

Episode One: Call To Darkness

By Kittsbud & Tree

Interior Chamber

Sam could hear the pitiful screams of grown men as they were torn to shreds by demonic hands. Men that he had once fought with, hunted with, and maybe now was going to die with. He could hear the disjointed rattle of guns blazing all around him, empty shells clattering to the ground as round after round was spent battling Haris's legions.

The young hunter could smell the acrid fog of unending weapons' fire, the familiar choking haze of gunpowder filling his nostrils until he wanted to gag. He could smell the aroma of burning wax and tallow smoke from the now extinguished candles that had surrounded him.

Every one of his senses was on alert, and even though the room had been plunged into pitch black, he could "feel" what was going on.

Sam didn't try to move. He couldn't. Somehow, the cacophony of sound barraging his mind had paralyzed him to the altar as if he'd been drugged.

Even though one arm had been cut free from its bonds as Dean had been shot, he couldn't coerce his muscles into movement. He felt numb, dead, even though the blade his brother had held had only nicked his skin as Dean had fallen.

"Dean!" Sam tried to see into the darkness, tried to listen for a muted response from his brother to indicate he was still alive, but all his straining ears could discern were the cries of the dying intermixed with the yells of the defiant that still waged their war.

Somewhere among those men was his father. The father that had just put a bullet into his eldest son, little realizing Dean had never meant to harm his sibling.

Sam clenched his eyes closed and rolled onto his side, trying not to sit up for fear it made him more of a target. He could feel his free hand shaking as he fumbled to try and untie the ropes that still bound him to the altar.

Where's Dean?

Sam let his fingers close around the twine on his wrist and began to tug at. He had to get free, had to find his brother and try to help him.

Sam had seen Dean being possessed in Haris's chamber, had seen the oily black hue of his eyes when he'd passed through the crowd of chanters to the altar, and yet, Sam was convinced Dean's knife cutting the cord on his wrist had been no accident.

Some part of Dean was still Dean. How else could he have been hurt by a bullet anyway? Humans possessed by a demon were usually blissfully unaware they even had an injury until the demon was expelled – just like Meg.

Sam's long fingers abruptly began to work faster on his bonds, suddenly spurred on by the realization that if Dean really was still Dean, John's bullet could have seriously injured him.

But what if...?

A stray slug zinged past Sam's skull inches from clipping his temple, ricocheting off the wall behind him with a metallic twang. He flinched, instinctively ducking as another salvo of small arms fire erupted from the far corner, briefly illuminating the underground room with flashes of white light.

What if...?

What if he was wrong? What if Dean really had intended to plunge the knife into his throat and John's shot had saved him? What if Dean really was possessed? After all, how could he not be?

Sam felt the cord around his wrist loosen and he tugged it quickly away, freeing his other arm. Hunching over, he began to work on the final bonds to his ankles. As

he pried at the rope, he squinted into the gloom, using the flash from the weapons fire to try to gain his bearings.

Maybe just the impact of the bullet knocked Dean back. Maybe he's already trying to find me again in the darkness to finish me...

Sam shook his head. For the briefest of moments before John had taken aim, he was sure he'd seen Dean's *hazel* eyes staring down at him, eyes that had spoken volumes without a single word being spoken. Eyes that had said "I'm not gonna kill you lil' bro" over and over, even though Dean's actions had said the opposite.

Sam pulled away the last remnants of his fetters and swung his legs down from the altar just as something seemed to fizz to his left. For a second, he didn't recognize the sound and abruptly found himself blinded by a brilliant red burst of light.

The young hunter threw a hand to his temple, guarding his eyes as they adjusted to the flare someone had tossed into the middle of the room. Within a few seconds, he wished he had kept his hand further down shielding his view from the horrors that littered the concrete floor.

Bodies of countless hunters lay strewn haphazardly in pools of their own congealing blood. Limbs lay askew at odd angles where they had been torn from their sockets by angry demonic hands.

Moans of dying friends, hunters, maybe family filled his ears - filled his heart with dread. And through it all, yet more intermittent gunfire as if a few stragglers hadn't realized the battle was over, the war seemingly lost before they'd even begun.

"Dean! Dad!" Sam's eyes darted from corpse to corpse until they settled on a battered and bloodied body he was sure he recognized.

It wasn't his father or his brother, but a colleague. Frank Driscoll had been a good tracker – his specialty had been werewolves, but he would turn a hand to anything should the need arise, and it had.

As Sam watched in morbid fascination, the body began to move, an unearthly black miasma seeping across the chamber floor and through Driscoll's nostrils until he began to rise.

Was this the fate of hunters who had not yet quite drawn their last breath? Becoming vessels for "homeless" demons so they might continue the fight, the war against mankind?

Sam fell to his knees at the side of the sacrificial table and quickly began to fumble in the dull light until his fingers touched something metallic. Tugging out the forty-five from beneath a dead man, he took aim, careful to go for a head shot.

The black ooze was almost completely in the dying Driscoll now, had almost completely possessed his shell keeping his broken and bleeding body alive as a human vase.

"No you don't, you bastard!" Sam pulled the trigger repeatedly until the click of the hammer on nothing told him he'd expended every shell. Still he continued to pull back, seeing Meg Masters die over and over again in his arms. He wasn't going to have Driscoll suffer for months like that. Wasn't going to let a friend with no hope be used by some creature of the dark.

Driscoll's body slumped onto the concrete, nothing left of what had once been his skull. The throbbing black demon fog billowed from his body, oozing across the floor at low level until it found a grating and seeped effortlessly into it.

Sam began to breathe heavily, his heart throbbing in his chest. What if Dean was trapped somehow like Meg? What if Dean was still in there, forced to share his body with the very thing he hunted?

The forty-five dropped from Sam's grasp as he suddenly envisaged Dean's body on the floor before him instead of Driscoll's. Dean lying broken, bleeding, dead by his hand. The youngest Winchester began to shake until he lost all focus of what was still transpiring – and of who or what was behind him.

A heavy hand clamped down on Sam's shoulder, twisting him around with such force he almost lost his balance. Maybe it was Dean come to finish the sacrifice. Maybe it was Haris come to collect.

Alea iacta est, Samuel...

Right now, as Sam looked upon the carnage and death around him, he didn't even care.

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The pain called to him, drawing him back to some semblance of consciousness he wasn't sure he wanted to visit yet. It was much nicer to stay in the darkness, the fog that his mind had wandered into after his last fleeting memory.

Some bastard shot me!

As Dean's body had been propelled backwards by the impact of the bullet he'd had little chance to see his assailant. All that his tormented mind could focus on was Sammy anyway. Sammy his brother, Sammy, the one he'd been about to give a Colombian necktie...

No! I wasn't going to do it...I could never hurt Sammy.

The problem was his semi-cognizant mind wasn't sure, was it? The whole scene was like some fuzzy overplayed video in his head, and frankly, this tape was so worn it had spots missing. Blank areas where Dean really wasn't sure who had been in control.

I can control it...it doesn't define me...

Inside he felt something shift – nothing physical, but definitely a presence. The demon wanted his soul. It wanted to use him, to beat him down into submission until he obeyed its every whim. It wanted him to be the pawn in Haris's trap to command Sam. But most of all, it wanted to know how the hell he was subduing it.

Dean groaned, a thin smile playing over his lips as he took down a harried breath and almost gagged on the sulfur and gun smoke in the air. "It must really piss you off that you're in there and can't give the orders, you sonofabitch..."

The entity within him seemed to tear at his psyche, some inner growl echoing in his mind even though there was truly nothing audible to hear save for the unending spatter of bullets on concrete.

Dean enjoyed the demon's frustration. He enjoyed knowing there was something at last that could prevent such a creature from taking over a person completely, even though he had no clue what that something was.

Gotta find Sammy. Gotta let him know I wasn't gonna hurt him...I could never hurt him, could I?

The hunter tried to push up on his scraped elbows, but his right arm just wouldn't support his weight. He cringed, remembering the wound inflicted by some unknown gunman – probably a hunter thinking he was playing for the other team. It hurt, but not enough. From what he could tell the slug had passed straight through without shattering any bone or major blood vessels. Clean entry and exit. But even so, he should be in agony right about now instead of feeling a dull ache through his shoulder.

He let fingers probe to convince himself, but he had already guessed what was happening. Maybe he was in control of the demon, but it was still part of him. While ever it was "on board" and had any influence, his physical body would be somewhat shielded from pain and injury.

Dean huffed and he tried to roll behind a podium Haris had used to give speeches to his "troops." It was barely what he would call good cover, but he was still far too groggy to join the melee or try and find a better haven until he could explain himself to Sam.

Gee, little brother, I'm really not possessed. These are just black Halloween contacts from Wal-Mart... Yeah, he'll really buy that one after I put a knife to his throat! Shit!

Dean felt his body sag against the hard wood of the platform and he let out a breath, realizing his mind was still reeling. Was it the demon? Was he losing control? Hell, had he ever had full control?

Are you sure you didn't try to kill your brother, Dean? REALLY sure? The sentence was like an echo through his subconscious, but the words didn't come from his own mind. They were bitter, taunting – evil.

Dean was tempted to slam his palms over his ears to quell the demon's tirade, but he knew it was useless. The words were in his head.

In fact, are you REALLY sure you didn't finish the job? I think you did, and now you just don't want to remember it...

"No!" Dean forgot he was hiding, forgot that he was now a wanted man by Haris, and probably any number of his own kind who had seen the flash of black in his eyes as he'd hovered over Sam at the altar.

Voices began to shout across the chamber and a new volley of bullets cut through the darkness. How anyone knew what they were shooting at was beyond the hunter, but at least they didn't seem to have heard his outburst. He looked around, but there was nothing to see, no one for the rescue party or their foes to aim at in the gloom. But then, maybe demons *could* see without light. Hell was supposed to be pretty damn dark after all.

"Bring me the firstborn!" Haris's tone was sharp, acidic as he barked orders to his demon-possessed soldiers from some unseen location. "Regroup as we planned..."

Dean dared to bob his head from around the dais, at first not realizing he was the one being sought out among the bodies now littering the chamber.

Firstborn...

A sudden flashback of a grimy cabin in lush swampland entered his mind. Only the crotchety old man that had given him the amulet had ever called him that. Did it mean anything? *And why the hell does that yellow-eyed bastard suddenly want me? Wasn't this always about Sam?*

Dean shook his head, trying to clear the disorientation that still clouded his mind and judgment. If only it wasn't so damn dark. If only he could see what was going on and know his brother was safe.

"Going somewhere?"

Dean's eyes darted up, picking out a towering form above him in the shadows. It was one of Haris's guards from the cells, and he looked pretty pissed – although how exactly you got such a big-ass demon pissed was anybody's guess.

"I guess this isn't Disneyland, huh?" Dean's lips curled into a smirk even though the creature above him had already grabbed his collar and held him by it until his feet dangled several inches from the floor. "You know, Haris is so gonna kick your ass for treating one of his kids like this..."

The guard's own raven eyes narrowed as he saw the flick of black cross over Dean's, but still he shook his head. Orders were orders, and Haris was not a forgiving master. "You are not one of the master's legions..."

The thing turned, ignoring the clip of bullets that a hunter emptied into its back. It felt nothing only the burning desire to please the dark one, its father.

Dean lashed out with his good arm, trying to dislodge the demon's grip, trying to fight it with the extra strength he now had within, but it was useless. To tap into the demon's power he carried was like letting it have just that little bit more control. Every time he did so, the voices inside began to scream anew, tempting him to give into them. Tempting him to join the dark side.

In the center of the chamber someone let off a bright red flare, and for a second Dean could have sworn he heard Sam's soft tones calling out to him. He opened his mouth, considering shouting out that he was alive, that he was being taken, but at the

last minute he clamped his jaw closed again. Maybe that was what Haris wanted. Maybe he was the bait now.

Are you sure he's even alive? You had a knife at his jugular, Dean...

No!

Dean's temper blazed almost as fierce as the flare now glowing brightly in the chamber. He hated the thing within him, hated its jibes for fear they might be true. What's more, he hated himself for allowing any of this to happen.

He was helpless, being lugged out of the room like a slaughtered animal, his boots dragging on the floor as he was hauled behind the huge behemoth that was his hellish captor. And all because he had trusted Zack and that damned code word.

Dean licked his lips, tasting the tang of his own blood as he suddenly had the insane urge to hum. He wasn't on a plane. He wasn't even being dangled off the floor anymore, but somehow hearing the defiant drone of his own voice was comforting at a level only Dean Winchester understood. It kept him focused. It kept *him* in control. It kept him *human*.

The demon entered a secondary corridor and turned, cocking its head in bemusement. As it briefly looked down at him, Dean continued his version of *The Stones Sympathy for the Devil*, with a smirk. He was getting just the reaction he'd hoped for.

"Gotta have sympathy for your boss, dude, 'cause damned if he isn't going to regret having his kid possess this Winchester's ass..."

The guard's expression remained neutral, but with one swift backhand it slammed Dean into the nearby stone wall so hard there would be no more quips. No more defiance.

Satisfied with its handiwork, it nodded, picking up the bloodied hunter and tossing him over its shoulder as it followed its master from the complex.

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Sam felt the hand squeeze his shoulder in something akin to affection and he exhaled. The eyes that now looked down into his were not the black orbs of a demon, but the reassuring eyes of his father. "Sam..."

John pulled his youngest into a quick bear hug and then stood back to check him over. When his searching gaze found no serious injuries or unwanted bullet holes, he nodded, relief clear in his expression.

It had been bad enough having to watch as Dean pressed a blade to Sam's neck, but if his youngest had been hurt by a stray hunter's bullet John would never have forgiven himself. The brothers had been through so much already because of his sometimes misguided crusade.

John cleared his throat. Maybe Dean had already paid the ultimate price for his blind loyalty to his family. The bullet wound he'd sustained wasn't serious – John had never intended for it to be a kill shot, but wherever Dean was, he was still possessed. Maybe there was no way to fix that.

Exorcisms worked, but not always. Sometimes the ritual was too much for the broken body once the demon inside was vanquished. And tonight, who knew what damage Dean had already been subjected to?

"Dad? Where the hell is Dean?" Sam pushed away from the altar, letting the ropes that had secured him fall as he faced his father. "You shot him...how could you..?"

The father sensed anger, fear, resentment, but then that was only to be expected. "Sam, I had to. You saw the color of his eyes. He was possessed and you know it." John's voice remained neutral, low, even though inside hurting his eldest had torn his heart in two.

Part of him still wished every day that Sam had killed him back at the cabin and taken the demon with it. Part of him ached knowing because he'd lived, the damned thing still walked the earth hurting people – hurting his kids.

Sam looked around, noting the gunfire had finally ceased. Bobby was somewhere, barking orders to the hunters still standing. Cries of agony filled the air from the dead, the dying, the afraid. Was this a lull? Or had Haris taken flight after all? Sam wasn't sure he even cared. Finding Dean was his mission, his priority.

"I saw his eyes," he admitted, avoiding eye contact with his father. "But right at the last minute...right when he held the knife at my throat...I saw Dean, Dad, not some damn demon..."

"It could have been a trick."

Sam shook his head, watching as a group of his father's friends began to assemble together in a huddled mass, unsure of what move to make next. "It wasn't a trick. Dean cut the rope on my wrist on purpose. I'm sure of it. And you had to barge in here and shoot him!" The words were scathing, just like the old days. Somehow, in Sam's eyes John always managed to do the wrong thing at the wrong time.

It wasn't really what he believed, but it was his defense mechanism against all the bad things that seemed to happen to the Winchesters. Now, he had to pick up the pieces again. He had to hope that Dean had somehow survived the hunters assault and was lying somewhere in the chamber, bleeding but alive.

"Sam..." Words evaded the father and he rubbed the bottom of his graying beard as if the motion would somehow provide him with some new excuse, some new order that would block any other thought. But then, Sam was never the one to follow his orders anyway.

Sam brushed off his name and turned. He didn't really blame John, how could he? He and Dean had walked right into the trap. John had tried to shield them. He'd tried to send them on some fake gig that would keep them well away from this place when the war came. But oh no, they were Winchesters. They'd smelled the ruse a mile away. Pity they hadn't smelled Murzak's ruse so quickly.

My fault. I'm the one this damned demon wants. I'm the one he wanted to sacrifice, or whatever the hell that ceremony was...

Sam continued to chide himself as he walked among the bodies, stopping every few steps to tug over a corpse, his chest hitching in case the mangled remains belonged to his brother.

When the bullets had started flying and Dean had been shot, Sam had noted pretty much where he'd fallen. Dean had been close to a small stage where Haris gave his little oratories. Yet now, there was no sign of the injured hunter. Was that a good thing?

Sam kneeled, his gaze locking on a small pool of blood on the floor. It was smeared and seemed to trail up the side of the podium as if someone still bleeding had rested there.

Dean...

Sam let his forefinger trace through the drying red liquid. There wasn't a lot. That was good. It meant his brother's injury wasn't life threatening. *Dad always was a good shot. So where the hell is he?* The young hunter swiveled on the balls of his feet, still not straightening from his crouched position. Maybe Dean had crawled to a better hiding place. Maybe he knew the good guys had shot him. Maybe he was scared of his own kind.

Dean scared? No way...

But then, what if he'd seen who had shot him? What if Dean knew his own father had pulled the trigger and might do so again? A flashback from Missouri repeated over in Sam's head until he had to put a hand to his brow.

You shoot me, son! Shoot me! Son, I'm beggin' you! We can end this here and now! Sammy!

Dean had heard those words too. Would John apply the same rule for him now that Dean was possessed? Sam winced at his own thought and flinched slightly

when his father's voice called to him from across the chamber. It was like those sweet, deep tones had suddenly turned to a knife.

"Son, we have to move..."

Sam stood from his crouched pose to see his father looking at him. John had joined the other group of hunters and had somehow managed to hush their rowdy, uncontrolled banter with his harsh military-style approach.

Bobby was at John's side, shotgun in hand, his left arm covered in blood – whether it was his own or the enemies, Sam wasn't sure.

"We have to find Dean..." It was the only coherent sentence Sam seemed to be able to string together.

Bobby glanced to John before answering. "Sam, Haris and his boys have made a run for it. We don't know where Dean is. He could be with them..."

Sam sensed the suggestion in Bobby's voice. Maybe the other hunters had seen Dean's eyes flash black, maybe they hadn't, but John and Bobby had. They thought there was a chance Dean had gone with Haris willingly. "No." It was one word, but it conveyed everything that needed to be said.

John nodded, accepting his youngest's answer. Dean was a Winchester. He'd die before he'd fight alongside a demon or let one control him.

"Hey, people, can we cut the crap and get after the demon's ass before it gets away? Too many of us died here today to let that bastard live..."

The voice was from the back of the throng of hunters, and John didn't recognize which man had complained. The complaint, however, was met with a hearty response from the rest of the men.

Jeering voices mixed with the sickly aroma of stale sweat and gun oil filled the chamber along with something else. John couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was another odor, faint, but still teasing his senses. He ignored it, holding up a hand to calm the masses.

"Listen, a lot of good men *have* died here today. But if we go after Haris now we'd just be adding to that number. He's not running because he's afraid of us. This bastard is too smart for that. I've tracked it, I've fought it more than any other man among you...you have to trust me..."

John paused, wondering if the hunters would trust anyone again after Zack Murzak's betrayal. There was a buzz as the hunters talked amongst themselves, each man evaluating just where his allegiance lay. Some had never even heard of John Winchester before today. Others, like Bobby, knew John's marine background, knew his exploits in the field, and knew he would never back down unless there was no choice.

"John's right," Bobby let his Remington rest on his shoulder. "The only way to follow Haris is to search each and every passageway in this place. Reminds me too much of the underground warrens the gooks used to dig in Nam. You guys don't want to find out how much fun being a tunnel rat is, believe me. I heard all about it from my brother, and he has some pretty nasty looking scars to prove it..."

More murmuring from the masses, followed by slowly bobbing heads indicated the hunters finally trusted their new leader. A wane smile and a nod back from John let them all know he appreciated it.

"We need to get back topside, regroup and get the injured some help." John looked to Bobby again. "Can you get them back out? I'll stay and help with the injured..."

Bobby's eyes twinkled and his beard twitched with an understanding smile. John was holding back. He was going to help those wounded in the fight, it was true, but he was also going to look for Dean. "You'll find him, John." The hunter pulled a small flask from his pocket and offered it up. "Just promise me you don't try to shoot him again when you do. Kinda a habit of yours if I remember correctly..."

John took the flask and let it lie in the palm of his hand, uncertain what to do with it. "Holy water?" He eventually asked.

Bobby chuckled. "Hell, no! Whiskey! Now go find your boy..."

"Something's burning!"

John, Sam and Bobby turned simultaneously as the voice from the back of the crowd began to yell a new warning. In the same instant, John at last realized the aroma he hadn't been able to pinpoint earlier. It was the smell of an electrical fire melting through plastic and cable. It hadn't been strong enough to identify before, but now the sickly scent was almost too pungent to miss.

"Haris wouldn't just leave like he did." Sam sprang towards the nearest corridor, noting the whispery tendrils of smoke ebbing from the entranceway at ground level like an innocent morning mist. "This has to be another ambush. His men probably booby-trapped the whole complex!"

To confirm his fears, an explosion in one of the far tunnels seemed to rock the small chamber, bringing down chunks of plaster and concrete from the ceiling. After the first detonation, several more followed in a chain reaction that made the very ground shake beneath the hunters' feet.

The air began to fill with a thick white dust as debris of all sizes toppled onto the dead, eviscerated bodies on the floor, mingling with their blood to make a nauseating strawberry split colored glop.

"We have to move! NOW!" John grabbed his own shotgun and gestured to a corridor that still seemed intact and fire free. It was like he was back in the marines taking point of the motley troop that now saw him as their leader.

Sam looked to his father, both proud and afraid. They were escaping, leaving the complex before it was blown to pieces, but what about...

Dean! We can't leave. He could be down here. Trapped, imprisoned...dying even...

John saw the look in his son's eyes and read the thoughts behind them as surely as if he were psychic himself. As he reached the corridors entrance he paused, letting Bobby take his position at the front of the men as they raced down the dimly-lit passageway.

Letting a hand fall on Sam's shoulder, he swallowed. "We'll find him, Sam. We'll find him and we'll fix him. But first we have to find a way out..."

Sam knew his father was right. They were no good to Dean if they died in Haris' "tomb." That still didn't make it *feel* right. It didn't make it any easier to just walk away not knowing.

"C'mon, Sam, we have to leave...maybe Dean's already out and waiting topside..." John tugged more firmly on Sam's shoulder, not giving his son any chance to rebel. Because hell, this was Sammy. And while he had never liked following orders, he sure knew how to disobey them.

This time, Sam didn't put up a fight and slowly followed his father into the tunnel with the last few stray hunters. He was no good to Dean dead.

As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he began to scramble forward, following his father and the illumination of a flashlight beam far in the distance. His companions didn't speak, but simply clambered onwards, knowing that if they saw daylight ever again it would be a miracle.

"Get back!"

The cry came almost at the same time as the last detonation. Sam wasn't sure who had yelled or how far ahead they were, but then he didn't need to know. The bright blinding flash that seemed to sear into his eyes was followed by a deafening explosion of noise and debris.

Sam had little time to even shield his eyes, little time to see the fireball now expanding outwards towards his group, and little time to say one last prayer before his legs were torn from under him and his whole world turned hellishly black.

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Interior of Haris's Complex

Sam could feel something wet tickling his throat as it dribbled from his chin all the way down his neck. Was something dripping on him? Damned if Dean wasn't playing another one of his pranks...

The hunter moved and the sudden motion jarred the muscles in his body, sending spikes of raw pain down one side of his back. He groaned, daring to open an eye as the memory of the fireball and landing hard came back to him.

"Sammy?" A disheveled, bloodied John Winchester hovered over his son, but only a few of the original group of hunters stood behind him. More of their number had been lost to the new explosion and ambush, some so gruesomely that their entrails now lined the walls like a demonic tapestry of human body parts.

Smoke filled the concrete corridor mixed with the stench of seared, still burning flesh and Sam gagged as he took his father's hand as it was offered in assistance. "What..?"

"Booby trap." John confirmed Sam's grisly assumption and glanced back at the half a dozen men still with him. "We're boxed in. Fire in front, fire behind..." *And maybe more tripwires...*

Sam took a minute to let his spinning head settle and rubbed the back of his palm under his nose. It came away a shade of scarlet and he realized just what had been dripping down his neck. The impact from the explosion had given him a bloody nose and lip from being slammed into the wall. Better that than the fate of his companions who had been at the head of the column. "There has to be another way out. Maybe if we can get back to the chamber..."

"We can't." Bobby appeared from the gloom and nodded back down the passageway. "The fire's already headed this way. I just checked."

Sam shook his head. There was another way out, he sensed it. Pushing past his old friend he began to jog back the way they had come. About halfway, he paused, looking at the walls around him. They were different here. Strange marks and symbols had been etched into the concrete, and one side of the wall was a slightly different color.

Haris wouldn't make changes to the complex like that unless there was a reason.

Sam hunkered down, letting his fingers trace a mark on the floor. It looked like a blood trail, and it was fresh. *Dean?* The young hunter winced. He was clutching at straws. The blood could belong to anyone – maybe even one of the men behind him.

One thing the blood did tell him, no matter whose it was, was that the tunnel had another exit. The dried red ooze pooled in one spot as if the injured party had paused a moment. Then, the blood trail headed right up to the wall of the corridor and stopped.

Sam moved closer, noting two gouges in the floor that finished midway in the corridor.

"There's a hidden door here somewhere!"

At his cry, the weary hunters gathered closer, eager to hear any options now that they were backed into a corner – literally.

"What do you see, son?" John leaned over, blotting out what little light there was, but Sam didn't need it.

Letting his fingertips gently move over the symbols carved into the walls he carefully searched for the trigger mechanism he knew had to be there. It was as if some part of his mind *knew* what he had to do.

Halfway up the wall, he stopped and carefully traced over a familiar sigil with the end of his left forefinger. Taking a breath, Sam pushed, hoping he was about to open a secret doorway rather than set off yet more explosions.

Beneath his hand, the wall began to move outwards towards him until another smaller corridor was revealed. A blast of fresh air hit him in the face from their new

escape route and Sam and his companions inhaled greedily. Breathing the stale fumes of burnt viscera suddenly made them feel nauseous.

“Come on, let’s MOVE!” John didn’t wait to congratulate his son. He didn’t even pat the tallest Winchester on the back as he moved past him to lead the way. Instead, John simply resumed command of his motley troop, and Sam followed.

The new passageway was only a small branch of a larger section, opening into another anti-chamber after only a short distance. The air was still fresh in the room, and there was no sign of the enemy.

Or Dean...

Sam looked around, instantly recognizing the area where he’d been held captive earlier. Several cells lined one wall, and in the nearest, Zack Murzak peered through a small rusted hatch.

At the sight of the hunters Murzak backed away, his eyes widening in sudden fear.

“You bastard! You led us down here to burn!” More jeers followed as the remaining hunters spotted the man who had betrayed them, giving them up to the very thing he was supposed to hate.

“Leave me here...leave me to burn. It’s nothing more than I deserve...” Murzak’s voice was surprisingly fearless, as if he had accepted his fate, maybe even welcomed it.

Sam shook his head, wasting valuable seconds to find the keys to unlock Murzak’s cell. The chain rattled as he tried several until the right one slipped into the lock. “You don’t deserve to die so easily. Not after what you did to my brother...”

The door swung open, but Sam held the other hunters back. They’d want to string Murzak up. Maybe kill him outright for his transgressions. Sam didn’t want that. He wanted to make Murzak suffer for Dean’s sake, he wanted the hunter to know what it was like to watch as your own sibling was possessed and tortured. But most of all, Sam wanted answers. He wanted to know why Murzak betrayed them, why he’d work for a demon and just why Haris had had Dean possessed.

“He comes with us topside.” Sam’s statement was final. It was a growling order that none of the hunters wanted to argue with. The building was crumbling. There was no time for internal struggles among the group.

Grabbing Murzak under one arm, Sam began to drag him from the cell. Realizing his plan to interrogate the traitor later, Bobby took hold of Murzak’s free arm and shuffled him forward.

“Which way?” John looked at the two corridors they had to choose from, uncertain which would be their escape route.

“That one.” Sam bobbed his head. “Keep going until you reach the stairs. They’ll take us right back up outside the complex.” *The stairs Dean joked about. The stairs we almost fell down on our asses...*

The bittersweet memory gnawed at him. Would that be the last time he’d ever see Dean? At least as his true self?

Sam’s face twitched as he tried to quell the anger that coursed through his being. Anger he’d never felt before, not like this. As he climbed each step to the surface, the rage grew stronger. He wanted to kill someone, something, hell anything and he wondered in that moment which Winchester was truly the marked one. Dean may be under a demon’s influence, but Sam? The anger, the urge for revenge was all his own.

For you or Dad, the things I’m willin’ to do or kill, it just...it scares me sometimes...

They had once been Dean’s words, but as Sam shoved Murzak into the daylight beyond the steps he had to admit that for Dean, there was probably nothing he wouldn’t do either.

Behind him, the clatter of boots on concrete told Sam the other hunters and his father were almost clear of the complex too. Letting go of his panting captive, he turned just in time to see the upper levels of Haris’s lair explode in a cacophony of sound and blistering heat.

Sam braced himself, barely keeping his footing as the ground seemed to rock in a two mile radius of the collapsing structure.

Murzak wasn't so lucky, his bone-wrenching grunt signaling he'd hit the dirt face first. He spat out blood where his teeth had cut into his own tongue with the impact, but Sam didn't feel sorry for him, he couldn't.

The minor injury would be the least of the turncoat's worries if he didn't help them find Dean. Dean who might have been in the building when it exploded. Dean who might be burning alive in the underground passageways and tunnels. Dean who was suffering the living hell of having his body controlled, even if he was safe.

Sam watched as flames licked over the rubble and debris that was the only evidence the complex had ever existed. At his side, John placed a hand on his youngest's shoulder.

"We'll find him, Sam..."

* * * *

Unknown Location

It started with the smell, part mold, part body odor, completely disgusting. Another breath; stagnate air that spoke of a space well used and then sealed up tightly. Dead air, now that he chanced a deeper breath. A smell that spoke of decay and death, one that he could only hope was not emanating from him. But no, dead men couldn't smell could they? And didn't smelling entail breathing and breathing meant being alive? Damn! So much for being dead!

Focusing, he could now pick out noises; the sound of shoes scuffling on the floor not far from him. Straining, he could hear more noises, the sound of machinery at a distance. The echo of voices from outside the space he currently inhabited. Human voices, but none that he recognized.

Okay, so this was getting him nowhere, time to include vision into this equation. Slowly, he peeled crusted lids apart, lashes unweaving, allowing the white glow of fluorescent bulbs to assault his pupils. His first sight was of the dingy floor that he was laying cheek down against. Without moving his head, he took in the space around him.

The floor itself was an uninspiring gray, parts of it chipped away to reveal concrete beneath while other areas bore stains whose origins he didn't want to consider. Further on, he spotted two sets of boots, standard issue paramilitary boots, boots that were being worn on some fairly large feet. Allowing his eyes to follow the footwear upwards to the bodies that were attached, he saw two of the biggest men this side of World Championship Wrestling. Imposing was an understatement and although neither held a weapon, he felt certain that was because they didn't need one to carry out their assigned duty.

Completing the observation, his eyes stopped on theirs and in that instant a flood of memories washed over him. Black eyes, coal black demon eyes stared blankly at him. Black eyes that he had seen far too many times before; the firefighter in Missouri, in the young man he had killed outside the Sunrise Apartments, in Meg, and in his dad.

"Black eyes that you have too!"

Possession; the swirl of black fog that was spewed out of Zack's mouth only to envelop him in a chest crushing embrace. Pain as he felt himself being torn apart from the inside out as the invader sought to subdue him. Pure malevolence; as Haris stared down at him, encouraging him to 'give in', 'let go', 'have peace'.

Peace, what a concept that was! Had he ever known peace in his entire life?

"No, you haven't! But you can! Give in, let go, have peace!"

And there had been Sam! His memory replaying sad, pleading eyes, not black like his, begging him, pulling him, hugging him close as he thrashed under the pain.

Sammy's voice, cracking with fear, yet a moment of defiance as he spat words at the yellow-eyed figure towering above them both.

"Ignore him. You're here because of him. The pain should have been his pain, not yours. It's all his fault! He doesn't care about you! Give in, let go, have peace!"

He struggled to a seated position, thankful that there was a wall behind him to support the body that felt as though it had been torn apart and reassembled without any heed to the instructions. There was still pain, beckoning him to return to blissful darkness. Pain was a friend, had been a common companion over the past two decades, perhaps the one constant thing he could always count on never letting him down, never leaving him.

"Mom left! Dad left! Even Sammy left! They all leave you. But you don't have to be alone anymore! Give in, let go, have peace!"

The words reverberated inside his skull, bouncing around his consciousness like the silver ball of a pinball machine being repeatedly struck by the flippers.

"Give in, let go, have peace!" Such a simple request to follow, close your eyes, submit to the darkness, both inside and out.

"NO!" another voice, a stronger voice shouted back! *"Resist, hold on, stay strong!"* Deep within him this new voice sounded, pouring out of the very marrow of his bones. Stronger than the voice that was picking at the scabs in his wounded psyche, this voice sounded familiar.

"Get up, you're a Winchester! You've never given up on anything in your life! Resist, hold on, stay strong!"

Spurred by optimism, he pushed off from the wall. A dozen different muscle groups shouted out in protest and vertigo threatened to put him right back on his gluts. Biting his bottom lip till blood flood and tainted his tongue with copper, he found as he always did, the internal strength to push himself past physical discomfort.

The two standing walls of muscle never blinked as he rose to his feet. Never moved, apparently content in the fact that he posed no threat. He walked right up to the nearest of the twin gorillas, standing a full head shorter than either of them. 'Sammy-size' except his brother would never have as much muscle mass as these two, and if he had any say, never the black stained eyes!

Sam! *"Resist! Hold on! Stay Strong!"*

The room's one and only door was directly behind gorilla number one, but it might as well have been a continent away. He thought about trying his luck, he'd done it before hadn't he? Spit in the face of the devil, screw the odds, fight like there's no tomorrow, never let them see any fear!

"But you do have fear, don't you? You were afraid of your father and being a disappointment in his eyes. You're afraid of your brother and what he might become. You're afraid of being alone! Give in, let go, have peace!"

It wasn't fear that moved him away from the wall of intimidating flesh but a much more basic need. Thirst! It drew him away from his strange introspection and dialogue. It silenced the voices vying for his attention. A small sink mounted on the wall to his left teased with the promise of water.

Moving to the rust stained bowl, he twisted on the knob but only a trickle fell from the spout. Holding his cupped hand beneath the meager flow, he greedily scooped it into his mouth, spitting out the first bit along with the leftover taste of blood. He filled another handful and sipped this one eagerly. Two more handfuls and the tap gave out, solitary drips mocking his remaining thirst.

He straightened and caught sight of a face in the cracked mirror that hung above the sink. A bruised and battered visage stared back at him. Hazel eyes that looked dull and exhausted and dark circles underneath telling him that his body had not been treated kindly. Blood coated the upper right side of a torn green shirt, a hole peeking out of the material and suggesting a wound that should likely be more painful than it currently was.

As he touched his shoulder, fingers guided by the reflection in the mirror, a flash of black startled him away from the physical inspection. Black eyes, flashing over the weary hazel, stared back out at him from the glass. Black eyes of possession. Black eyes of a demon, buried deep within him.

"Give in, let go, have peace!" It beckoned him, sweet temptation like a lover calling him to a soft, warm bed.

A thousand thoughts rummaged through his mind. I was possessed! I am possessed! How can I still see out of these eyes? NO, NO and NO! He shook his head back and forth, denying the vision, denying the obvious, denying the truth of what stared back at him. His eyes were hazel, sometimes green, but never black. Not now, not ever! Push it down, make them hazel, don't give in!

Timidly, reluctantly, he lifted his face and once more allowed the lids to barely peel apart. The black was gone once more and the exhausted green shown through. A smile burst inside him and he felt optimistic, if only mildly.

"I'm proud of you son! Resist! Hold on! Stay Strong!" his father's voice encouraging him as he so rarely did in life.

He moved away from the mirror, afraid to tempt fate any further, afraid that the hazel eyes were more an illusion than the black ones. It took just a few seconds to really canvas the entire room/cell. No furniture, no belongings, just trash and the two human mountains of meat. He began to pace, since there was nothing better to do, and besides, he always paced when his mind was working on something. He was on his third pass of the room when the squeak of rusted hinges drew his attention.

Yellow-eyes glaring, sinister smile spread across an otherwise human face, Haris unfolded his hands and spread his arms open wide like a parent inviting a child into a hug.

"Welcome home, Dean!"

* * * *

Outside Haris's Complex By the Impala

Sam didn't know how long he'd watched the complex burn. He didn't even notice the other hunters once again gathering around as John and Bobby began counting heads and giving out instructions.

It was only the yelp of a once long-time friend that brought him back from his stupor.

"Kill me...it doesn't matter. Just make it quick..."

"Quick, Zack? Hell, you don't deserve quick, not on a good day even." Bobby shot the man who had once been his ally a look of contempt, but didn't join the other hunters as they surrounded Murzak.

The men were mad. They wanted retribution for their dead friends and they didn't care what unspeakable or cruel acts they inflicted on Murzak to get it. Some spoke of a lynching, others had ideas for much more graphic and bloody torture. These were hunters, they'd seen enough in their hidden, death-filled lives not to care if a little more blood spilled, not even if it was from a man who had once been one of their own.

John watched, but didn't try to intervene – deep down part of him felt the same way. Murzak had tricked them all, maybe cost Dean his life. Why should he be spared now? *I can't let them kill him.*

John cringed, his emotions torn in two different directions. Murzak deserved a beating maybe, but not death. Taking his life would make them worse than the things they hunted. It would make them murderers.

Two wrongs, don't make a right...

The elder Winchester squirmed at his own recollection, rubbing at the ache in his neck that seemed to throb with each new dire thought. Haris had used those exact words to Dean while he'd been in John's body back at the cabin. He'd had to watch, to suffer the demon's actions as it used him as a puppet. He'd had to see his son torn to pieces by unseen hands – hands being directed by the creature within him. Was that what Dean was feeling now if he was alive? Was that the fate Zack had given his son? Having to watch as his body did horrific things to other humans?

"Dad, we can't let them hurt him." Sam interrupted any further reflection as he walked to his father's side, his own face still sullied with blood and despair. "Zack was possessed, Dad! He couldn't help luring Dean and me here as bait. The demon inside him is the same one that took Dean..."

"You'd stand up for him, even after what happened to your brother?" John stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at the man before him. The man who had once been the tiny baby Dean had plucked from the flames of their home. He'd never say it, but he was proud of Sam – proud of the sensitive young man he'd become. Just as proud as he was of Dean. He simply found it a lot harder to say.

Sam nodded, never realizing the pride his actions stirred in his father. "We need him. He might know where Dean is, or at least something that might help us find Haris."

"I think I already know where Dean is, and you're not going to like it..." Bobby fidgeted as he crossed over the enclosure, fumbling with the peak of his trademark soiled baseball cap before continuing. "Some of the men think they saw one of Haris's boys dragging Dean out of that chamber. Looks like he wasn't in the building at least."

"And if he was being dragged he wasn't going willingly, demon on board or not." Sam looked across to where Zack was now pinned by the other hunters, every one of them eager to tear him a new ass or worse. "Murzak is the only one who can give us a lead..."

"If he's willing," Bobby pointed out, stowing his sawn-off shotgun in the rear of his weather-beaten pick-up. "I've known the man a long time, and I'm telling you there's something off about this whole deal with Haris."

Sam's gaze settled on his father. He'd already told John Zack had been possessed, but was there more? Right now, if there was, it didn't matter. Zack Murzak was their only link to Haris – their only link to Dean's whereabouts.

"I think you're right," The young hunter agreed. "But we're not going to find out what's going on with the rest of the men about to eviscerate him. We need to get him alone. I need to get him alone..."

John Winchester's eyes narrowed and several creases appeared in his brow in surprise. He was usually the aggressive one. Hell, Dean had inherited his short temper, but Sam? Sam was all Mary. He was the placid one. He was the thinker of the family.

The grizzled ex-marine took down a long breath and licked his parched lips. Eventually, he nodded to the crowd surrounding Murzak. "I'll handle the other hunters. While Bobby and I keep them busy you take Zack to the cabin I've been using. Take the second dirt track off the highway and follow it to a fork in the road. Go left and it's about half a mile further down. I'll meet you there later..."

John paused, forcing back words that were on the tip of his tongue. He didn't want Sam hurting Murzak even though the traitor deserved it. If there was any interrogating to be done, then he would be the one to shoulder it. Sam didn't need anything else on his conscience.

Sam noted the pause, realizing his father's thoughts. He was acting out of character. *Acting like a man possessed...*

He wanted to laugh at the idea, but somehow it just wasn't fitting, not now, not ever to a Winchester. "I'll wait for you," he finally settled, waiting for his father to address the throng massing around the Impala.

John took his son's word without further questioning and turned back to the group of hunters, hands still tucked into his pockets. The men were still angry, but at his throaty tones they stopped their ramblings and focused on his impromptu speech.

"Men, I wish I could say today had been a victory, but I can't. We've lost good friends, some of us have lost family members..."

As John spoke, Sam let the words play in his mind, but he didn't truly listen.

Lost family members...Dean...

Regrouping was important. But for Sam, stealing Zack Murzak away to their hideaway was something more – it was vital.

Sliding between a huge ape-sized hunter and the Chevy without being noticed, he grabbed Zack's wrist so hard it made the elder man gasp.

Sam instantly put a finger to his mouth and then made a slicing motion across his throat, indicating more noise could mean death. The hunters wanted blood, and only the conspirator's would do. "Get in the car..."

Sam carefully pulled at the handle, trying to open the Chevy's heavy door without instigating the usual ear-splitting creak that signaled the car's true age. It was worse than the sound of Dracula's coffin lid being opened.

The move was half successful and only a small groan erupted from the hinges.

Murzak gulped down air and then squeezed his body through the small gap Sam had made until he was perched on the bench seat. He didn't move, didn't try to escape or rebel.

"Haris is on the run, he's not as certain as he once was. We can regroup, build a stronger army to fight him..."

Sam could hear his father's voice as he bounced down behind the wheel of his brother's baby. This was Dean's car, and he should be here driving it. It felt wrong, alien even as he turned the ignition key and cranked the tiger of an engine to life.

When the stereo suddenly blared to life as if controlled by some ethereal force it simply added to the torment. Rock music blaring, rock music that only Dean could gain pleasure from. Rock music that said it all as Sam pulled away, tires spinning wildly in the loose earth as he applied far too much gas in his haste to escape his torment.

You're caught in a crossfire

Of a greater love than man has ever known

Caught in a crossfire

And you've got to choose which way you're gonna go

Caught in a crossfire

In a world of darkness turn to the light...

Maybe the [Kansas](#) lyrics said it all, because what Sam chose to do next could ultimately decide his brother's earthly fate. Perhaps his own fate too.

* * * *

Inside Impala Sometime Later...

Zack Murzak kept his eyes firmly fixed on the countryside outside the car, not daring once to look at the young man at his side. The Winchesters had been his allies and he had fed them to the wolves as surely as he drew breath.

He knew what it was like to feel the sting of the demon within. Knew the torture of being possessed and having no control over his actions, and yet still, he had done it willingly. Perhaps that was the thing that hurt most.

Willingly. No, what he had done hadn't been voluntary. It had been necessary.

Murzak flinched as Sam reached across the interior of the Chevy and he expected the backlash of the young hunter's hand. He deserved it, after all.

Instead, Sam simply switched off the hard rock that had been assaulting their ears since leaving the complex. As he flicked the button of the ancient player, his gaze shifted to meet Zack's.

There was anger in those soulful eyes, anger and a kind of fear Murzak knew all too well. Having family was a curse to a hunter sometimes. It left openings for the enemy. Sam was learning that the hard way now.

"Where has Haris taken my brother? And why? Why the hell would he suddenly lose interest in me in favor of Dean?" Sam's voice was low; his tone hinting that although he appeared in control, he was balancing on a fine line that he might tumble from any second.

"He hasn't lost interest in you, Sam. Of that I'm sure. Let's just say he's found additional interests..." Murzak's grizzled yet handsome features twisted in shame. "I wish I could tell you more, but I don't know anything..."

"Don't know anything? You had one of Haris's kids inside you for God knows how long and didn't get any scrap of his plans?" Sam slammed a fist down onto the dash so hard he grazed the skin from his knuckles and red welts began to appear across his hand. Better his hand though, than Murzak's face. *He's lying. Meg knew what the demon had been up to while she was possessed. She remembered Sunrise...*

Murzak re-fixed his gaze on the passing trees; they were easier to look at than the pained young man at his side. Easier to focus on as he remained silent.

"You bastard!" Sam's boot hit the brake pedal so hard Murzak was thrown forward with the sudden loss of momentum. He reached out, catching himself on the dash just in time to save his face from slamming into the windshield.

Sam ignored the fact that his prisoner was shaking. He ignored the fact that he'd blocked off the road with the Chevy's mass. All he could think about was the hurt, the blame. Zack had instigated the trap. Zack was the one who deserved to feel his rage. He needed an outlet, even though he knew neither he nor Dean should have fallen for the ruse Murzak had set off in the first place.

Sam grabbed Murzak's collar with his grazed hand, the color draining from it as he squeezed hard, pressing the elder man up against the side window. "Where's Dean? Where the hell has that Sonofabitch taken my brother!"

Zack's throat bobbed as he tried to swallow, tried to breath. He couldn't answer even if he wanted to, Sam was pressing so hard against his neck. He coughed, meekly struggling against the attack until Sam realized what he was doing.

The young hunter let go and recoiled. He was losing perspective. Losing control. Blinking, he took a long breath to calm his jangling nerves. "Just tell me where to look..."

Murzak rubbed at his neck, realizing Sam's assault would probably leave bruises – still, that was far less than the injuries he'd have received from the angry mob of hunters they'd left behind. "Haris will kill me if I tell you anything. Dean is probably dead by now. Haris doesn't take kindly to his kind of retorts, you know that..." He watched Sam, eyes wary of a further attack. "Why should I risk the demon's anger for a man that's already dead?"

The sentence was like a harsh slap to the face, and Sam's earlier anger returned, striking from the darker corners of his psyche like some venomous creature. He couldn't stop the anger; he couldn't stop the pain of reliving the moment Dean had been taken over by the black miasma over and over again in his head.

"You need to forget about Haris and worry about what Dad and I are going to do to you if you don't start talking." Sam tried to hold back, tried to push the feelings away, but for Dean, he couldn't. "We're getting my brother back, and I don't give a damn if you live or not in the process..."

Murzak's expression clouded with fear, his eyes widening until they looked like they would pop from his skull. From John or Dean he had expected this kind of behavior, but Sam?



If he hadn't known better, he would have thought the younger Winchester had been possessed too. But then, according to Haris's acumen, the gifted children could easily be turned into the dark creations he envisaged for his human legion. Maybe Sam had already been pushed into the first steps down that road and didn't even know it.

How much loss, destruction, and torment could one soul take before breaking and accepting a new fate, a new destiny?

Zack knew that point of no return, he'd been there. Perhaps that was what scared him most now. He had done what was necessary, set traps, watched the innocent die – some friends even, and all for one reason.

In Sam's mind, he had a reason; an incentive to tread that dark path now, and that reason was Dean.

Murzak's muscles relaxed and he accepted the inevitable. In that moment, he was certain that Sam would do anything, kill even for his brother.

* * * *

Unknown location

"Welcome home, Dean!"

Haris remained standing there, his arms wide open as though he expected, maybe willed, Dean to move forward into the embrace. After an appreciable amount of time, accompanied by the sheer insolence that seethed out of every pore and fiber of the young hunter, Haris sighed audibly and dropped his arms. He moved forward, closing the short distance between himself and Dean. Slowly, he began to walk around the man, appraising him like a collector would a work of art. Not missing any aspect of the body in front of him, yellow eyes swirling as Haris took in every detail from the finest strand of short brown hair to the rigid, unyielding stance. The embodiment of defiance!

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," Dean snarled, his skin twitching from the nearness of the demon.

Haris laughed, his breath whispering across the back of Dean's neck, setting the fine hairs at his nape on end.

"I do so appreciate the impudence Dean. It makes it that much more satisfying when you submit."

When, not if!

Dean tried to hide the shudder that coursed through his body, but Haris caught the involuntary movement and laughed once more.

"What? No snappy Winchester comeback? Why Dean, I'm a little disappointed in you! But no matter, you will submit to me. Sooner or later, easily or painfully. Personally, I'm hoping for the latter."

Dean remained rigid as Haris walked back around to stand directly before him. Just beyond the demon's left shoulder, the door to the room had remained open following Haris' entrance. Dean held his head stiffly forward, but he carefully stole a glance to the right, mentally calculating the distance between the two humongous guards and the temptation of freedom. It was only a quick look, but Haris caught it nonetheless.

"Oh please! Do try to escape. I could use the entertainment this afternoon." Haris invited.

The two guards smiled in unison, black eyes glowing, large white teeth gleaming in anticipation like two pitbulls waiting for their master to toss them a raw steak. Dean didn't bother to hide his eye movement this time, looking from the doorway to the guards and back again to the sardonic grin on Haris' face.

Dean Winchester could be reckless, often was in fact, especially when it came to protecting his family, but these odds were clearly not in his favor and he knew it.

Offering his own acerbic smile back to the demon, he shook his head, backing down, the pent-up tension in his muscles relaxing just a little. "Nah, maybe I'll wait around to see what you serve for happy hour: I just love those hot chicken wings with an ice cold beer."

Haris laughed back, recognizing the defeat covered by the sarcasm. He moved closer now, mere inches away from the hunter's face. Haris locked eyes with the young man. Yellow eyes meeting hazel, hazel glaring back. Still perplexed by the lack of black in the irises before him, Haris stared intently, attempting to bore into the very soul of the human before him.

Why had this young man not succumbed to the demon within him? What was preventing the complete possession? Had he not witnessed the black cloud of his demonic spawn overtake and envelope the young hunter, he might have thought that it had been repelled somehow.

"Dude, I don't get this close to a chick on the first date. Well, okay, yeah I do, but you're definitely not my type, and that sulfur breath, dude, I don't think there's a mint out there that will take care of that," Dean snarked, the proximity of the demon's face to his own unsettling.

Haris backed away laughing. *'So much defiance in this one!'* he thought to himself. *'Such a worthwhile adversary and he'll be an even greater soldier to carry out my will!'*

"Still wearing those masks huh Dean? Seems like we played out this little tough guy act of yours before. Oooh! That night at the cabin! What fun memories we created then: A regular Winchester family reunion as I recall!"

"Cut to the chase you bastard! What the hell do you want with me?" Dean snarled, frustration chasing away the ghosts that had been haunting him since that long night. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I'm assembling my troops here Dean. This is where you belong. You belong to me!" Haris calmly stated.

"I don't belong to anyone!" the young man hissed back defiantly.

"Ah, but you do Dean. You have one of my children on board."

The young hunter spun away from the yellow-eyed glare.

"What do you think I am? Some freakin' minivan from hell, hauling your demonic brat all around?" Dean snarled, the question rhetorical, the answer he already knew.

Haris walked around him, seeking out his face once more. Hazel eyes shot to the floor, but the tension in the young man's body was palpable in the small space.

"Still, it is a curious situation," Haris continued. "You should be completely under the control of my 'son' right now. You certainly submitted to him back at the complex. But now, hmmm, I'm just not certain what's going on here."

"Well, so much for the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful OZ." Dean shot back. "I hope the curiosity drives you friggin' insane!"

Haris drew his hand back, a split second from lashing out against the defiance being displayed in the taut jaw of the hunter standing before him. Tempted to beat the young man into submission if necessary, the demon restrained itself. There were better and more effective methods to gain compliance and Haris well knew the fears that lay behind the eyes that glared at him now. He knew the words that would chip away at the hardened exterior. He'd used them before and had gained the desired results.

"Dean, why make this so hard? Don't you see what I have to offer you? It's everything you ever wanted. Family, belonging, home! All those things that daddy could never give you! You've been a soldier all your life. A good and dependable soldier for such a lost cause. With me, you can be a commander on the winning team. I can give you everything you ever wanted, no more sacrifices, no more pain!"

"Give in, let go, have peace!" the voice whispered from within him.

"There is nothing for you to go back to! I am the only future for you now!" the demon continued.

"Sam? My dad?" Dean muttered softly, afraid of the implication in the demon's last statement.

"Gone!" Haris replied. "Remember Dean? You sacrificed your brother! Your hand held the knife that slid across his throat! And Sammy, he just laid there, staring up at you, all the time believing that his big brother would protect him like he always had, save him, like every other time before. Too bad it was too late for him to realize how wrong he had been."

Dean's mind flashed back to the chamber. A mass of candles encircled a prone form. Figures in robes, their faces shrouded, chanting. Someone handed him a knife. Forced it into his open palm and pushed him forward toward the altar. He wanted to resist, should have resisted, but he hadn't. He moved ahead until he could see the sacrifice. Sam! Dark eyes staring up at him, relief turned to fear which turned to pleading and ended with acceptance.

"It's not your fault Dean!" Those soulful eyes that had always trusted and relied on him to make things right, now offered forgiveness as the knife kissed against the skin of Sam's throat.

He remembered the movement, in slow motion, more agonizing because he couldn't remember any attempt to resist it. Then, the melee began. Gunshots ringing out as the hunters stormed the chamber. Bullets whizzing by his body from every direction as men poured into the large room only to be met by a horde of demons.

Dean flinched in the recollection, his body jerking as he recalled the impact of a bullet into his shoulder. The force of the slug spun him around, knife still in his outstretched hand incriminating him. Then there were more eyes. Dark again, like Sam's, but these were not forgiving, not accepting. His father's eyes, saddened as he lowered the still-smoking weapon and watched as his eldest son fell to the ground.

Haris smiled smugly yet again. He saw the resignation in Dean's body as the young man reached up and touched his right shoulder. Time for another dagger to be thrown.

"See, it's all true Dean. You killed poor baby brother and John caught you doing it. Why else would Daddy have tried to kill you? But don't worry. He and all of the hunters paid the price for their audacity."

"Dad?" Dean breathed.

"Slaughtered, all of them. Screaming like dogs as my troops tore them apart. We bathed in hunter blood that day; so satisfying. And John? I saved him for last. He cried when he saw what you did to poor Sammy. He died hating you. Cursed your name and the day you were born."

No, No, **NO!** His very soul screamed out in disbelief. It didn't happen that way. It couldn't have happened that way. Demons lie, Haris was lying now, he had to believe that or there was no point in living.

Dean struggled to wipe the memories from his mind. If he could erase the vivid replay, then it hadn't happened. He could convince himself that his brother and father were still alive and that he wasn't damned forever. As if in response, his shoulder ached, a deep throb that radiated outward and ate at him far worse than any bullet wound ever could. It affirmed Haris' story and condemned him.

"Give in, let go, have peace!"

"You're all alone Dean, but you don't have to be!" Haris tempted. "There is no one left for you. No Mom, no Dad, no Sam! They're all gone!"

"Give in, let go, have peace!"

Pain engulfed him and he sunk to his knees, arms wrapped tightly around him as he began to rock back and forth. Twenty-four years of emotional pain, fear, uncertainty, and loss boiled up from inside, a tidal wave that threatened to wash away any semblance of the strong Dean Winchester that he had so cleverly and

precisely crafted. His family was gone, the very definition of who he was had been finally and completely wiped off the earth. With no family, who was he really?

“Get up, you’re a Winchester! You’ve never given up on anything in your life! Resist, hold on, stay strong!”

“Dad?” he cried out weakly, inner voice spurring inner hope.

“Gone!” Haris insisted.

‘But Demons lie!’

‘Slaughtered, all of them’

‘It’s not your fault Dean!’

‘Give in ... RESIST ... let go ... HOLD ON ... have peace ... STAY STRONG!’

Darkness clawed at him, pulling him under! *Sam! Help me! Gone!* Sam’s eyes, his light, pulling him back to the surface like a lifeguard. **Gone!**

“All gone Dean! You belong to me now!” Haris restated.

Pain instantly turned to rage. It exploded behind his eyes and enveloped him like a warm blanket. Dean vaulted to his feet, muscles bunching, fist clenching, hazel irises flaring wildly then glazing over black.

In one fluid movement, he was toe to toe with Haris, his hands wrapped around the demon’s neck, fingers clawing into human-like flesh as his forearms bulged with the effort. The two behemoths at the door moved in protectively, ready to peel the puny human from their master’s throat, but Haris waved them off.

Momentarily surprised at the strength of the hands that were clasped about his neck, Haris ignored the attack like the minor irritation it was. Instead, he focused on the black eyes of the form in front of him; black eyes that indicated a change of control, an internal war being waged and won all in the demon’s favor. As the hunter’s grip continued to tighten, Haris smiled.

“That’s it Dean! Feed the anger, embrace all that rage!” the demon encouraged. “You belong to me!”

* * * *

Cabin in the woods - later that evening

It was early evening when John pulled his truck up to the front of the old hunting cabin. The retreating sunlight fought a losing battle with the nearly full moon that was just appearing over the horizon, each in turn casting peculiar shadows across the landscape and amongst the lines of pines just behind the log structure.

He pushed the truck door open and paused momentarily as he swung his feet out and planted them onto the ground. Sighing loudly, he sat there in silence, his weary body reminding his tortured psyche of everything that had transpired that day. What a fool he had been, believing that today could actually have been the end to his crusade and the destruction of his most vilified enemy. Instead, the day started in betrayal and had ended in loss.

John rubbed at reddened, fatigued eyes. *‘Yeah, fatigue! Not tears!’* his mind insisted, but as the base of his palms continued to press into the hard edge of his orbits, the wetness there had nothing to do with physical exhaustion.

Dean! Soldier, son, possessed, missing! Memories of a tousled haired little boy, rambunctious, energetic and full of life, coursed through his mind. A young man, standing by his side, seasoned hunter, true brother, faithful son.

Gone! Maybe lost to him forever by either death or worse. John surged to his feet. Part of him was tempted to shout at the skies until his throat was as raw as the heart in his chest. The other part of him wanted to march inside the cabin and tear Zack Murzak apart with his bare hands and then use the amputated limbs to beat the man to death.

The latter part of John Winchester won out and he flung the truck door shut with as much force as he could muster; the glass in the partially opened window rattled

and threatened to shatter. He stormed up the stairs to the covered porch two at a time, leaving no doubt in the occupants mind that he was on his way. Thankfully, the front door was unlocked, since he hit it at full stride, twisting the knob and flinging it open, the wood colliding with the interior wall and knocking a picture to the floor with a loud crash.

Inside, his youngest son sat backwards on a chair, his long legs straddling either side of the seat. Leaning forward, his chest resting against the spindles, Sam rigidly held his .45 aimed directly at Zack's head. The young man didn't even glance up as his father's heavy steps carried him across the short span between the front door and the small kitchen area where the dark haired hunter sat tied to an identical chair.

Without breaking stride, John stalked over to his former friend and stood glaring at him for a few brief seconds, breathing heavily. Suddenly, John lashed out and backhanded him with such force that the restrained man was thrown sideways to the floor, chair and all.

"You sonofabitch!" John roared, reaching down and dragging the stunned man back upright by his shirt front, twin trails of blood trickling from Zack's nose. "We lost a lot of good men out there today because of you! And on top of that, you serve up my sons on a silver platter to that bastard Haris!" Brown eyes screaming as loudly as his voice, rage overwhelmed him and John backhanded the man once again for good measure.

Watching his father, Sam never flinched; the gun that remained trained on the hunter didn't drop a fraction. In truth, at that moment, he would have enthusiastically helped his father tear the man to pieces were it not for the information that he fervently prayed Zack would reveal. Instead, he sat silently, content to let his father take out anger and frustration on Zack for the both of them.

Another backhand, another pain-filled grunt, but the former hunter remained silent, each time his nearly glazed-over eyes returned to the floor unable or unwilling to meet the eyes of the two men before him.

John mistook the silence for defiance, and as he released the remnant of his anger and pain, he grabbed Zack's hair and forced the man's head up to meet his gaze. Zack gagged as John's other hand closed around his throat, thumb crushing into his windpipe, but the older hunter never broke his grasp.

"Dammit Zack! Just tell me where he took my son! I don't care about anything else. I just want Dean back!" John began shouting, but his voiced cracked as he said his eldest son's name, betraying the desperation he was trying so carefully to hide. He increased the pressure on Zack's throat, losing control, ignoring Zack's desperate efforts to get air.

Sam caught the break in his father's tone. Suddenly realizing that John was losing it and about to kill Zack, he sprang up from the chair and grabbed John's arm.

"Dad!" It was like trying to move a marble statue, the muscles in his father's arm were coiled like a python. "Dad! Stop it!"

John blinked, then blinked again, staring at Sam. Reluctantly, he let go of Zack's throat, but retained his grasp of the former hunter's hair. "Last chance," He warned, face close to Zack's.

Satisfied, Sam stepped back, watching as Zack gulped for air, lifting his gun once more.

"I don't know anything!" Voice raw, Murzak screamed back, his bloodshot eyes and bruised face arching forward, pleading ignorance. "I swear to God, John!"

John looked long and hard at Zack, searching the beaten hunter's eyes, carefully considering what he saw. He could see the fear and lies in the rapid movement of Zack's pupils. John Winchester was never a tolerant man, but he was even less so when it came to lying.

"Bullshit!" John snarled, releasing his grip on Zack's hair with a jerk, straightening angrily. "You were one of the best hunters I've ever known!" John narrowed his eyes

in disgust. "How the hell does someone like you get possessed? You were too careful. It just doesn't happen that easily with someone like you!"

Zack shrugged, absolutely unable to meet his former friend and comrade's eyes. He knew he couldn't offer a rationale that the indomitable John Winchester would ever accept, especially when he was focused on the welfare of his sons.

John moved away from the shell of the former hunter, pissed off and exasperated at the lack of information coming from the man. Afraid he would actually just kill him and be done with it, but aware that wouldn't help them find Dean. Pacing across the room, running his hand through his hair and across his face, trying to think, he turned to his youngest, *remaining?* son.

Despite his posture of readiness, Sam looked exhausted, his face bearing the bruises of Haris' not-so-gentle guards, his hands swollen, knuckles split and reddened from his futile assault on the cell door as he tried to get back to his older brother.

There was hollowness to the young man's eyes, and John well knew the underlying cause. While there had always been a brother's bond between his two sons, Dean stepping naturally into the older brother protector role, Sam was equally, albeit more subtly, his older brother's guardian as well. If Dean was the rock climber, Sam was his tether to the mountain, always there to prevent the big fall. While John knew - had witnessed firsthand - the devastation to Dean when Sam left for Stanford, then he was currently seeing that same desolation in Sam now that Dean was gone.

'What have I done to my sons?' he groaned inwardly.

John walked to Sam's side; his hand dropped to rest on the young man's shoulder, applying a gentle squeeze that he hoped conveyed some sort of optimism. Sam glanced up only briefly, the .45 never wavering from its dead-on aim, the muscles in the forearm holding the weapon taut and tense.

Gently pressing his hand down on the top of the pistol, John eased Sam's hand downward, feeling the tension ease ever so slightly. Grabbing another of the chairs, John pushed it to Sam and nodded at him to sit. He sank down onto the hard seat Sam had vacated, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. He was still for a long moment, his mind swirling with thoughts like a five hundred piece puzzle tossed onto a table that he struggled to put together without the picture on the top of the box to guide him. Nervously running a hand through his dirty, sweat slicked hair, he looked from Zack then over to Sam, addressing him.

"Okay son, tell me everything that happened at the compound." John shot Zack a threatening look. "Since Zack isn't exactly running off at the mouth with explanations, maybe something you remember will help."

Torn from his anger and pain, Sam looked up at his father's face. John was asking him to relive one of the most horrid moments of his young life, but he understood the need and, possibly for the first time in his adult life, he didn't challenge his dad. He drew a breath, letting it escape in a long sigh.

"Well," he began, "we got the coordinates that we thought were from you and we headed out to the compound. When we got over the fence, Zack there put a gun to Dean's neck and escorted us inside the building. Dean said later that Zack had given him a codeword to signal that everything was okay. Once we were inside, Zack said that he had been on a sort of covert ops within the demon's organization."

Sam took another deep breath before continuing on with the rest of the story. John didn't miss the sharp intake of breath nor the shiver that ran through his son as he recalled the events.

"He took us up to this office, said he brought us there under the pretense of making a deal with the demon, so that he could protect his cover and get more answers on how to destroy Haris." Sam snorted mirthlessly, gesturing at Zack. "He even asked for the fake bullet that you left with Dean; said that was part of the ruse."

"We get in there and Dean goes to hand over the bullet." Sam made a face and shook his head. "It was that bastard Haris all along. He grabbed Dean and then he pulls the demon out of Zack and it ..."

Sam stopped abruptly, his eyes shooting down to the floor as he recalled what happened next. Over and over, those minutes had replayed in his mind. Dean, surrounded by the black cloud; Dean, barely visible as the thick mass poured down his throat; Dean, as his body tumbled to the floor and began its seizure-like movements as the demon sought control. He could have done something, should have done something, but just like in the cabin in Missouri, all he could do was watch as his brother was made a pawn for demon torture yet again!

John remained silent, sharing in silence, the sheer agony that he knew Sam felt at having witnessed the possession of his brother. His own demons resurfaced and, like Sam, he recalled his own possession at the hands of that yellow-eyed son of a bitch Haris. He writhed inside, the torture of recalling the hateful words he had spat at his sons, of watching his eldest bleed and beg for his life as he was ripped apart, of Sam, as he held the Colt, torn between destroying the demon and losing his father.

"Go on, Sam," he said gently.

"That was the last I saw of Dean, well, until in the chamber that is. But the demon, he said that he wasn't done with Zack yet and they hauled us down to a cell." Sam stared at the floor, giving his unruly hair a habitual tug.

John looked back over at the sullen former comrade. Zack had not lifted his eyes during Sam's recounting, but his rapid respirations seemed to betray his imposed silence and denial.

"So, apparently your Master had some other plans for you huh?" the elder Winchester snarled, kicking the chair Zack was tied to, causing Zack to glance up briefly, then immediately back to the floor. "But you don't know anything, you lying son of a bitch, that right?" John kicked the chair again but got no reaction this time.

"Dad," Sam interrupted, another memory of his captivity scratching at his subconscious. "While we were locked in the cell, Zack said something about our family being cursed. That there was nothing we could do about what was happening, like our whole family was marked in some way." He raised his eyes and looked directly at John. "Do you know anything about that? Is it true?"

John Winchester paused before answering, his hesitancy alerting Sam to the inevitable 'half-truth' that was about to be uttered.

John despised lying and hated that this lifestyle had demanded that he do it on an ongoing basis to achieve necessary results. He also had quickly learned that in order to protect his sometimes over-eager sons, he couldn't always divulge the complete truth. Worse still, he knew that his boys had grown to be perceptive of his less-than-true answers.

"No son," John replied, looking back steadily. "Our family is not cursed. You are not cursed."

From his restrained position, Murzak 'humped' air, his disdain apparent in that single breath. John responded instantly, intent on silencing the man, his anger resurfacing.

"And what the hell would you know about my family? Huh?" he shouted. "What did that bastard Haris tell you?"

"Nothing!" Zack responded, his voice brazen despite cringing from the physical abuse he knew was inevitable.

Provoked, John stood once more. "Oh, you know plenty!" he hissed as the barrage of questions began.

"Why did Haris let you live? What did he want with you?"

"I don't know!" a soft statement.

"Where is Haris?" demanding.

"I don't know!" more insistent.

"Why did he take Dean?" intensity growing.

"I don't know!" pleading ignorance.

"WHERE IS MY SON?" shouting each syllable.

"I told you I DON'T KNOW!" matching the tone.

John Winchester felt his heart pounding against his ribcage as he repeatedly clenched and unclenched his fists. A bevy of emotions coursed through him like an electrical current, frustration, anger, pain, desperation. He couldn't focus, could barely speak for fear that his brain would only allow a stuttering grumble of curses. So he did the one thing still available to him, he acted. Years of hunting taught him how to be a predator and the predator in him knew what had to be done. Moving over to his green rucksack, his hand closed on the needed object.

Sam saw the glint of light on stainless steel but he rose too slowly to intervene. The flash of light on metal also caught Zack's eye too, but the ropes that bound him to the chair prevented him from reacting.

Unimpeded, John casually moved to face the former demon hunter turned demon collaborator. Panic filled Zack's eyes, the realization that his resistance might be about to cost him the ultimate price as the huge hunting knife waved just inches from his nose.

"I want answers!" John sneered, eyes glaring. "And you're gonna give 'em to me!" he promised, as the well-honed edge of the blade sliced through the air, hungry for human flesh.

* * * *

Unknown Location

Dean huddled in the corner of the room shivering, his body fighting a battle against itself as fatigued muscles still struggled to twitch in response to the last ebbs of adrenaline that had been surging through him just moments before. He huddled against the wall for two reasons; one - because that's where he had landed when Haris tossed him across the room with a nod of his head; and two – because right now, the junction of the walls and floor were the only thing holding his battered and exhausted body upright.

Closing his eyes, he wrapped his arms around his chest, squeezing tightly. He concentrated for a minute, listening for the telltale voices that had been plaguing him since he had woken in this place the first time. Deep inside, he recognized the voices for what they were; one demon, one soul, but both vying for supremacy, for total control over the shell called Dean Winchester.

It had been a toss-up which voice was going to win when he had launched himself at Haris. If he truly had lost everyone important in his life, then the prospect of being left only with the demon within him and the demon facing him was more than he could bear. Taunted to the point of breaking, he could not restrain himself. Weaponless, he chose to rely on his bare hands to either kill his most hated enemy or better still, perhaps to be killed himself.

His hands had closed around that cold, clammy throat, constricting until any normal person would have been gasping and gagging from the pressure. Instead, Haris urged him on, reinforcing the voice that told him to 'give in', encouraging Dean to continue his attack.

"That's it Dean. Anger, hatred, fury, give it all to me!"

Despite his best efforts to force the demon into striking him down, Haris merely laughed at Dean's futile attempt to inflict physical harm. In that instant, as the muscles in his forearms began to quiver from the exertion and as he gazed into the unflinching eyes of the demon, Haris' tactics became suddenly clear. Feed the rage, empower the demon!

It was one of the hardest things Dean Winchester had ever done, but he forced himself to resist the urge to continue attacking his lifelong foe, his stranglehold loosening ever so slightly. In response, the dark voice began shouting loudly.

"Kill him! Avenge your family!"

Dean squeezed black-filled eyes tightly shut, searching inside himself until he found the other voice, the one that reinforced him; the one he prayed would be his salvation. In his mind, it was a bizarre mixture of Sam's softer timbre and his father's harsher commands.

"Resist, hold on, stay strong!"

"I can't," he groaned aloud defeat biting at him.

"You want to kill me? Then kill me Dean," Haris encouraged.

"No Dean! Don't give in. You've always been the strongest one of us. You've always held us together."

"Dad, I can't!" he cried.

"Dad is gone. Sammy is gone. You're all alone, the last of the Winchesters. I'm all you have now. Come to me or kill me. Either way, you're mine!" the demon taunted.

"Dean! You have to live, Dean! You have to get away from here." Words he had heard before, but when and where he couldn't place. *"Get away from here and protect Sam!"*

"Sam!" Dean screamed as his hands knotted closed again a fraction more.

"You killed him Dean. You are a killer. You've always known that," Haris sneered.

"The things I'm willing to do or kill for you and Dad ..." his own admission to his brother so many months ago.

"Take your brother outside! Now Dean! Go!" his father, placing the care and protection of his baby brother into his hands so many years ago!

Dad had trusted him, Sam had trusted him, and he had betrayed that trust in one swift movement of his hand.

"Resist, hold on, stay strong!" Despite acknowledging his betrayal, the Sam/John voice within him strengthened Dean.

"I'm sorry Dad! I'm sooo sorry Sam!" he sobbed, a single tear dangling precariously from the corner of his eye but refusing to fall.

Haris smiled broadly. Victory was close at hand. Dean Winchester would soon be his soldier, his minion, his pawn. Except...

Dean's eyes reverted back to clear hazel, haggard and somber, but lacking any semblance of the black that had been filling them seconds before. Having made his apologies to the ghosts of his family, he knew the greatest betrayal to his father and brother would be if he allowed the demon-spawn within him to gain control. The mere thought that he might be overcome with the evil inside him scared him worse than anything ever had in his life. Giving in to it once had already cost him Sam's life, a sin for which he could never be forgiven.

Pushing, forcing, compelling the darkness that was crawling up his throat to retreat, he recalled every good memory of his young life; his mother reading him bedtime stories, singing to him as she pulled the covers up to his neck; his father tossing him a football, teaching him how to shoot, and Sam, playing together as children, fighting side by side as adults. Any thought or recollection that was good or happy in his life, he called to the surface. Then, just as he was nearly over the top, the demon within him becoming weaker and quieter, Dean slammed the door to his mind shut with every bit of defiance he could muster.

"I am Dean Winchester!" he shouted, audibly and internally so that both demons would know. Then the wall reached out and hit him.

Back to the present, Dean silently congratulated himself on the victory. He could still recall the look of anger and frustration on Haris' face in that last moment when he announced his determination to remain himself. That alone had been worth the additional bruises to his body.

Across the room, his two gigantic doormen were still at their posts. They remained as still now as they had been when he was trying his damndest to strangle the daylights out of the bastard Haris.

Dean pushed up off the floor with a groan, silently thinking that he was getting pretty tired of being thrown into walls. He slowly made his way over to the sink once more, hoping that the tap might have pooled more water since his last visit. As his hand reached for the faucet he could sense the mirror just above the bowl mocking him, tempting him to look up.

Slowly, reluctantly, he lifted his head, afraid of the blackness that might greet him. A flood of relief washed over him as true hazel stared back. As he was about to turn his concentration back to the need for water, a flash of light reflected from the mirror and caught his attention. His amulet!

Its shining golden face was now nearly covered in a dark tarnish. In over a decade that the bizarre thing had been hanging from his neck, it had never lost its shine. Despite all the blood, sweat, and assorted other bodily fluids that he had found himself coated in over the years, the amulet had never required anything more than water from a shower to return it to its usual brilliance. He'd never removed it voluntarily, not even to clean it.

John took the necklace and let the pendant unwind gradually on the leather string as the loop opened. When it had fully opened, he took the rope in both hands and lifted it over his son's head. Dean felt himself cringe in anticipation expecting to be shocked again as the horned figure made contact with his chest, and he flushed slightly in embarrassment when the charge didn't come.

"Dean," John explained, staring deeply into his son's hazel eyes, "I went to a lot of trouble to find this for you. It's extremely powerful and that's all you need to know. If you ever trusted me on anything, I need you to trust me on this, son. You wear this, and never take it off!"

At the time, he'd shrugged off the whole 'firstborn' 'ancient, powerful necklace' thing. He had grown up listening and subscribing to the many myths and lore that his father dug up during his crusade to destroy everything evil in the world, but he'd always been a bit skeptical about the amulet. In all his young life, he'd never really thought the thing had done much more for him than help strike up conversations with pretty girls in bars. Until the moment he had lost it in a Louisiana swamp and the connection between him and the amulet became all too painfully apparent.

He supposed he knew deep down that the amulet held some purpose and power. Hadn't there been enough people out to take the stupid thing from him? Now, maybe it began to make some sort of sense as he continued to stare at the blackened charm. Blackened like his eyes had been, blackened like the ghostly swirl of a disembodied demon.

"Is it possible?" Dean asked his reflection as his fingers rubbed the talisman.

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

"The amulet is absorbing the demon?" he asked aloud. "Helping control it somehow? It's keeping me from being fully possessed!"

"Resist, hold on, stay strong!" The words popping into his mind as if the amulet could sense his thoughts, and for the first time he had hope that he could follow those ethereal instructions.

His attention focused in the mirror, Dean was startled as one of the guards came up from behind him, grabbing both of his arms and spinning him around like he was nothing more than a small child.

"Master requires your presence," it informed in a deep basso voice, black eyes adding to the air of menace.

“Well, tell him to get his people in touch with my people and maybe we can do lunch sometime next week,” Dean snarked back. “Besides, I really need to freshen up...”

The last of his sarcasm was cut off as the second guard threw its meaty forearm around Dean’s neck, snapping his head back, and cutting off his air as effectively as it cut off his words.

Unable to breath, much less resist, Dean could do nothing more than allow himself to be pushed forward out the doorway and down a long hallway. The corridor revealed a long line of doors, the spaces behind them a mystery. He carefully observed his surroundings, counting doors, noting exit signs, windows and any other potential route for later escape.

As they reached the far end of the passage, the first guard flung open the door as the second, still holding Dean’s arms behind his back, forced him into the room. At the far side of the large office, Haris sat behind a mahogany desk, a large dust covered manuscript held in his hands. The demon raised his head as Dean entered the room, closing the text and placing it reverently down.

Placing the palms of his hands firmly on the desk, Haris stood up, looking directly at Dean, yellow eyes glowing and wild.

“Okay, I’m through playing games with you! Just like your brother, YOU WILL surrender to me ... or you’ll die screaming just like him!”

* * * *

Cabin, Daybreak

John felt his muscles relax just a little too much as he slouched in a rickety cane chair by the log cabin’s fireplace. The motion jarred his senses and he started, realizing he hadn’t slept for so long he was in danger of dozing. *Can’t sleep, not until we’ve found Dean. Not until Zack spills his guts, one way or another...*

He ran a bruised hand through his disheveled mop of hair in desolation, feeling the tenderness in his knuckles where his fist had impacted with Zack Murzak’s jaw too many times.

The elder hunter wasn’t a violent man by nature – at least not towards the average guy on the street, but Murzak had pushed him hard. The traitor knew where Haris was keeping Dean, of that John was sure. If not the exact location, Murzak knew enough details to help the people he had once called friends.

And yet, despite John’s interrogations, despite the beating he had taken at the hands of the ex-marine, Murzak remained stoically silent. Not even veiled threats of being sliced and diced with John’s best blade had fazed him. *He knows me too well, dammit!*

John’s eyes wandered from his own battered knuckles across to where Murzak was tied. Blood stains spattered the man’s shirt, globs of the red liquid still dripping randomly from his overly-swelled, cut lip. With his already blackened right eye, he looked like a monster from a crass Hollywood B movie – a monster John Winchester had created. *Why didn’t Sam stop me? I’m no better than Murzak...*

Murzak ignored his captor’s shamed gaze and kept his own eyes firmly glued on the young man now lightly dozing in the opposite chair. The roaring fire had eventually lulled a tired and sleepless Sam into some semblance of sleep, although from his pitiful yelps and spasming muscles it was obvious his dreams were not pleasant ones. His arms and over-sized legs hung loosely over broken cane segments, his seat dangerously unsteady every time his limbs jerked.

Murzak pushed aside the fact that Sam was fitfully snoozing and appeared transfixed by the hunter’s every breath. It was as if he feared it was all an act, and that Sam was about to pounce on him with some undetermined weapon should he look away for a second.

What the hell happened in the car to make a creep like Murzak terrified of Sam? The bastard didn't flinch when I put a sharpened hunting knife to his throat, yet he recoils every time Sam takes a breath. What did he see in Sam he didn't see in me? John wasn't sure he wanted to know. He wasn't sure he wanted to accept that Sam had a sadistic thought in his head. After all, that would be the final nail in the coffin, the final admission of just how bad a father he had been to both his sons. But then, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for his kids, Murzak's beaten form proved that. For Dean, why should Sam be any different?

*I look inside myself and see my heart is black
I see my red door and it has been painted black
Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts
It's not easy facing up when your whole world is black*

A cell phone began to warble the classic lyrics from *Paint It Black* and John was forced to stand and fumble in his jacket pockets for the elusive item. He rarely ever had his battered cell switched on, let alone out of silent mode, but today he needed it to keep in contact with Bobby. Information was the key to getting Dean back, and it would seem Murzak had no intention of helping them in that department.

The Rolling Stones seemed to taunt him with their words as the tune continued its electronic wail. His whole world had been black for a long time now, hadn't it? His family had been torn in two, his sons brought into a bloody and evil war they should never even have known about, and all because he couldn't let go.

But what if I had let go? What if I'd never gone after Mary's killer? Then what? Haris wins and mankind is screwed anyway. Yeah, helluva choice I had in all of this.

With a huff, John noted that the thrumming phone had awakened his napping son, and at the sight, Murzak had flinched again, shying back on his chair even though he had no way of escape from his bonds. Sam had somehow scared the living daylights out of Murzak far more than his father's punches or threats with a knife had. *Maybe I should have used the damn knife instead of just taunting him with it.* But again, John Winchester wasn't that kind of sadist – not like Murzak.

It would have been so easy to cut the man, to watch his blood flow as the blade sliced into his flesh just enough to cause excruciating pain. John had been trained for no less as a marine. But still, he just couldn't do it, not in front of Sam. It would seem Murzak knew that too.

Flipping his cell open, John placed it to his ear and held it there with the top of his shoulder. He could worry about Murzak later. "John Winchester..."

"John, it's Bobby. Me and a coupla the boys went back to Haris's complex last night and had a sniff around. Found some military ordnance I think you might be interested in..."

John turned, gesturing to his youngest that they may at last have cut their first break. "What did you find?" His whiskey-deep voice rumbled down the line with a sense of renewed urgency.

"From the markings, looks like the hardware came from a closed Army ammo depot in Milan, Tennessee. I was thinking maybe our yellow-eyed friend might have used the place at some point." Bobby paused. "Course, there's no real reason to think he's still using the place, but..."

"Thanks, Bobby, you've been a real help..." John slid the phone closed and dropped it down on the nearby pine table without letting his friend say more. Maybe now, with a little incentive, Zack might start talking.

The bearded hunter circled his prisoner, knowing Sam watched from his "ringside" seat, eager for answers. *He never tried to stop me with the knife...never said I was going too far...*

John placed a hand on either side of Murzak's chair and leaned in until he was level with the collaborator's face. He could smell the fear, the blood mixed with sweat as he saw Zack's eyes narrow. "Ever heard of Milan, Murzak? Milan, Tennessee?"

The tiny pupils he stared into abruptly dilated in recognition and something more. Murzak turned his head away, baulking as if he'd been struck by a killer lightning bolt.

John saw the opening and pushed harder, question after question being thrown as he grabbed Murzak's collar and shook the smaller man for answers. "Haris is there, isn't he? That bastard took my son and you sit in this chair as if you're at a slumber party. Is Haris there? Is Dean with him?"

"I...I can't tell you..."

"Why the hell not? Demon got your tongue? But then again, maybe it has." John raised his bruised hand and then pulled it back in hesitation, his voice tinged with both anger and supplication. "Don't you care that this is my son? How can you keep quiet for something that isn't even human?"

Zack's swollen lip quivered and he looked up through bloodshot eyes, the fight, the fear, finally leaving him to be replaced with something new – defeat. "*Your* son? Why does this always have to be about *your* family, Winchester? Yes, I made a deal with Haris and I've tried to stick to it. I had no other choice..."

Sam moved to his father's side, uncertainty suddenly crossing his tired, boyish features. "But you always had a choice. Why would you make a deal with the thing that has killed so many people, ruined so many lives?"

"Your deal already sent a lot of hunters to their graves, Murzak, maybe even Dean." John felt his eyes smart and he whirled to face the still smoldering fire in the hearth. The heat from it seemed to sear into his eyeballs even more, and he rubbed at them absently with his thumb and forefinger. "What kind of deal could be worth what you've done? What could Haris possibly offer you? Eternal life? Wealth?"

"Nothing like that..." Zack's words were faint and full of shame. He didn't like what he had done, but in the end, it had been worth it. It had to be. He blinked, casting a quick glance towards Sam before continuing. "Wouldn't you make a deal to save your son's life? How can you expect me to do any less for mine..?"

* * * *

Office at the abandoned base

"... Just like your brother, YOU WILL surrender to me ... or you'll die screaming just like him!"

The demon's threats of submission didn't faze Dean nearly as much as the simple mention of Sam. Despite his best efforts, he could not block the mental picture of his brother tied to the altar, looking up at him with knowing, forgiving eyes, his mouth silently wording 'It's okay' then stretching wide as a scream tore from his throat. More damning was the knowledge that he was the cause of Sam's torment and death.

Lost in his self-loathing, Dean barely resisted as Haris motioned to the guards and they stepped forward, each roughly grabbing him by an arm. They pulled him backwards, his shoulders straining at the joints, and hoisted him up onto a large conference table. The massive demon-possessed men remained on either side of the table, each holding one of Dean's arms outstretched and immobile. The restraint was effective as he could barely lift his head; his limbs were stretched so tightly.

Unable to see beyond his chest, Dean could still sense the demon's presence nearing him as Haris casually strode from behind the large desk, coming to stop at the head of the conference table and Dean's booted feet.

Haris scanned over the prone figure, starting with the hazel eyes that seemingly mocked him by their mere presence. As he continued down the hunter's body, he stopped abruptly as he caught sight of the tarnished horned charm peeking from behind the edge of the young man's unbuttoned outer shirt. Haris' yellow eyes

widened in surprise, and then just as quickly narrowed as his mind recognized the significance of the amulet. In one quick moment, the demon understood.

"So that's the reason?" he mused, one hand going reflexively to his chin, hand rubbing there in consideration. "I couldn't figure out what new Winchester trick you had up your sleeve; why my child couldn't gain full control of you."

Dean didn't respond, unable to raise his head high enough to see what Haris was ranting on about, but silently, he took a minute of pleasure at whatever was irritating the demon.

Haris, however was less than happy, not that demons lived for that particular emotion. He had a real dilemma now in the form of Dean Winchester and the amulet that hung from around the man's neck. Nearly as ancient as himself, the talisman's power, combined with the sheer willpower and resistance of the elder Winchester son, had prevented the complete possession. He reached out mentally, seeking to communicate with the spawn deep inside Dean, but was unable to find his offspring. This concerned him even more.

There was always a minimal amount of information transferred between possessor and possessed, even under the most controlled situations, but Haris couldn't risk that the information his progeny held would be leaked out to Dean under these conditions: Critical information about Haris' plans for all the special children, plans for the ultimate battle, plans for Sam Winchester in particular, whom he had convinced Dean was now dead by his own hand.

"Interesting trinket there. Where did you get it?" the demon asked, coming to stand at the side of the table and peering down at the trapped hunter.

"Out of a box of Lucky Charms, had to dig to the bottom just to find it. Although, it was a toss up between it and the super decoder ring." Dean rambled back meeting the demon's eyes.

"Very funny Dean! Tell me, did you always share with little Sammy?" Haris asked, reveling in the response as his captive visibly shivered from the mention of his younger brother's name.

"So, who gave you the amulet, huh Dean? Mommy? No, couldn't have been her, I toasted her ass when you were so little. Must've been dear old Daddy then." The demon continued. "Funny, wonder why he gave it to you. I think we clearly established that little Sammy was his favorite, didn't we Dean?"

Haris walked around to the far side of the table, hands clasped behind his back like a general surveying a battle map. Inwardly, Dean cringed as he watched his captor move around him, his eyes registering the present but his mind slipping back to a deserted cabin in Missouri not that long ago.

"Yes Dean, I can see that you do remember our little discussion. And if that wasn't proof enough, just remember that it was John that shot you after you killed poor little Sam. But really, why dwell in the past. I know how badly you tried to please Daddy, how miserably you failed. I'm not a harsh father, I cherish my children, and each one is as precious as the next. I can give you what John never could; I can give you a home, a place to belong."

"I have a family!" Dean insisted, trying to convince himself more than anyone.

"Had a family" Haris corrected. "Join me Dean. Hand over that amulet, given to you by a man that did nothing more than sire you. Give it to me as a sign of new beginnings, to a father that will care about you and care for you."

Picking a spot on the discolored ceiling, Dean allowed his eyes to lose focus. Concentrating all his energy, he sought out the voice from before. Maybe his life hadn't been all that great as far as normal childhoods went, but had he ever really doubted his father's love for him? Certainly not when he was younger, back before mom died. Even growing up, sure his dad had been harsh and dictatorial, but who could have blamed him? He was only trying to protect the family he had left, doing anything to keep his boys safe.

The amulet, once again, hadn't that been another of his father's intended ways of protecting him? There wasn't a more deliberate man in the entire world as far as Dean was concerned. If John had wanted him to have and wear that amulet, then there must have been a pretty important reason.

Beyond that, he couldn't get the image of the tarnished gold out of his head. If he was correct and the amulet was keeping him from being fully possessed, then it only made sense that Haris would try to get it off of him.

'*Demon's lie*', the mantra engraved in his psyche like a childhood rhyme. Suspicion bred uncertainty and uncertainty to Dean meant that just maybe the amulet was important, maybe his family was alive, maybe he could escape.

"Dean?" Haris prompted.

"Well, I suppose 'go to hell' is a bit redundant isn't it? So you'll have to settle for 'screw you' instead!" he replied, struggling to lift his head so he could be sure that the demon saw every ounce of defiance and loathing that flashed across his face.

Furious at Dean's rebelliousness and desperate to gain control, Haris lunged forward, his hand snaking out to grasp the darkened piece of jewelry, intent on ripping it from the young man's throat. Reflexively, Dean tried to pull away, but the two massive guards still held his upper body tautly outstretched, preventing him from moving.

As the demon's hand enclosed around the darkened horned figure, a strong smell of sulfur and burning flesh filled the area. Haris cried out in surprise more than pain, as smoke began to billow from his human hand where it came in contact with the amulet. He released it immediately, taking several steps back, his usually stoic expression clearly now one of shock.

In the next instant, the maelstrom exploded. Rage erupted from the demon and with a wave of his uninjured hand, books, chairs, and furniture became airborne missiles, tossed about the room like a child throwing toys during a temper tantrum. The two windows in the room were blown apart sending shards of glass flying in nearly every direction.

Still not appeased, Haris then turned his attention to one of the two colossal henchmen. The one holding Dean's right arm suddenly staggered backwards, releasing his grip as his chest ruptured open. Blood cascaded downward to pool on the floor just a split second before the body collapsed and the thick black haze of the previously-housed demon shot outward, swirling about the room before it seeped out of a recently broken window.

As quiet returned to the space, now partially unrestrained, Dean propped up on his free arm to survey the results. Just beyond him, Haris stood just behind the large desk once again.

"Just can't find good help nowadays," Dean commented sarcastically, glancing over to the torn apart body of his former jailor.

Haris didn't respond, refusing to be baited any further by the young man before him. Reaching inside the top desk drawer, he removed a large shining object before slowly walking back to the side of the conference table. As he approached, he motioned silently to the remaining guard. Before Dean could react the enormous man had grabbed both of his arms, pulling them above his head with one giant paw while the other grabbed a large handful of his close-cropped hair.

Squatting down, Haris drew his face in close to Dean's. His hand flashed up, silver serrated blade gleaming as he waved it back and forth. Dean's eyes widened as he recognized the sacrificial knife that had been thrust into his hand back at the chamber. The blade's silver surface was marred with a rust colored coating along the razor-thin edge. Dried blood! Sam's blood!

Dean shut his eyes tightly, no longer able to deny what Haris had accused him of, nor able to refuse what his memory had shown him. He had killed his brother!

He felt the sharp edge fall against the skin on his neck, the metal kissing his skin, a slow tingle that would soon turn into a raging burn. Eyes closed, he accepted his fate.

“Just like your brother Dean, if I can’t have you, then no one can. I’ll get that amulet off of you if I have to cut your head off to do it.” Haris growled as his hand began to move.

To Be Continued in *The Beast Within...*