment. "School my ass. Add a little razor wire and this place could pass for Manticore."

Sam wrinkled his eyebrows. "*Dark Angel?*"

"Duude, Jessica Alba in camouflage and army boots, kicking ass and taking names?" He defended, dismissing his brother's skeptical smirk. "She was like Luke Skywalker with b... boots," he waffled with a smirk, leading his brother on. He wiggled his eyebrows. *Thought I was gonna say boobs didn't ya? Perv.*

"Besides, that show was freakin' hilarious," Dean continued. "That guy, Normal, he was totally gay for the good-looking transgenic kid. What was his name? Alex? Allan? Alec?" He shook his head to break the train of thought and get back to the business at hand. "Something like that anyways..." he trailed off, following Sam's glare up to the apex of the perimeter fence. "Could totally use some of that souped-up, genetically-engineered strength about now, though. Then we could just make like an X-5 and jump this mother."

Sam caught the doubtful look on his brother's face. "Well, we could always walk the perimeter and see if there's an opening," he suggested.

"What's the matter, Frances?" Dean smirked, stuffing his EMF meter into the inner pocket of his jacket and zipping it safely inside. "Fraid you might break a nail?"

"Yeah, right. I was thinking more about you and your little, uh, handicap," Sam snarked.

"Handicap?"

"Well, I hate to point it out to you, big brother, or should I say, older brother, but you're a little vertically challenged."

"It just looks that way from your freakishly exaggerated perspective. Objects in Sam's line of sight are closer than they appear. You're just getting the panoramic view. You miss a lot of the detail that way. A good macro lens comes in handier in our line of work."

Dean took a few steps away from the fence and assumed a runner's standing start position. "C'mon, Twiggy. Let's just get this over with."

With that, he sprinted forward and launched himself as far up the wire as he could reach.

It was an impressive leap, and he managed to get a handhold about eighteen inches from the top, grunting loudly as his arms stretched in their sockets. He hit the wire chest first, feet uselessly dangling for a hold beneath him. After a couple seconds of awkward kicking, he managed to wedge the toe of one of his boots into the diamond mesh and pushed up, alleviating the strain on his arm sockets and taking a moment to catch his breath.

Dean heard two long strides crunch over the gravel behind him and a grunt of exertion, and then Sam was at his side.

To the older brother's dismay, the long-legged geek boy was like a cat, latching the top rail of the fence in one bound and hoisting himself smoothly up to the top while barely wiggling the wire. Sam balanced his big feet on the top rail for a second, taking most of his weight on his arms as he smoothly turned around and began lowering himself down the other side. He paused momentarily, a Cheshire grin on his face that seemed remarkably fitting as his bangs clung to his forehead in black tabby stripes.

"You were saying, Shorty?" He teased, looking down upon his brother as Dean wrestled his way up by brute force alone.

Dean ignored the remark and kept doggedly climbing, concentrating on each hand and foothold. He was nearly to the top when he felt a strange movement beneath his jacket.

It was then that he remembered the tear in the lining of the pocket.

He reached out gracefully with his own cat-like reflexes and caught the EMF detector

just as it slid free of its hiding spot. He caught the prized meter easily but lost both footholds in the process and was dangling helplessly by one arm in the blink of an eye.

His face grew red with exertion as he tried to muscle his way back into a safe position using just the strength of his one arm and upper back. *Oh crap. This is gonna hurt.*

Before his brutalized fingers could slide free of the death grip they were trying desperately to maintain on the wire, Dean felt two giant hands snake under his arms and haul him up to the top. Sam maintained his grasp long enough for Dean to get his one free arm up and over the rail, fingers twined into the mesh on the opposite side and feet braced in firm holds.

Dean caught sight of his brother's self-satisfied, expectant smirk and groaned audibly with a roll of his eyes. He would have preferred falling on his ass to having his ginormous baby brother save it, thus validating Sam's suggestion that they should've just looked for an open gate somewhere.

"I had it, Sam," he protested with a look of 'God just kill me now.'

Sam laughed in disbelief and proceeded to lower himself down the other side of the fence. "Whatever, man."

Dean watched him work his way down to the ground and managed to get himself turned around to the other side of the wire with just the one free arm. Then he paused momentarily to consider what he should do with the EMF detector, because no way was he gonna be able to climb down with it in his hand. "Sam, I'm gonna drop the EMF down to you..." he began.

As he turned his head to find Sam's position, he lost his tremulous grasp of his own and a wave of vertigo washed over him just long enough for his fingers to unwind from the rail. Without warning, he fell, landing on top of his brother and knocking them both to the ground.

The fence was located on the top of an incline, and the brothers went rolling down it, through the brush and gravel for what seemed like a hundred yards before they coasted to a stop, leaving behind a trail of dust and a string of curses they were pretty sure they wouldn't want their dad knowing they had in their vocabularies.

Of course, they'd learned most of them from John to begin with.

Shaking his head as the world stopped spinning at last, Dean took stock of his various body parts. He quickly realized that nothing was seriously injured, but the position of his arms and legs, akimbo atop Sam's sprawled form, was likely going to get him in a whole world of hurt if he didn't get the hell off before his brother decided to go mechanical bull and throw him off.

Jerking spastically, *awkward much*, Dean rolled off of Sam and stood shakily, brushing the leaves and dirt from his body as he did so. "You okay, Sammy?" He asked, glancing down at his brother uncomfortably. "You know, if you wanted to go for a roll, we coulda stopped a couple of towns back to relieve a little tension with a couple of pretty local girls," he snarked half-heartedly, embarrassed at his own clumsiness.

"Zack?" Sam asked.

Dean looked at his brother with an expression of total bewilderment. "Zack? Dude, you didn't hit your head or anything did you?"

Only then did he catch Sam's glance diverting to just over his right shoulder. The click of a revolver being armed, the cylinder rolling into place just behind Dean's head, had the older brother's hands stuttering in their process of cleaning up and raising weakly in a gesture of surprised submission.

The voice that parted his hair was the unmistakably raspy bark of their crazy old friend, Zack Murzak.

"Nice of you boys to finally drop in," Zack growled, and the barrel of the gun pressed hard into Dean's neck.

"You know the drill. Get your hands behind your head," Zack ordered, pressing the muzzle of his revolver into Dean's neck. "And you," he motioned to Sam who was still sprawled on the ground like a gazelle that'd been brought down by a lion, "get up nice and slow, and do exactly like big brother over here. Don't think about trying anything funny. This place is crawling with people who'd just love an excuse to take a shot at you."

The brothers met each other's gaze just long enough to share an "oh, shit" expression before darting their eyes suspiciously to see if they could catch a glimpse of the alleged gunmen. The place looked pretty damn dead to them, and Zack could tell they didn't believe him.

"What? Don't tell me the boys of the mighty John Winchester have never heard of a glamour?"

"Sure we have, and as soon as we find Tinkerbell and the secret Smurf Village, we'll believe they work," Dean sniped as Sam rose slowly to stand beside him.

"Oh, that's funny. I always figured you for a Lost Boy, Dean. Or should I call you Peter?"

"As long as *he's* Wendy," Dean retorted, jerking his head in Sam's direction, eyes to the ground as the wheels in his head continued to turn.

Zack chuckled dryly. "All the stock you seem to place in sigils and amulets, and you don't believe in the magics that make them work?" He gestured with his gun, and the boys started walking reluctantly ahead of him in the direction he indicated.

"Those are sacred religious artifacts. They're consecrated," Sam argued, feeding off Dean's devil-may-care attitude. He was careful to keep one eye peeled lest he miss an indication that his brother had a plan other than annoying their captor into submission.

"Religion is just belief, be it in God or magic. 'Ts all the same," Zack dismissed, keeping the gun trained on them intently. "And don't get any funny ideas about testing that little bit of theology, either. The entire south wall of this building is covered in windows. You can't see 'em because of the glamour, but every one has a gunman in it, just waiting for one of you to make a break for it."

"All part of your plan, I'm sure," Dean grouched.

"Well, I'm nothing if not prepared," Zack replied. "Which is why all the snipers have their orders. If one of you runs, they're instructed to shoot the other. So which of you wants to make a break for it?"

Sam glanced to Dean, met his gaze, and knew they were royally screwed. No way in hell either of them would risk the other, whether they believed in glammers or not, and they were pretty sure the bastard knew it. It was a helluva setup. *Never, ever shoulda followed up on those coordinates.*

As they trudged closer to the facility, they realized just how huge it was. By the time they were within twenty-five yards they couldn't see either end of the massive brick structure without turning their heads, and the closer they got, the more it looked like a penitentiary.

"I fought the law, and the law won," Dean mumbled pessimistically under his breath.

Sam couldn't help but fight to stifle a smirk. Dean had a soundtrack for every situation. He'd be willing to bet his brother quoted song lyrics during sex. Not that he'd know...

"Not that way," Zack instructed, startling his captives just as they were about to head through the arched gate that led into the paved yard of the facility. He pointed simultaneously with his chin and the gun toward the side of the building. "Go around the side."

"Why, you gonna tell us there's invisible hell hounds in the yard and a giant doggie door with a Welcome mat that says, *Sic'em Chopper?*"

"No, smartass," Zack growled, finally letting Dean get to him just a little, "but if you're feeling like you wanna go *American Gladiator* on something, I could probably arrange it." His lips flattened into a thin line of determination as he gestured more strongly around the side of the building.

Having no option but to obey, Dean and Sam rounded the sharp corner of the brick construction and followed the wall for several paces, Sam leading and Dean doing his best to stay between the gun and his brother. Walking in silence for a few strides more, they nearly didn't see the underground entrance as they stumbled upon it. Both boys stopped abruptly, teetering on the edge of a concrete opening in the ground.

"Down the stairs," Zack ordered. "And don't worry, I got Pennywise all chained up."

Dean hesitated, straightening slightly, suddenly more confident. "Well good, then," he stated, eyebrows arching comically, "because my brother's kinda got a thing about clowns. Personally, I'm more worried about the rats..."

"Kid, you're making this way harder than it has to be. Just shag ass down the hole before I throw ya down, okay?" Zack threatened, exasperated to the point that his voice rose into another key.

"Whatever, dude, if that's what it takes to make you stop whining like a little girl. I'm game."

They proceeded down the narrow staircase, single file, as they'd fit no other way. There were twenty stairs leading down the hole, and by the seventh one, it was already apparent that it was definitely not the sewer tunnel from *It*. If anything, it was worse. There was a stench of rot and death, and what light there was seemed muted as though the source was covered in grime or soot.

Navigating the absurdly narrow staircase would have been tricky with one hand latched firmly onto a railing. With both hands laced behind their heads and no railing to be found, the brothers waged a constant battle with gravity, and the footing became slicker the further they advanced, giving gravity the advantage.

Despite Dean's delusions of superhero grandeur, the laws of Physics were the only rules the brothers had never managed to break.

When they were nearly to the bottom, Sam, his height a distinct disadvantage in the current situation, slipped and fell heavily against the stone wall, fingers scrambling for purchase. Dean forgot about the gun at his back entirely as he lunged forward and snagged a fist in the back of Sam's hoodie.

Unfortunately, it was a rather nice day, and the sweatshirt wasn't zipped.

For what seemed like an eternity, they hovered like a rocket at the apex of its launch, caught in the limbo between ascension and descent, weightless with nowhere to go but down.

Dean's chin wavered with exertion, and his thighs trembled against the drag of Sam's top-heavy mass. As certain as Dean was becoming that they were going to be just a mangled pile of broken limbs and twisted body parts at the bottom of the staircase, it came as a great surprise to him when he was pulled backwards, and the entire balance of their tenuous equilibrium shifted. Dean felt himself totter back from the edge and dragged Sam along with him as they fell backward on top of their captor.

Dean grimaced in anticipation of the gunshot he expected to ring out, certain that their clumsiness would cause a misfire.

Instead, Zack...laughed. His throaty growl took on a fizzy tone, and the burly chest that Dean had collapsed onto began to quake.

"Oh lord, your daddy would have my hide if you boys got your brains bashed in falling down some stairs."

Relieved, but still wired from the adrenaline rush, Dean pushed Sam away from him.

"Dude, get off me. You weigh a friggin' ton." He jerked his shoulders roughly, straightening his jacket, which was still clenched tightly in one of Zack's gnarled hands.

Dean turned and glared at Zack menacingly. "And if you stretched the leather, I'm so gonna kick your ass, 'Pennywise' or not."

The older hunter let go of the jacket quickly and smoothed it down in a placating motion before raising his hands submissively. "Let's not be hasty, son. Just help an old man up, would

ya?" He asked, holding out his hand.

Sam's face contorted in disbelief as Dean reached out and actually helped the man to stand. "Dean, he just held us captive at gunpoint," he protested, tugging at his brother's shoulder to steer him back from the perceived threat.

Zack chuckled, tucking the weapon back into the waist of his pants. "Never even had the safety off," he assured them. "Sorry about the confusion. It was the only way I could think of to get you here, and most of these walls have ears as well as eyes," Zack explained as they made their way to the bottom of the staircase. "I couldn't risk disclosing more than coordinates."

Dean rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Sorry, little brother, I guess I forgot to update you on some of the code words."

"What? Pennywise?" Sam asked skeptically. "What kind of codeword is that?"

Dean feigned an insulted expression. "Hey, I thought that one up, I'll have you know. C'mon - Pennywise - creepy-assed clown that lurks in sewer tunnels under the city? What better code for covert, underground operation?" Dean blew on the backs of his fingernails and brushed them over his jacket collar smugly. "I thought it was a pretty good tag, myself," he explained with a self-satisfied grin.

With his collar flipped up and that cocky grin on his face, all he was missing was a thumbs-up and a smooth "Aaaaaayyyy," and he could have passed for the Fonz.

"You would," Sam grumbled. "And your choice didn't have anything to do with trying to freak me out with a homicidal clown reference," he smirked knowingly.

Dean shrugged. "Well, did it? Freak you out, I mean?"

Sam half nodded and half shrugged, unwilling to give Dean the satisfaction of getting under his skin, but knowing he was maybe freaked by it.

Just a little. Teeny. Tiny. Bit.

"Not as much as getting held hostage by a dead man," Sam admitted, glancing at Zack accusingly, eyebrows raised, and straightening his posture as if he needed to look any taller to be intimidating.

Zack met his gaze, unblinking. "Rumors of my death..."

"Have been greatly exaggerated. Thank you very much, Mark Twain," Sam finished, unimpressed.

Zack laughed. "You boys are definitely your daddy's sons - forked tongues attached to sharp minds, damned lethal combination." He turned, motioning for the boys to follow, and led them through a dark hallway, the walls of which were slick and broken up by far too many steel doors to be anything but a prison block.

Dean looked at the coating of green slime that he'd gotten on the back of his hand by brushing against one of the doors. "Guess we're walking the green mile," he observed with a grimace, wiping the hand on the back of Sam's hoodie.

"Hey!"

"What? It was already trashed from almost falling down the stairs," Dean argued. "Smooth move, by the way, giraffe boy."

"Shut up, Stumpy."

They passed one of the doors that just happened to be ajar, no pun intended, and looked in curiously. The room looked to be eight-foot by eight-foot. No bed of any kind was visible, and only a toilet and a sink fixed to the far wall indicated it was anything more than a supply closet.

"What were you saying again about this being a school?" Dean asked darkly. "I've seen jails with better accommodations than this, of course most of them were in girls-behind-bars prison flicks."

Zack overheard as he continued to snake them through hallways that appeared to extend under the entire building. "Oh, Sam was right. This was a school - a very high-end military school. People who could afford to send their kids off here could afford a certain

amount of secrecy as to what went on behind the fence. Not that most of those people gave a rat's ass. By the time they got around to sending their kids here, the brats were so over-indulged that they were mostly beyond help. No surprise that a fairly disproportionate number of them committed suicide in the first six months. The dark taint of this place is what drew its current occupants in the first place."

"And who would they be?" Sam inquired.

"First things first," Zack replied, finding a door at the end of a slightly less dusty hallway and opening it with a click. "We can talk more in here."

Sam and Dean both paused at the threshold, the term, "lamb to the slaughter," on the tips of each one's tongue.

"No way, dude," Dean refused. "You first."

"Of course," Zack obliged and stepped ahead of them. The boys followed him and realized, to their collective relief, that the room was much bigger and better maintained than the one they'd peered into farther back and supposed it was some sort of guard's station.

Zack sauntered over to a desk in the corner and sat atop it, one leg hiked up, foot dangling, and the other braced on the floor. "As far as I can tell, it's safe to talk in here," he said.

"So, talk," both boys said simultaneously, staring back at each other in surprise.

"Start with why you aren't dead," Sam suggested, folding his arms across his chest defiantly.

"How do you know I'm not? There are some pretty powerful necromancers floating around these days."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Oh God, don't get Sammy started on revenants. He still looks at me funny every time I write something in my journal."

"Just checking to see which pen you're using, Mr. Invisible Man."

Zack chuckled again. "You two make me wish I had a brother," he stated, pausing pensively. "Anyway, I'm sorry I had to convince everyone I was dead. It was just..." He looked at Sam apologetically. "That night you called me from Bobby's and I said I had something to tell you...?"

"Yeah, the line went dead," Sam acknowledged.

"Cult freaks tried to take me, in my own house no less. I just managed to get away, but I realized the only way to cover my tracks was to break off contact with everyone until I could get a solid lead on how to take the bastard out, once and for all."

"The bastard Demon, you mean," Dean surmised.

"Yeah. *Your* Demon. Friggin' Haris."

"Have you?" Sam asked. "Do you know how to kill it?"

"No," Zack said, shaking his head sadly. "Not yet, but I think I'm close. This place," he revealed, pointing to the ground upon which they were standing. "This is the heart of his establishment, his corporate office, so to speak. Only his officers and most trusted allies are allowed inside the gate."

"There's a gate?" Dean deadpanned, rubbing his shoulder after their earlier tumble down the hillside.

Sam ignored his brother flatly, absorbing Zack's information skeptically. "So what are you doing here, then? You said they tried to kill you, and now you're one of the few and the proud?"

"Well, that's the beauty of it." He tugged at a charm around his neck as though its power was obvious. "They only see what I want them to see."

"Another glamour. Dude, you totally Obi-Waned 'em," Dean snickered, grasping the man's stodgy implication.

Zack looked down, grinning and shaking his head in amusement. "I suppose, yes, that's what you could call it. Where do you think they got a spell powerful enough to keep this place

secret and protected?”

“That’s all fine and good for you, but what about us?” Sam asked bitterly. “You had us waltzing right across the grounds in broad daylight.”

“They already knew you were coming. I told ’em you were looking to make a deal,” he disclosed with a smug grin.

“I don’t think I like the sound of that, Monty,” Dean interjected. “How ’bout we keep the money, and you keep the jackass behind door number three?”

Zack sighed. “I know. I know I took a few liberties.”

“A few?!” Sam huffed. “You brought us right into enemy territory without any kind of recon to work with.”

“And that’s different from what we usually do, how?” Dean countered, looking at his brother from under his eyelashes as he kept his head ducked down, studiously toying with the knobs on his EMF detector.

“Look, I need you boys here, or I never would have done it. I’m so close to getting the answers I came looking for, but the tension is rising around here. Something is brewing, and I can’t do this alone. Something happens to me, and all of this has been for nothing.” He paused, letting his point sink in slowly. “Now, I’m sorry to drag you two into this, but I couldn’t get ahold of your daddy or anyone else I thought I could even remotely trust.”

“Nice to know we’re one notch above chopped liver,” Dean grumbled.

“What kind of deal?” Sam questioned, ignoring his brother’s snide remark and choosing to focus on the issue instead of their rank on the hunters’ food chain.

“Hmm?”

“What kind of deal did you tell ’em we’re here to make?”

“That depends,” Zack said. “Do you still have that fake bullet I had your daddy leave you?”

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Sam and Dean navigated yet another hallway, this time following behind Zack.

“Dude, I can’t believe he’s actually gonna take us to his leader,” Dean quipped nervously. This hallway was much cleaner, nearly pristine, and the stench of the cellar passages was several floors below them, judging by the number of stairs they’d had to climb to get there.

Sam and Dean were able to walk shoulder-to-shoulder in the larger space and did so, erecting a wall of Winchesters that would have seemed much more imposing if they weren’t already deep in enemy territory and way the hell out of their league.

Zack approached the door at the end, pushed a buzzer, and looked up, craning his neck awkwardly as the tiny camera that was mounted above the door zoomed in on his features for identification. A few seconds later, there was a buzz and an audible click as the door unlocked. Zack grasped the knob and opened it. “Right this way, gentlemen.”

Both boys ducked their gazes to the floor and entered. They’d been told that it was a matter of courtesy to enter the officer’s presence with their eyes diverted. He was, after all, Haris’ right hand man, according to Zack, and he’d worked hard to earn that position. Any show of disrespect was call for immediate termination in a non-PG-13 fashion.

They entered to find what could’ve been the corporate office of any high-powered CEO in the real world, not unlike Frank Taliean’s had been before the brothers Winchester had given him a guest spot on “Lifestyles of the Not So Rich and Famous.”

There was a massive mahogany desk arranged front-and-center, just inside the door, and beyond that, the walls seemed to stretch on forever, an entire presidential suite wearing an office mask. The signed Jackson Pollack on the far wall most definitely did not come from Office Max.

Their benefactor, as it were, was standing at a large window that overlooked the grounds and didn't turn to acknowledge the entrance of his guests. Sam and Dean darted glances at each other without raising their heads, both getting the distinct impression that this was a really bad idea.

The leader seemed formidable even with his back turned to them, broad shouldered, in a tailored suit, with jet-black hair gleaming atop his head. His hands, nearly as large as Sam's, were clasped behind his back, his shoulders squared-up and feet planted slightly apart in a balanced stance. It was a posture not unlike the one that movie Hitlers often assumed while addressing the Nazi Party.

Dean vowed silently that if the guy turned around and had a mustache and an armband, he and Sam were just going to jump out the window and take their chances against the laws of Physics again.

"Did you bring the bullet?" The man asked, his voice eerily chilled. Even if it had been freezing out, he couldn't have fogged up the glass of the window, despite being only inches away from it.

"Yes," Zack answered, motioning for the boys to remain silent.

"And you're certain it is genuine?" The leader asked skeptically. "We had it on fairly good authority that the bullets had all been spent."

"That was the intention, I believe, Sir," Zack explained. "Elkins could be very deceptive. He kept one back. Even John Winchester didn't know the bullet he'd left with his sons was one of Samuel Colt's special rounds and not a decoy."

The black-haired head bobbed rhythmically as a dry chuckle scraped from his throat. "I sometimes think we gave the old geezer far too little credit. I wish Luther and his clan hadn't made such quick work of Elkins. He'd have made a fitting gift for the Master."

"Not as great a gift as the bullet, though," Zack suggested. He pressed Sam and Dean forward, closer to the desk, nodding to them reassuringly. "These boys have brought it, as I promised. Perhaps there can be a trade."

The leader raised a hand, still gazing out the window, his other hand still resting in the small of his back, awaiting the return of the first. "You seek amnesty, do you not?" He asked. "A Get out of Demon Hunting Free Card? Do you really think you Winchesters can walk away from all of this? Even if the Master accepts the deal, do you really think you can ever have *normal*, knowing what you know?"

Dean kept his eyes locked on the ground. It wasn't a question he hadn't asked himself a thousand times. Would any of them ever be free of this life? Take the hunter out of the hunt, but not the hunt from the hunter. It would be like changing the color of his eyes. Cheap contacts weren't going to cut it.

Beside him, Sam cleared his throat, taking initiative in the wake of Dean's silence. "We'd...we'd like to try, uh, Sir," he ventured, shifting nervously.

The leader nodded, hands once again clasped behind him. "That's admirable," he granted. "Feeble, mind you, but admirable nonetheless." There was a pause as he seemed to consider the offer. "Let me examine the bullet," he said finally, stretching an arm behind him, palm flat.

Dean glanced at Zack questioningly, but their comrade nodded encouragement, and he reached deep into the pocket of his jeans. The bullet was never off of his person, always close, digging into this flesh to remind him that everyone in his life had let him down at least once. He preferred to forget, but remembering kept him from expecting more than he could fully believe John or Sam was ever going to be able to give. Ironically, though, it never really kept him from hoping.

Dean felt the cold steel in his fist, intricately carved and warm with his own body heat. Hesitantly, he twirled it in his fingers and reached forward to place it in the extended hand.

No sooner had the metal crossed the palm of the leader's hand, then the fingers

stretched into claws and wrapped around Dean's wrist like the tines of a steel trap. He drew back reflexively but was held solidly, a cold tingle creeping up his arm.

"Dean!" Sam cried, reaching for his brother's arm.

Slowly, as though he didn't have a full-grown man fighting his hold at the end of his arm, the leader turned, and the room fell silent as glowing yellow eyes shone out of his smirking face.

Panic welled in the brothers as they realized the trap that had been sprung on them. Behind the two, a sharp click echoed in the stillness over the pounding of blood in their ears. Zack stepped around in front of them, grinning maniacally.

His eyes were oily black.

"Surprise," Zack hissed, flashing a grin worthy of a Crest advertisement. "Your daddy would be soooo disappointed."

He opened his mouth to continue his taunt, but fell ghostly white as his feet lifted from the floor. He rose through the air until his body nearly brushed the sweeping expanse of ceiling above them, his face slack with surprise and terror as he looked down at the Demon.

"What? What are you doing?" The traitor questioned frantically, voice trembling.

The Demon looked calmly from his floating child to the young man ensnared in his grasp. "Upgrading," he hissed.

Suddenly, Zack screamed, his body going taut as though stretched from the inside, and his mouth spread open, a black cloud of demonic vomit issuing from him as his throat constricted in protest.

Dean began to struggle anew as the wraith-cloud swirled around them, descending rapidly toward the two. Sam, his concern for his brother overriding his own desire to escape, wrapped his arms around Dean's waist and pulled for all he was worth.

The effort was futile.

As Sam's body quivered with the exertion of trying to pry his brother free, he felt Dean go tense in his grasp, trembling as though caught in an electrical field. When the Demon released his hold on Dean's arm, almost lazily after several arduous minutes of resistance on the brothers' part, Sam knew that Haris was not conceding but only relinquishing control to his child, a passing of the demonic torch, so to speak.

The body that fell lax into his arms was no hard-won prize, however. It no longer belonged to his brother, his protector, his Dean. What Sam held in his arms was a demon.

Silence permeated the room as each side awaited the reaction of the other, the air so still that each halting, panic-stricken breath leaving Sam's rigid body pounded in the vast expanse of the room. The resonant rise and fall of his chest facilitated a blur at the edges of his vision, adding to the illusion that it was all a bad nightmare he'd rise from, gasping and gripping his shirt as a lifeline.

Sam's mouth worked futilely to speak, barely managing to initiate the action as his lips parted and closed, forming the only word his mind could even piece together—Dean. The fear that the limp, unmoving form pulled close to his chest was his brother paled to the horror of knowing it truly wasn't.

"And I was expecting a fight," the Demon stated in disappointment, "Not that there was much you could do," he continued with a sneer.

The younger Winchester lifted his head slowly, his lingering gaze on Dean broken as he stared into the sickly yellow irises that now bored into him. "I'm going to kill you."

"So you've said," Haris replied, resting back against the desk as Dean's arm twitched slightly. Sam's vision jerked back to his brother, his features terror-stricken as he shot a panicked look toward the Demon. The bastard merely smiled hauntingly. "Try not to get too excited, Sammy. This is the best part."

Sam felt Dean's body jerk again under his quivering hands, and he gently placed a soothing palm on his brother's chest, surprised at the heat he found there. "C'mon, Dean...you're--" his voice trailed off when Dean's eyes cracked open revealing irises black as

coal.

“Okay?” the Demon interjected with a sharp laugh. “Yeah, Sammy, your brother’s more than okay. He’s mine.”

The claim of possession struck a chord in both brothers as Sam opened his mouth to protest at the precise moment that Dean’s body seized, his hand snapping up and clutching at the charm hanging from his neck frantically as his black eyes bulged from the strain. A roll of spasms coursed from his stomach to his head and back again. Sam’s brain scrambled for every bit of first aid instruction he had ever sat through and struggled to roll his brother to rest on his side.

“Let him go!” Sam demanded fiercely.

A wicked glint flickered in Haris’ eyes, hinting the pale yellow with a touch of green as, with just a nod of his head, he intensified Dean’s suffering. “I’d rather watch. Your brother’s going to be a big help to us, Sammy. But he’s just a part of the plan. Now the sacrifice—the sacrifice will end this all. You’ll like that part, Sammy. Trust me.”

Sam blinked slowly, trying to make sense of the situation that was slowly slipping out of his control when Dean’s body didn’t want to cooperate any longer and jerked again. Sam felt bitter tears well in his eyes as the older brother’s agonized form jack-knifed, his hands clawing at his neck as his head hit the office floor with a thud as the torture continued. With shaking arms, Sam kept his connection, fighting to keep Dean’s body still, lest the older man injure himself, and silently willed his brother to keep fighting whatever demon was trying to lay hold of him.

It was in the panic and whirlwind of the moment that Sam felt hands grip his arms, not the strong, brotherly grip he was used to or the firm, no-nonsense hold of his father. This time long, gnarled fingers latched hold with iron strength and *yanked/pulled/tore* him from his brother.

A scream hit the air punctuated by the thud, thud, thud of Dean’s seizing body, and the thin, emotion-raked wail that Sam didn’t even recognize, calling out words of spite, was none but his own terrified voice.

“You bastard. Let him go!”

“He’s mine, Sammy,” Haris repeated, sliding from the desk and kneeling next to Dean’s shaking form. He turned his head to stare at the struggling man, and the two members of his legion that held him fast. He tilted his head toward the door, an eerily calm look on his face as he addressed his henchmen. “Take him downstairs. The other one, too. I’m not finished with him.”

It took Sam a stunned second to realize that Zack was still in the room, the older man lying limp, body propped against the wall it had collided with. One of Sam’s captors stalked over to him, pulled Zack roughly to his feet, and escorted him forcefully out of the room before vanishing down the hall.

“No!” Sam shouted madly, twisting in the harsh grip. Every muscle in his body strained with fight as the demon-man that bound him began to drag him from the room.

Sam dug his heels into the floor, allowing his body to go fairly limp, and forced the man to carry the brunt of his weight as he struggled to get free. It accomplished nothing as the Demon servant escorted the younger brother out of the room with little strain on his part, as if Sam was simply a rag doll.

The doorway revealed the grief-stricken Winchester, face twisted in agonizing loss before the office door slammed shut with a resounding bang.

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Sam fisted his hands in his dark, unruly hair, trying desperately to still their trembling as he paced back and forth across the cell he’d been tossed into, stepping haphazardly over Zack’s unconscious body on each subsequent trip, though he could really care less if he

accidentally left a toe-shaped dent in the man.

Okay, so Zack was possessed when he totally went Benedict Arnold on them, but, but, but someone had to be to blame for the fact that Dean was writhing on the floor being violated by a demon. Zack was just handy. Besides, the dude was unconscious. Wasn't like he could defend himself.

Sam's chin dimpled and trembled, a bizarre combination of the most devastated expression it knew to make and the most pissed off, want-to-wring-someone's-neck scowl he could muster.

Even the fact that the guards had thrown them into an old dormitory room and not one of the cellar cages was of little comfort to the younger brother. The door was still locked. The window was still barred, and from what he could see through the tiny, vision-distorting peephole, there were still guards in the hallways. Big guards. Ugly SOB's with combat boots and arsenals strapped to their hips.

Sam was so screwed. Dean needed him, and he was stuck with a traitor. Hell, Dean had needed him to pick up on the fact that Zack was a traitor BEFORE the trap had been sprung. Dean had accepted Zack's drop of the codeword, but Sam was supposed to be the psychic one. Yet again, he had nothing to show for his supposed prowess but a giant headache and a royal, Zack-shaped, pain in his ass.

Irate to the point of insanity, compounded by worry and humiliation, Sam lost his cool.

Temporary insanity was still a viable defense in most states of the Union, therefore it must be a real state of mind, or so he reasoned, because his mind had a knack for justifying just about anything.

He pulled his hands from his hair and fisted them tightly. "If you hurt my brother, you're gonna need way more than some shoddy, back alley M-16's and some brass knuckles to save you!" He yelled, pounding on the door futilely.

He got no response and whirled around, heart pounding and face beet-red. He stalked across the tiny room two or three more times, purposely knocking a giant foot against Zack's dangling legs as he made his last pace. Why should he get to sleep through all the fun? By God, Sam was pissed and someone was gonna hear about it.

"Look, you gotta let me outta here, fellas," Sam drawled, changing his tactics. "Maybe your boss didn't tell you this, but I have these, these superpowers. When I get really pissed off, you don't wanna mess with me."

A muffled voice chuckled from the other side of the heavy core door. "What's that you say, boy? Don't make you angry? Why? We wouldn't like you when you're angry?" The hallways erupted into uproarious guffaws as the other guards picked up on the *Incredible Hulk* reference.

Shit, Sam had left that door wide open, a sure sign that he was letting his emotions get the best of him, not thinking clearly. He took several deep breaths. He couldn't help Dean by flying off the handle. He had to...hell, he didn't know what he had to do. Didn't know what he could do, but he'd try anything at this point.

"Look, I know you guys think you're pretty tough, but you gotta have families somewhere, right? I mean, you didn't just hatch down in the dungeon." Or maybe they had. Sam really didn't know where the hell Haris got his fruit loops, but he bet it wasn't the breakfast cereal aisle. If he had, then he'd bought some seriously curdled milk in the dairy department.

Sam let his head fall against the door, trying to get a handle on his racing thoughts. They weren't even making sense to him anymore, and he prided himself on being able to grasp the arbitrary and oblique. What was a Stanford education good for if it all just flew out the window in a moment of emotional strife?

"Um, guys, I'm just worried about my brother. You can relate to that, can't you? He's my big brother. He used to tuck me in at night, fix my scraped knees. He taught me to ride a bike, to throw a strong left hook, even though I'm right-handed, and that we have to look out for

each other. I just need to know if he's all right."

A shuffling step approached the door, and Sam felt a vibration go through it as someone leaned against it from outside. "Sure kid. If that's all you need to know, then I can tell you..."

"Yeah?" Sam asked hopefully.

"He ain't all right, kid. You best be worrying about yourself, 'cause that brother of yours is gone."

"NO!" Sam shouted, pounding on the door once more, both fists bruised and split already. All right, so his temper was as bad as John's and Dean's, despite his hard-fought attempts to maintain himself as the level-headed Winchester. Not like anyone was around to call him on it at the moment. "Just wait 'til I get out of here!" He threatened. "I'm so gonna kick your asses. All of you!"

A hard snicker spread through the small band of guards. "You and what army, kid?"

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Dean thrashed on the floor like a broken marionette. It seemed the puppet strings at his joints were all connected somehow and in constant motion while the ones meant to give the movements purpose had been completely snapped, rendering him a quivering mass of flailing knees and elbows.

He wasn't a moron. It was obvious that he was being possessed by a demon. It was the why and how that was puzzling him, although figuring out that mystery would have to wait. The dark tendrils of the evil being violated every pore, every crevice, every vessel in his body, turning them to ice that pained him like the worst ice cream headache he'd ever endured in his twenty-eight years.

He didn't understand why the hell it was taking so long or why it hurt so bad. He and Sam had been completely surrounded by possessed humans at the apartment complex in Jefferson City, and the evil bastards had jumped ship like a supernatural game of *Frogger* was being played that used humans as logs in the stream. No way was it supposed to take so long or hurt this friggin' much.

An intense thrum began somewhere behind his eyes and traveled down his spinal column in torrents like blasts from a flamethrower, shooting out his fingers and toes but never diminishing, only making him clench more tightly against it. His eyelids were exhausted and throbbing from pressing so close together as fireworks played across their black backdrop.

His jaw bones tried to crush his teeth between them, the pointed ends of his mandibles driving up into his skull like the worst TMJ headache he'd ever had when he was thirteen and his bones had grown in weird, uneven fits and starts that had kept him aching and trembling in his sleep for the better part of two years.

He stifled his screams now just as he had squelched his moans and whimpers back then, gasping around the forced exhalations of the panting breath his cramping diaphragm drove across his larynx.

Dean was only vaguely aware that Sam was no longer there. Mostly it was the complete absence of warmth in the room that left him feeling abandoned and helpless. He writhed around onto his stomach, trying to rise to his hands and knees, desperate to find that warm spot again, to get to his Sam. Sam was alone.

He felt a hard toe in his ribs, and he slumped back onto the cold tile of the floor, burning inside and freezing on the surface.

Haris' dry chuckle reverberated off the umpteen hard surfaces of the room, as though it had been designed as an amphitheatre for demonic amplification. "That's it, Winchester. Crawl. Fight. Struggle. It's what you do best, isn't it? And damn it's entertaining."

Tears squeezed from the corners of Dean's eyes as he tried to still his shaking limbs, feeling violated by the Demon's glare. He fought the intense urge to keep his eyes shut as

though reflexively closing out the sun's glare and forced them open, staring back at Haris with hazel defiance even as black circled the irises and tainted the whites.

"You don't honestly think you can win?" Haris asked coolly, pacing back and forth with his hands once more clasped behind his back. "Quite the opposite is true, you know. The more you fight, the longer this takes, the more you lose."

Unable to stifle the next scream, Dean arched back as though prodded between the shoulder blades, and a guttural roar tore from his frothy lips.

"You protest too strongly. Especially since you got the better deal, I think," the Demon assuaged snidely. "You get to join the winning team now. Can't you feel the power that will be yours? Don't you wonder what you can accomplish with that energy at your disposal? You'll live like a king here, my right hand man, an entire army at your disposal, and free from the burden of that infernal baby brother of yours. You could be your own man for the first time in your life, Winchester."

Dean shook his head as a strange heat radiated out from his chest, pooling around his throat and choking him, his face turning beet red with exertion.

"Didn't you hear me, Dean?" Haris reiterated. "You'll live, which is more than I can say for your brother. It's too late for him. Too long, you know? Too long he's been kept from me, and now you've poisoned him against me, you and your precious daddy." He snapped his teeth on the "d's" hard enough that Dean heard the clicking as clearly as if a hellhound were snarling in his ear, hate apparent in the diction.

The edges of the young hunter's vision began to go white, and whispers of hatred and vile intent echoed through his mind.

*"You should have let him go. You should never have gone back for him."*

*"He's right to hate you for dragging him away that weekend, for leaving me to find just poor little Jess waiting when I came for him."*

*"If you had stayed away, I'd have him now and he'd live to see tomorrow, many more centuries of tomorrows, my general, my commander."*

*"His death will be on your head, big brother. I hope you're pleased with yourself."*

Haris knelt on the floor beside Dean, placed a hand on Dean's shoulder, and leaned in to whisper in his ear menacingly. "You can't win. After tomorrow everyone you love will be dead. My family is vast, my army is legion, and you will never be alone again. It's what you've always wanted. All you have to do is let us in."

Dean screamed again, an edge in the vocalization that hinted at defeat as tears of exertion flooded down his cheeks. Then, as though a switch had been flipped, the thrashing stopped, and the only motion that remained was the heaving up and down of his constricted chest, straining to draw breath after long minutes of asphyxiation.

Haris tugged gently on Dean's shoulder until he rolled toward him, like a sleeping child falling from the backseat of a car and into his father's arms. The Demon gazed down at him with a serene smile on his face, his expression made that much more pleasant by the oily black orbs that blinked slowly and gazed up at him reverently.

His pain gone at last, Dean smiled.

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### **The woods outside – Dawn**

There was an energy welling up from the undergrowth. The leaves of the sucker brush and cedars trembled with it, moving almost imperceptibly as the collective breath of some twenty highly-trained hunters stalked between the trees, using the forest as cover and the departing night as shadow to disguise their approach.

Besides the tremble of anticipation that each man knew and relished from years in the field, hunting under cover of night, there was another, less-familiar thrum in the air.

Most of the men dispatched evil on a daily basis. Wendigoes, werewolves, vampires, and poltergeists were old hat at this point. They were comfortable in their skins, confident in their abilities, determined to live long enough to see the day the world was the better for their efforts.

This was a whole other ball of wax. Most of their usual quarry consisted of half-breeds, evil SOBs that, nonetheless, were once human and weak. Their human weaknesses, their desires, needs, and temptations lingered in their metamorphosed incarnation. Those traces of humanity, dark though they were, could still be exploited, used to level the playing field.

Demons had never been human. Their weaknesses were specific, faith-based, wielded in belief, and therefore dependent on the hunter's own faith and belief. Any lack of confidence, any doubt in the power they wielded, set them up for defeat.

Most of these hunters had never been tested to that degree. They put their trust in weapons, other men's religions, and training. They believed in themselves, each other, and the strength of their plan. Already that plan was crumbling.

Thirty minutes beyond the time that Zack had promised to meet them in the forest, they were all feeling the weight of disappointment and abandonment. Their leader had picked a hell of a time to go AWOL. His absence shook each hunter's confidence enough to make them question the validity of their mission.

They were superstitious; all of them, and this was the worst omen they could imagine.

John Winchester gazed around apprehensively, noting the grey glow that blanketed the eastern horizon. He knew they had no more time left to wait. If they were going to make their move, it had to be soon.

"Men," John spoke, authority in his voice. "I haven't hunted with many of you before, and I know that I'm new to your gathering, but I think I'm voicing what each one of you already knows when I say the time for standing by is over. I don't know where Zack is, and I don't claim to know what awaits us on the other side of those trees, but I do know that the opportunity for all of us to come together and wield the kind of manpower we have available to us right now, at this very minute, is not something we'll easily come by again in the near future."

There was a rustle amongst the gathering as hunters, young and old, nodded their agreements, mumbling encouragements between themselves.

John took their actions as permission to continue. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I've spent most of my career hunting these things with nothing but my wits, my connections, and a whole lot of luck. At times, I had others with me, but mostly I hunted alone." He looked down at the ground, nodding slowly. "I'm kinda tired of playing lone gunman. I'm tired of sharpening my skills and building my experience on childhood nightmares and minor hauntings only to have my ass handed to me in the face of something that is a threat to us all."

The crowd was silent. None among them but John Winchester had ever come face-to-face with this Demon and lived to tell the tale.

"I want this to be over," he admitted. "I want my boys to have options that don't involve stuffing the trunk with weapons and holy water. I want them to have homes and picket fences and not worry that it will all be reduced to ash."

The rest of the group nodded sadly. They'd all lost plenty themselves. It was the motivation that kept them all going, the fuel to their vengeance fire. Most of them were tired, too, of the loss. Most of them wanted to have something just once that wasn't taken away.

"The sun's going to rise in another few minutes, and we're going to lose our advantage. I'm not your leader, and none of you are obligated to follow me in there. But I'm going, and I would be honored to have any one of you at my back if for nothing else than to tell my boys if I don't make it out. You're all here because of Zack, and if you want to leave, then go. But for those of you who are as tired as I am and who want to make a stand. I'm standing with you."

The men stood silently, eyes to the ground, each weighing his options. One by one, they realized none of them really *had* options.

Bobby was the first to say so. "I'm with you, John."

"Me, too," Joshua said, raising his rifle and standing beside his friend.

"And me."

"Me, too."

Within moments, every gun in the group was raised in agreement. The sun made its appearance over the horizon, casting a soft glow on their faces that felt like the first warmth they'd touched in years.

John nodded, blinking back the now-orange glisten of pride in his eyes. "Then let's do it."

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Zack shook his head and groaned weakly as water ran down his forehead, pooling momentarily in the divot under his nose and between his half-parted lips. Okay, so the water from the ancient dormitory sink was a shade on the brown side, and the fact that Sam used one of his cellmate's own dirty socks to collect enough of the foul-smelling liquid to rouse the man made the youngest Winchester somewhat less than a nice guy.

Sam didn't give a damn. The guards had stopped responding to his rants several hours into the ordeal, and Sam was a little tired of tearing at his fingernails.

There was some reason they were there, some reason Zack had lured them into the snare, and some reason Dean was alone somewhere with a demon clawing through his mind. Sam needed to know what it was. The possessed Zack hadn't been entirely truthful with them, but that didn't mean that Zack, the man, didn't know something that could help them out.

Zack shook off the water sluggishly, moaning gently through the pounding in his skull and the throb in every joint of his body. The irony of his earlier comments about Peter Pan was lost on him after his little attempt at wireless flight. At the first glimpse of flickering fluorescent light from over the sink, he shut his eyes tightly and rolled over, intent on settling back into unconsciousness.

"Oh, hell no," Sam protested. He dropped the half-sodden sock beside Zack's head and grabbed the man by the collar, lifting him up off the lumpy cot and shaking him roughly. "No way are you checking out on me again, man," he said. "You've been sleeping all night, and I'm out of ideas. Wake. Your. Ass. Up."

Zack groaned more loudly, finally forcing his eyelids past half-open. His arms moved feebly as he tried to reach up and force Sam's hands away from his neck.

"Sam? Stop it."

Sam didn't. He was through doing anything Zack suggested. "C'mon. Enough napping."

Zack's head lolled to the side, his gaze falling on the barred window. At first he thought the gray coloring of the glass was just the sickly glow of the interior light. A few seconds later, it had morphed into a more orangey shade that caused his heart to leap into his throat.

Ignoring the pain that wracked him from the ends of his hair follicles to the tips of his toenails, Zack sat bolt upright and lurched to the window, oblivious to the fact that he was wearing one sock and one shoe and sporting one bare foot.

"Morning?" He questioned blearily.

"Brilliant deduction," Sam snapped. "And unless you're expecting the IHOP to deliver a Rooty Tooty Fresh and Fruity breakfast under the door, you'd better start talking, because I'm getting the distinct feeling that we're not going to get another sunrise inside these walls."

"Oh, God," Zack moaned, placing a hand to his forehead as he staggered back to the cot. "You don't know the half of it. It's starting."

Sam realized he was on the verge of getting some of his answers and knelt before the man, pleading with his green eyes. "What is, Zack? What's starting?"

"Attack," the man stammered, finding it difficult to string more than one word together at a time. "Hunters. Your father," he explained. "They're coming. They're in the woods now."

Sam smiled broadly. "All right, the cavalry," he sighed. "I knew there had to be a way out of this mess."

Zack gripped Sam's shoulders tightly, gazing into his eyes and forcing him to stay kneeling before him. "No, Sam, it's a trap. Haris knows he's coming, and you and Dean are the insurance. Once he knows you're in here, your daddy's gonna come charging through those gates, guns blazing, and he has no idea what's waiting for them here. They don't stand a chance."

"Another trap?" Sam asked incredulously. "For Dad? For us? But why?"

"It's not your fault Sam. Not your daddy's either. It's just your curse."

"A curse?" Sam's brow scrunched. "Usually you need to piss someone off royally to get a curse put on you. What did we ever do?"

"Nothing Sam," Zack said, rubbing Sam's shoulder appeasingly. "You were just born with the wrong name. The Winchesters, the Ismays...you've all been marked for a very long time. They're not your sins, but you bear them, nonetheless." Zack stopped his rambling and placed his hands at the sides of Sam's head. "Sam, you have to get out of here. He's going to kill you, make an example of you, and a whole lot of good men are going to die here today if we don't stop it."

Before Sam could ask what he meant, the door was thrown open and the guards busted in, brandishing their weapons with authority.

"It's time."

\* \* \* \*

Wordlessly, the hunters moved into position, crouched and stalking like panthers. They savored every last, withering shadow of protective darkness as the sun threatened over the horizon to give them away. John took the head of the line with Bobby and Joshua flanking him on the right and the left. Each of the other men gathered to form a pairing as well, raising their rifles. Bodies tensed on full alert as they awaited the signal to advance.

John moved stealthily ahead in the tangle of brush and ancient trees that skirted the perimeter of the enemy's camp, ducking his hunched body between Bobby and Joshua's human shield. One hand cradled his rifle as the other slid into his jacket pocket, long fingers circling around the vial of holy water he had stashed there. If anything, it would give him just a moment of advantage, although that thought alone wasn't enough to quell the knowledge that he probably would not last this fight.

At least they still had the element of surprise. It was an ally in whom they all had infinite faith.

As the group neared the perimeter, most of them still hidden amongst the underbrush, the three men crouched down against the fence, Joshua staying center, whilst Bobby and John slowly scouted outward from there. Not much was visible below the sharp incline on the other side of the wire. The ground dropped off abruptly and disappeared altogether until the base of the slope met the field below, a good fifty yards beyond the fence.

Joshua, being the younger and more spry of the three pointmen, indicated the top of the fence with a hand signal that revealed his intention to climb it. They understood his intention was to gain a better visual appraisal of the situation and moved in beneath him ready to offer assistance and cover him if he got stranded in a precarious position.

Joshua struggled to the top, inching resolutely forward without faltering, despite the tremble in his muscles. Finally, he managed to get a hand on the top rail and pulled himself up

the rest of the way. Securing an arm over the wire, he paused and turned back, issuing a thumbs up to his comrades to assure them he was secure.

John and Bobby nodded as the third man turned back to the task at hand. The awaiting group, expecting an “okay” signal to give the all clear, barely had time to register the look of surprise and terror that washed over Joshua’s features before they were painted in drops of crimson.

Joshua’s body slumped downward as his knees went suddenly slack. The rest of his muscles followed suit shortly, and he rolled down like a Slinky on a staircase, barely missing John and Bobby when his dead weight hit the ground with a thud. He quivered briefly like a Jell-O mold before his head lolled loosely on his neck, leaving him staring at his lifelong friends, eyes parted by a lone bullet hole dead in the center of his forehead.

They recognized the empty glaze of the stare but had not time to lament his passing. An army leapt clear of the embankment, having been crouched like soldiers in a bunker for lord only knew how long. Waiting.

“Ambush!” Bobby called out, firing his shotgun through the fence and into the advancing horde.

In the span of three breaths they’d lost their advantage and switched from offense to defense. In three breaths more, they were just flat losing.

Gasps of surprise and anguish met John’s ears from every direction, punctuated with the thud of bodies on cold ground. Only panic spread more swiftly than the air of betrayal through the ranks.

There was bravery, and there was insanity, and John wasn’t willing to risk other men’s lives on his own tenuous mental state. “It’s a trap!” He shouted. “Fall back!”

He stood abruptly, heeding his own advice as he moved backwards away from the fence, laying down a shower of bullets ahead of him to keep the enemy from drawing too near. He was on the verge of turning to take advantage of the cover fire by running into the brush, when he met something solid in the trees behind him.

Stunned, he looked down to find himself propped against the side of a car - Dean’s car. And, oh shit, there was nothing tenuous about his grasp on sanity after that. There was no grasp at all.

“Son of a bitch!” the hunter declared angrily, his eyes lit with rage as he realized the extent of their betrayal. The one thing he’d asked was for his boys to be left out of this fight. The one thing he’d asked for himself in twenty-three years, and it had been thrown back in his face.

And not just his face. Every man there had been set up and betrayed. Someone was going to pay for that, and John was going to be the one who collected the toll, insane or not.

He turned to where the line of men were retreating into the undergrowth and covering the frontlines as best they could. Gritting his teeth around a growl of determination, he jerked his head toward the building signaling them to charge.

Bobby jolted up as John raced back toward them. The eldest hunter’s face stunned. “John, it’s a trap. We can’t--”

John stopped his forward advance, his militarily stern façade faltering as he stammered his reasoning. “The—they have my boys.”

For a second, the gunfire and the screams were drowned out by the buzz of determination that emanated from John Winchester and the pounding of blood in their ears. Somehow that one, desperate line, a solemn, heartbreaking revelation was heard over the chaotic din of battle. It echoed in the hearts of every man who’d come there that morning, reminding them that they were there not only to avenge their losses but to end the losing forever.

There was no need to confer, no need for a vote. A consensus was reached in silence. No more running. Today they’d fight.

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Zack glanced nervously between Sam and the stocky guards, his once strong voice betraying him with a tremble. "T-time? Already?"

Their self-appointed warden smirked haughtily, one arm snaking out with lightning speed and latching onto the older man's neck with a crushing grip. "Don't play the fool, traitor," he snarled, drawing Zack's body toward him before pushing him back violently to the hard floor. He about-faced and tilted his head to Sam. "You're coming with us."

"If it's Miller Time, I'm game," Sam stated nonchalantly, stepping back from the door and clenching his fists. He raised his arms in a boxer stance, refusing to take his destiny lying down. Hell, he'd taken Dean down with a good left hook once, and he had more in his arsenal than just that one punch. How hard could these yahoos be?

The second demon-worshipper snickered, shaking his head. "You and your daddy are more alike than you think." He paused, relishing in Sam's startled expression at his knowledge of their family past. "But no."

"Too bad," Sam quipped, his knees bouncing lightly as he anticipated their strike, "I was looking forward to knocking back a few with you fellas."

"Sorry to disappoint," the warden growled. He edged into Sam's space, a ghostly smile washing across his face.

Years of training proved their worth as the vigilante stepped within Sam's arm reach, and the younger man launched a well-placed blow to the man's jaw, sidestepping around the groaning form and swinging again at the second guard behind. Instead of landing the punch, however, Sam found his hand clenched in a bone shattering hold. Before he could compensate, his entire body was twisted around, arm held fast behind his back.

"You're pathetic," his captor hissed, bringing his free arm up and lacing it around Sam's neck tightly.

Sam fought to inhale and fight off the man's grip. His eyes locked on the first guard who was wiping a hand across his bleeding lip. "That was stupid," the jail keeper stated menacingly, and Sam saw stars as the bastard threw a blow of his own. His head pounded mercilessly against the fierce hit and the dizzying swim of his vision.

"Now let's get this show started," the warden taunted, grabbing Sam's chin firmly. He met the boy's insubordinate gaze with an eerie smile. "Want our sacrifice there on time, don't we?"

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The first group through the gate into the yard knelt down, forming a defensive line, guns raised and awaiting the call to fire as the second wave entered behind. Their numbers had been decimated, but they'd made it through the first wave of the assault and were back on the offensive once more, over the fence and into the enemy's stronghold without a moment's pause. Nervous glances were exchanged between the men as they gazed around, seeking entry to the building.

John stepped through the lines, his hand outstretched as a sign for the anxious men to be patient. A tiny clunk caught his attention, and the graying Winchester turned toward the direction from which the sound had originated, his body poised for battle as the clicking of guns cocking resounded behind him, all barrels aimed firm at the sound.

Suddenly a loud ringing pierced the air followed by the rolling and clatter of chains and iron. The hunters quickly formed a group unit, backs touching each other as they prepared for an attack. Each man's breath left their lungs in a startled gasp when walls of bars were released from their hidden alcoves above the gate, falling with a finalizing clang and cutting off

any chance of retreat.

And just like that, the trap was sprung.

"Nice of you to pay us a visit," a throaty voice rang out from the far corner, his body resting against the barred wall.

The hunters tore their frantic focus from their capturing bars toward the demon follower, each man tightening his grip on his weapon as an army of henchmen marched in from the back hallway, entering through the only other possible exit. The Demon's militia approached, and there was nowhere to go but through it's heart.

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Sam thrashed violently in panic and blatant outrage. This wasn't how it was supposed to be, and no demon was going to kill him over some stupid ancient curse he had nothing to do with. "You friggin' bastards!" He screamed, biting into the hand that sought to smother his cries, and tightening his stomach muscles to form the balance he needed in order to kick his legs out. But the other henchmen merely caught them like a cowboy flanking a calf.

Using his advantage, the guard jerked Sam's body toward him to the point where the Winchester was nearly stretched parallel to the ground between the two guards' grasps. His muscles flexed in futile fight and a stream of curses that would make Dean blush poured from his mouth as the guards held firm and carried him away.

Their journey through the dark hallways, the second green mile Sam had traversed in twenty-four hours, was accompanied by a soundtrack of agonized cries and gun fire rising off in the distance.

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John thrust his knife deeper into the enemy that had dared to try and take him out of this battle by attacking from behind. Crimson slicked his hand as he dug the blade deeper, snapping it upward to finalize the kill before the squish of the steel withdrawing from the dying man's body met his ears. Hastily, he wiped the blade clean against his jeans, his eyes scanning the enclosed battle field, searching out his next victim.

The sea of bleeding hunters and howling demonic servants clashing in grisly warfare played out in the background, practically non-existent to the father whose frenzied mind only held one thought. He had to save his sons.

A growl to his left had John wielding the blade again, but the blond-haired, dark-eyed attacker issued a swift kick to the hunter's legs, and tackled John to the floor, crazed hands scrambling for the knife. John tightened his grip on the blade, snapping his arm in close to his body and doing his best to roll into a better position for an offensive attack.

The guard grabbed John's shirt, pulling the man toward him with one hand while the other bore down on the hunter's arm. It was the move John was hoping for, and without a second thought, he thrust his head forward, slamming it into his attacker's forehead and grimacing instantaneously at the throb of the action.

His opponent grabbed his head, pain lacing across his features, and John bucked his body, flipping his rival over and pinning him to the floor, a knife to his neck.

"You don't want to do that," the man warned, not even fighting the hunter's grasp.

"Not yet, anyway," John shot back, digging the blade into the taut flesh and eliciting a trickle of red. "Where are my boys?"

The attacker barked a harsh laugh, his eyes rolling as he worked to take in shallow breaths against the steel bearing into his neck. "Dead."

Emotion flooded across the father's face, and John worked to still his hand lest he decapitate his only chance for answers before he got them. "You're lying."

"That's possible," the man admitted, a smug smirk on his face. "You a gambling man, John boy?"

"I'll take my chances," John stated, muttering a Latin phrase under his breath before beginning a methodically slow slice across the man's exposed neck. "Where's Dean?"

"He's ours."

John stopped, eyes narrowing at the possessed man's wheeze. Blood began to drip, drip from the slash, staining the room's floor. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The bleeding man's face twisted in a boastful glare. "You'll see."

"A-and Sam?" John questioned, stomaching his anxiety and funneling his fear into hate. To not do so would leave him an emotional slaughtering machine. He couldn't afford to kill and lose his boys without fighting for them.

The blond flicked his head toward the hallway from whence the legions had appeared - seemed like days ago in the adrenaline-warped timeline of war - before sliding back to meet John's stoic expression. "Sacrifice."

It was over in a flash, and John didn't even flinch as blood splatter launched itself at his face, forming a crimson mask as the man beneath him gurgled continuously, the blood pooling and spilling liberally from the wound until the gasps of fading life ceased and vacant eyes stared back at the Winchester father.

John stood once again, stepped over his last victim, and began the slow, inconspicuous attempt to save his boys. The pits of Hell would not claim his sons.

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Sam groaned as the henchmen dropped his body unceremoniously to the cold stone ground. He scrambled to his feet, searching for some leverage, as his eyes blinked furiously against the darkness of the room he'd been deposited in. The small flicker of candles illuminated a large, round table surrounded by the hands of men. A whole lotta men.

The young man found himself speechless, his voice disappearing as the low, melodious chanting began, causing the sparse light to burn brighter and expose the glistening yellow eyes that studied his every move.

"Bring him."

Every fiber in Sam's body went into fight-or-flight mode, and he lashed out desperately, seeking the door that led to an alternate future than this one that reeked of death. Hands hooked onto every part of his body from behind, slowly pulling him toward the altar, the jerking and flailing of all his long arms and legs doing nothing to stop the followers from lifting him easily into the air, and tossing him onto the stone altar and its smattering of intricately drawn sigils stained in red.

Haris' eyes burned bright in the dim light, and a whimper escaped from the back of Sam's throat as the henchmen bound him to the altar, the rope digging deeply into his tender flesh.

"I told you that you were going to like this part," Haris taunted, laughing manically as Sam fought against the bonds.

"You're not going to get away with this!" Sam threatened, arching his back and letting out a whoosh of air as the Demon pushed him firmly back against the stone. The youngest Winchester's breathing turned to a deep, panicked wheeze as his eyes roamed the darkened prison. "The hunters are here."

"They're almost all dead too," the Demon stated coolly, "including that father of yours."

"I wouldn't count on that," Sam shot back, bucking against the restraints again in frenzied jerks when the henchmen circled around the altar, their chanting becoming louder with each syllable muttered.

"You are a talkative one," the Demon commented through a laugh, placing a large hand

over Sam's mouth, smothering any chance the boy had to interrupt the ceremony. "You ready?"

Sam moaned weakly, tugging loosely at the bonds on his wrist. Unshed tears of defeat burned against his irises and reflected in the candlelight as they sought their exile.

Haris removed his gnarly hand, choosing to place it on Sam's shoulder as if comforting the boy in his hour of death. "That's it, Sammy. Just surrender. It's easier that way." He paused, a thin smirk pulling at his lips. "Or perhaps you'd like big brother to be here? Hmm? Would you like him to hold your hand, Sammy?"

The youngest Winchester sucked in a breath, swallowing thickly as the Demon disappeared into the darkness that surrounded him, and the candlelight revealed the circle of followers breaking, allowing the passage of another man into their ring. The man's face was hidden, but the crafted blade he held in his hands was not.

Sam's attention was fastened on the shimmering steel. He hardly noticed the man had tread closer to his bound form until his pained, resigned eyes locked with the coal black indifference and the all-too-familiar face they belonged to.

"D-Dean?"

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John began his trek down the hallway, the steady tapping of his comrades' feet echoing behind him. It was sheer luck that he had chosen the path that he had as it had led him to five of the men assembled so long ago, all of them now trailing behind him, prepared to face their enemy head on.

Fear pitted in the father's stomach as the distant steady chanting drew nearer, every failed fatherly moment and lost possible future with his boys played for his mind's torment. He reached the archway, raising a hand to stop the hunters' forward procession, and took a steadying breath before rushing in to charge the altar room.

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"D-Dean?" Sam muttered, his voice breaking into a partial sob that so was not his intent as his sorrowful eyes searched his brother's for any sign that Dean was still there.

He felt the calloused, worn hand of Dean, once so tender in their touch, wrap tightly around his shoulder, and Sam nodded acceptance as the older brother brought the blade down onto his neck. "It's not your fault, Dean," he whispered lovingly, knowing full good and well what Dean's angst-ridden soul would do if he ever snapped out of this possessed stupor.

Sam felt the blade dig into his skin and let out a wince as he shut his eyes against the image of his brother removing him from this earth in the name of a Demon.

Instead of slicing pain, however, the loud report of a gun shot barreled through the room and Sam jerked at the knick of the blade as his eyes flew open to see his brother flying back away from him, falling limply to the floor, the knife that once held Sam's demise skittering across the stone as he felt one of his arms fall free of its rope bonds.

"Dean!" Sam screamed, lifting his head as far as he could manage. He barely caught a glimpse of his father as he was forced to clench his eyes against flying debris as gunfire hailed into the room. "No! Dean!"

The once-sacred room erupted into a war zone as John's hand went limp around his own gun, eyes falling onto the lifeless body of his eldest son as his youngest was caught in the line of fire, his saving army too intent on taking out the glowing yellow eyes in the corner to have concern for his safety.

A cloud of dust raised in a hail of gunfire against stone, cloaking the room in choking darkness.

**TBC**