

Episode Twenty-Two: Dance With The Devil

By Kittsbud & Tree

“So, we melt the amulet down into a bullet to kill Haris with. Sam is safe forever?” he asked. “It’s that simple?”

John looked at him starkly. He was always amazed at how black and white things could be for Dean. But then again, hadn’t he made him that way?

“Not that simple, Dean. Don’t you remember what happened the last time you lost the amulet? Don’t you remember what Mann told you would happen if you were ever separated from the amulet for any length of time?”

“Yeah, I’m toast.”

John was taken aback by the bluntness of Dean’s reply. He expected, no, wanted his oldest son to refuse, or at the very least have some sort of reservation.

“We kill Haris, Sammy is safe from that bastard forever. Game over, we win!”

“Dean, you have to know, I checked everywhere, with everyone. I even went back to visit Mann twice, hoping, praying that there was some other way, some way to break the binding between you and the amulet,” John explained, his voice cracking with emotion.

“Dad, stop! Do you know so little about me that you think I’d have to consider this for even one minute? Do you think that if it was within my power to kill the evil sonofabitch that I’d pass it up no matter what the cost to me?”

John shook his head, a lone tear falling free of his eye and cutting a path down his blood-stained and bruised face.

“No, I’ve always known that there isn’t anything that you wouldn’t do to save your brother, to save this family. I remember that night at the cabin in Missouri, Dean. As painful as it was to be a prisoner in my own body, it was nothing compared to watching you sacrifice yourself for Sammy and me,” John admitted. “Son, I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose either of you. I don’t think I can bear it after your mother. But every day that Haris continues to exist, I know the odds of me losing both of you grow higher and higher...”

Moose Lake, Minnesota

John watched as Dean walked slowly away back towards the motel room. He swiped angrily at the tears that gathered at his eyes, furious at what he perceived to be a sign of weakness in himself. Weakness when he needed to be strong, strong for Dean. He never knew his heart could have broken again, not after the night that Mary died, but he felt it breaking now. Bit by tiny bit, it was crumbling apart. Step by fateful step, as Dean moved further away, what was left of John’s hardened heart fractured into pieces.

He watched his faithful soldier walk off, accepting his suicide mission with resignation, with acceptance born of sacrifice for his fellow man, or in this case, for his brother.

No greater love...

John wished, no, wanted desperately to be able to rush to Dean and pull him back, to place the amulet back around his neck and tell him that they would find some other way to defeat the demon. He wanted to pull Dean to him, to be able to tell his oldest son how proud he was of him, how much he admired the man he had become, how much he loved him. Yet, like always, John couldn’t manage the words, couldn’t force the muscles into movement.

Still, with his son nearly to the doorway, John knew he had to do something. He couldn’t bear the thought that Dean would simply walk away, or that he could even let him.

“Dean, wait!”

Hesitating, one hand nearly reaching for the doorknob, the cropped haired head dropped down.

“Dad, we’ve been through this. Please,” Dean implored.

“Dean, look at me,” John softly commanded.

Reluctantly, the elder son turned around, but his head remained down, his eyes turned away, unable to make contact with his father. His hands remained jammed tightly into the pockets of his jacket, his shoulders hunched inward as though he was trying to stay warm.

“Son, I’m not going to try to talk you out of this. I won’t. But I want you to come with us.”

“Dad, I can’t. You know that. Sam will never let us go through with this if he finds out. We have to do this now and he can’t find out until after it’s all done,” Dean insisted. “I’ll deal with Sammy later. He’ll be pissed, but he’ll get over it.”

But you won’t Dean, you won’t be getting over it, John added silently. “I’ll be right back. Okay. I swear, just as soon as Bobby and I take care of Haris, I’ll come right back to you.”

“Dad, it’s okay. I’ll be okay. Just go and do this. For Sam, for me,” Dean pleaded, finally looking up, green eyes seeking out his father’s brown.

“Dean...”

“Dammit, Dad! I can’t pull this shit off if I’m tied up in knots. It’s gonna be hard enough keeping my ass together in front of Sam without you looking at me like I’m dying! Now buck the hell up and let’s do this thing!” Dean shouted, reaching out and pushing off from his father’s chest.

John recoiled from Dean’s attack, shocked at the abrupt vehemence that poured off his son. As fast as it started, Dean relented, his anger drained as he collected himself. He rubbed a shaking hand across his face then stuffed both back into his pockets once more.

I’ll come right back.

His father’s words echoed in his head.

Come back for what, Dad? To watch me die? What for? You didn’t care enough to come around when I got electrocuted and was dying. You didn’t care enough to come around when I begged you to help us in Lawrence. You left me in the hospital after Missouri, not knowing if I was gonna live or die. You couldn’t wait to ditch Sammy and me back in Oxford. Really, Dad, why bust your ass to come back to watch me kick the bucket now?

The venomous dialogue rambled through Dean’s head, chewing at his psyche like a ravenous wolf. Yet as he looked at his father, he only saw pain and regret, sadness and heartache.

No, I’ve always known that there isn’t anything that you wouldn’t do to save your brother, to save this family. Son, I don’t want to lose you. I don’t think I can bear it after your mother.

And in that, Dean knew.

His father wasn’t a hard-assed, uncaring bastard. He was simply a man that was trying to save what family he had left. Save a family that had been torn apart by something that average people had no concept even existed. Demons and spirits, hunters and creatures, evil and death, surrounded them every day, came after them like hungry dogs after a meaty bone. All John Winchester was guilty of was being overzealous in his attempts to prepare his sons to fight that evil, to keep them safe, to protect them from the same demon that had stolen their mother from them, and to spare them the heartache and pain that he had suffered over the past two decades.

Had John Winchester meant to be harsh? Not really. Did Dean really hate the life he had been forced to lead, the man he had become? Did he even regret the decision he had just made? Was that decision ultimately even his Dad’s fault? Had

Dean found out the truth about the amulet instead of his dad, would that have changed anything?

Do you think that if it was within my power to kill the evil sonofabitch that I'd pass it up no matter what the cost to me?

"I'm sorry," Dean mumbled, looking up into his father's eyes, apologizing as best he could by offering out his hand.

John smiled meekly, ignored the proffered hand and instead pulled Dean into a rough embrace. He felt the young man tense up briefly, then relax as he allowed his hands to find purchase on the back of his dad's brown jacket, grabbing fistfuls of material with an almost desperate grasp.

For a moment, Dean was a scared six-year-old and his father's arms felt strong, safe and secure. Six-year-old Dean wanted to cry out, to tell his dad that he was afraid. Six-year-old Dean wanted to ask his dad if it would hurt a lot being without the amulet there at the end. Six-year-old Dean wanted Dad to be sure to come back, swear to be back before the end came. Six-year-old Dean didn't want to die and even more, didn't want to die alone.

But in a flash it was gone, and tough, hardened, always vigilant Dean returned. Fears were pushed back, weaknesses were buried, insecurities were hidden away underneath the impenetrable exterior and he pulled away from his dad. A cocky smile spread across his face that both men knew was a poor attempt to cover the underlying fears, but John didn't comment on it.

"We'd better get back in there before Sammy sends out a search party. You know how paranoid Samantha can get," Dean joked. "Besides, we should rescue Bobby from him. Not fair to Bobby to leave him in there with Sam when he's all hot and bothered by somethin'."

John smiled, nodding in agreement as they headed toward the motel room.

"So, we got this under control, right?" Dean asked, turning back quickly before he opened the door.

"Yeah, Dean," John replied, his voice still tinged with sadness. "We've got this under control."

Sam looked up from the computer as his father and brother walked back into the motel room. Dean smiled as soon as he made eye contact with Sam, suspicious in its own right, but when Sam spotted his father purposely look away, he knew something was up between the two of them.

"So, since when does it take the two of you a half hour to check out an alternator?" he asked warily.

"Ah, Sam, when are you ever gonna learn that you can't rush things when it comes to a classic?" Dean quickly threw back. "Tell him, Dad."

John twisted around, managing a sly grin. "Stick to your computers geek boy, leave the automotive repairs to us," he teased.

Dean raised his eyebrows in surprise, a soft chuckle formed in his throat as he covered his mouth with his hand.

Sam opened his mouth but nothing came out. He couldn't believe that his father had just called him a geek. Looking around the room, even Bobby was now trying to contain a soft snicker.

"Face it, Sammy. That whole Geek Squad thing they advertise on T.V., they're talking about you dude," Dean added, bursting into laughter.

"Being mechanically inclined isn't your strong suit, son," John reminded him.

"Yeah, and let's not forget, you aren't exactly handy in the kitchen either. I remember that whole deal with the Mac & Cheese that time back at my place," Bobby put in.

"Geek, dude. Certifiable, card-carrying, geek," Dean announced.

Sam abided the teasing, shaking his head as they ganged up on him.

"Okay, okay, laugh it up. But let's talk about how *technologically* challenged all of you are. Considering that you," he began, pointing at Bobby. "can't even turn on a computer without someone spotting you the power button. "Or you," now looking at John. "still ask me on the sly to program your cell phone with everyone's phone numbers. And Dean..."

Sam now turned to focus on his brother. Dean stopped laughing abruptly and had taken to slinking back on the bed.

"...shall I enlighten Dad and Bobby about the time that you had the old laptop, you remember the one that used to get so hot, on your lap, in bed, with nothing but your boxers on, and um, you sorta burned..."

"No! No, no, no, no, no. Really, Sam, no need to go there," Dean stammered.

Sam now smiled smugly, leaning back, arms crossed about his chest.

"So, are you all ready to hear what the 'great geek' has dug up?" Sam asked sarcastically.

"We bow to your infinite geekitude. Speak on oh great Sir Geekalot, wise king of Geekovia, land of large-brained..."

"Enough, Dean," John's voice silenced his older son in much the same way he had when his boys were younger.

He looked between Sam and Dean, and for a brief second, he didn't see tough, experienced hunters. Memory flooded him and instead, he found himself recalling two brothers, seated around a similar motel room, one diligently doing homework while the other just as meticulously disassembled and cleaned a weapon. The banter was similar then, Dean chiding Sam for having his head buried in books while Sam sniped at Dean for the ever present smear of grease or gun oil on his hands and clothes.

But underneath the teasing, they were intricate parts of a puzzle. Neither one lacking in either the intelligence or skills department, yet both complementing the other like a right and left hand.

John tried to hide the sadness that thought brought him. *Could the right hand function without the left?*

"So, I've been digging into Alyssa's disappearance, reading the police reports, the reports from the facility. It's all pretty suspicious," Sam began.

"Suspicious how?" John asked.

"Well, like I told you earlier. We left her pretty much catatonic in this mental institution down in Phoenix after she tried putting the whammy on Dean. Yet, according to all the reports, she just vanished into thin air. There's not a sign of her on the security tapes and not a single record of anyone coming to see her."

"What about someone on staff?" Bobby interjected.

"Nope. Everyone was accounted for when she disappeared. It was during the third shift, so there isn't as much staff there then. Every single staff member is accounted for and shows up on the security tapes according to Phoenix PD reports," Sam refuted.

"So, what if she did get better somehow? Maybe if she's back to her memory-erasing tricks, she coulda just waltzed right outta there and made everyone forget," Dean suggested.

"Hmmm, maybe. Scary thought, but maybe," Sam agreed. "I think we need to get down there and check it out for ourselves though. I mean, if Alyssa is back to normal, then we need to be worried that she might be after you again Dean."

"Yeah, well, bring her on. I'm ready for the bitch this time," Dean snapped back defiantly. "Still, maybe you're right. We oughta find out if she's roaming loose. Don't need her out there scrambling anybody else's melon." *Not to mention, it gives me something to distract you with, bro!*

"We can head out in the morning then, be in Phoenix by tomorrow night," Sam announced.

“Uh, Sam, Dean, maybe you should be lying low right now. At least till we know for sure where Sid and Rennie sulked off to,” John suggested, casting a fearful glance at Dean.

In return, Dean glared back at his father. *Don't do this! Don't act like something's wrong. Sam will get suspicious!*

“We can take care of ourselves. Just don't you go to any midnight meetings with any former friends. Besides, I don't think Rennie will chase us to Phoenix; I mean really, black leather in that heat?” Dean covered, hoping the humor would divert attention away from his father's seriousness that was threatening to suffocate him once again.

“Okay, it's settled then. We'll take off in the morning. Where are you and Bobby headed then?” Sam asked.

John fumbled, his prepared exterior cracking slightly by the suddenness of the question.

“Uh, well, we have some work to do,” he answered vaguely.

“We do?” Bobby asked. “I got a home to rebuild last time I checked.”

“Yeah, well, that's what I was talking about. We got our work cut out for us building you a new house. Course, not that it matters much what it looks like considering it'll be standing in the middle of a junkyard,” John joked.

“Junkyard? I prefer to think of it as a place of rest for automobiles that have served their country well. Kinda like a retirement home. They deserve to sit back and relax now,” the older hunter said defensively. “And the way I figure it, the Winchester family owes me a nice new house.”

“How do you figure that, Bobby?” Dean exclaimed. “We didn't blow it up. Rennie's crew did.”

“Yeah, well, they were after you all.”

“Ha! Well, I guess it not only sucks to have Winchester for a name, but also to have Winchesters for friends, Bobby,” Sam replied, slapping the hunter on the back as he walked past.

“Ain't that the truth, son. Ain't that the truth.”

Next Morning

Dean stood at the driver's side of the Impala, one foot already perched halfway inside while he leaned on the open door. By all appearances, he merely leaned out of impatience to leave, but if anyone had looked closer, they might have noticed the way the weight of his upper body was supported by the frame of the car.

But that was the magic of Dean Winchester: Allowing people to see only what he wanted them to, when he wanted them to, was a skill he had perfected and was now coming in very handy. Just this morning, Sam hadn't noticed when Dean had nearly stumbled out of bed, room spinning, and staggered into the bathroom grumbling about the early hour and his brother's incessant need to get up with the birds.

Even now, Sam was so eager to get to Phoenix that he hadn't seen Dean strain with the simple effort of tossing his gear bag into the trunk of the car. Sam hadn't seen it, but Bobby had.

So as they prepared to part ways, John going first to Sam and pulling his youngest to him in a quick hug, Bobby quietly approached Dean.

“Thanks for everything, Bobby,” Dean said appreciatively, offering out his hand.

Bobby shook the young man's hand, maintaining the grasp long after Dean was ready to let go and suspiciously eyeing him.

“Not a problem,” he replied, finally letting go but continuing to watch him.

Shying away nervously from the scrutiny, Dean looked over toward his father and brother.

“So, keep my old man out of trouble will ya?” he asked.

"Sure, and I'll work on peace in the Middle East while I'm at it," the older man sniped back, chuckling. "And you'll watch your backside too? Keep it in one piece. It'd be nice to see the Winchester family together for once without one of you filled with holes or beat to hell."

Dean remained silent, able only to smile grimly at his old friend. Bobby was about to probe further when John drew up beside them.

"You'll let me know what you find out in Phoenix?" John asked. "Specially if it involves Haris."

"Yessir," Dean replied dutifully.

"And I'll stay in touch with you too. Let you know what's going on, okay?" John continued.

Dean flashed him a look of concern and Bobby noticed the exchange between father and son.

"We'll be okay, Dad. I'll keep Sammy safe," Dean firmly reiterated.

John placed his hand on Dean's shoulder, his eyes softening.

"I know you will, son. I know you will," he answered gently.

John quickly hugged Dean goodbye, neither of them belaboring the farewell, feeling both Bobby's and Sam's eyes watching them intently. Dean turned away, sliding into the Impala and firing the engine to life.

"I'm waiting on you, princess," he snarked out the window to Sam.

He threw the car into drive, glancing out the window at his father, nodding slightly, saying goodbye silently, as he pulled out of the motel parking lot.

John watched as his sons pulled away, knowing that it might be the last time he'd ever see Dean alive again. He felt the emotion threaten to overtake him, but he pushed it back down and strode purposefully over to his waiting truck. Tossing his own bag into the bed, he then jumped up into the cab and the waiting glare of Bobby Singer.

"What?" he asked hotly.

"Nothing,"

"My ass. I know that look, Bobby. What's up your craw?" John demanded.

"Oh, I'm just making observations," Bobby replied.

"Observations on what?"

"Ah, just little things. Like, how you had a bullet in your shoulder and another graze your chest, yet you managed to throw that bag of yours in the back of the truck easier than Dean could haul his out of the motel room and toss it into the Impala."

"Yeah, well Sid's men worked Dean over pretty good. He was pretty beat up,"

John covered, starting the truck and pulling out onto the highway, moving off in the opposite direction to his sons.

"Oh really? 'Cause I've seen that boy of yours half dead and looking better than he did this morning. And of course, there's that whole emotional thing you got going on between the two of you. And don't try to tell me there ain't nothing there. I've known you and them boys nearly all their lives and I can count on one hand the times I've seen you act like that around that son of yours. So what gives John?"

When John didn't immediately reply, Bobby grew more worried. Putting it all together, Dean's weakness, John's sudden display of unabashed emotion, the strange farewell, and the calloused hunter suddenly grew fearful.

"Oh my God, John. What's wrong with Dean?"

"It's all my fault Bobby. I wish to hell I would have never found out about that goddamn amulet," John replied.

"The amulet? What are you talking about?"

John stared blankly out the windshield, but his jaw clenched tightly, and Bobby didn't miss the white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

"I found out a while back that Dean's amulet will kill Haris. It was once a part of King Solomon's sword, but the original sword was broken apart, reformed and scattered across the world for safekeeping. A long while back, when Dean was

young, I got a call from a Shadrack Mann. I didn't know it then, but he was Mary's uncle. He'd been holding the amulet, waiting for Dean to be old enough to assume his role as the amulet's Guardian," John explained.

"Guardian? Are you talking about Dean being some sort of Freemason or something?"

"Not exactly, I don't know much about what the Guardians did or do, other than in Dean's case, just keep the amulet. I don't even know how many others are out there. The rest might not even be amulets, they could be anything. But what I do know is that Solomon's sword was a demon killer and so are any of the other pieces," the elder Winchester continued on.

"Okay, so I get it..."

"No, no you don't!" John shouted back, turning to glare at his friend with so much intensity that it startled the older man.

"John?" Bobby started tentatively, his body recoiled to the farthest corner of the passenger's side as he stared at the angry man. As he continued watching, he saw John's face soften, his body nearly slump and for a moment Bobby worried that he might lose control of the truck.

"The Guardian is bound to the amulet, Bobby. Once Dean took possession of the amulet, it was tied to him body and soul. I s'pose that's why Haris couldn't get it off him back in Tennessee, why it kept him from being completely possessed and well, why we couldn't exorcise the demon either."

"John, what aren't you telling me?"

"I found that I can melt the amulet into a bullet, summon that yellow-eyed bastard and destroy him forever. The only problem is..." John paused, sucking in a deep breath before continuing. "The problem is that if Dean loses the amulet, he dies. The Guardian cannot be separated from the amulet for any prolonged length of time. It happened to Dean once before. He lost the amulet and he nearly died."

Bobby shook his head in disbelief, one hand absently rubbing at the dark scruff of beard as he tried to process what he was hearing.

"Okay, I understand that you've spent your whole life chasing that bastard, but John, you'd actually risk Dean's life just for your friggin' quest?" Bobby questioned.

"I'm doin' it for Sammy," John blurted out, quieting Bobby once again.

Stunned, mouth agape, the older hunter found himself clenching a fist silently.

"For Sam?" he finally shouted. "How the hell do you justify sacrificing Dean for Sam?"

"Because I'm gonna lose them both. Haris is after Sam, always has been. He's relentless and he's been upping the ante lately. That deal with possessing Dean to get to Sam was just the tip of the iceberg, he nearly killed them both back in New Jersey a few months back. Bobby, don't you understand, Haris won't stop till he has Sammy and Dean will never stand by and let that happen. Haris will kill him the next time he gets in the way."

"So you're just willing to serve up Dean to save Sam? What the hell, gonna lose him anyway, so you just toss him aside now? You're as much a bastard as that demon, John Winchester." Bobby replied disgustedly.

"Don't you dare judge me! You can't even begin to know what I've gone through, how much this has eaten away at me. How long I've carried this around with me even before I said anything to Dean about it. It was his decision, he begged me to let him do it once he knew about the amulet," John refuted.

"Of course he did, John. What else did you expect that boy to do? What else does he have in this world besides you and Sam? Did you think for one second that once you told him about that amulet, about the fact that it could be used to kill Haris and save his brother, to kill your mortal enemy, that Dean was gonna tell you, 'no thanks, Dad, I'd rather just sit back and see how things work out?'" Bobby snapped back sarcastically. He calmed down slightly adding, "Don't you know your boys at all, John?"

John shook his head sadly. "I just feel like I'm gonna lose them both, Bobby. I can't bear the thought of losing either one of them, much less both of them. I'd rather put a bullet in my own head first. But that sonofabitch is coming after them and it's the only way to stop him. God knows I've hunted high and low for any other answer. But it's too late now," he said regrettably.

"Too late? He's already given you amulet hasn't he? That's why he looked so bad? It's already started for Dean? How long has he got John?"

The elder Winchester nodded quietly. "He gave it to me last night. I don't know how long it will take, but I promised him I would come right back after I took care of Haris. I promised I would be there with him at the end. I know I haven't been a good father, Bobby. I know you're right, I have been a bastard, but I'm gonna be there for Dean. I *will* keep that promise to him."

Bobby pretended not to see the stray tear trickle down John's cheek, or the casual way he wiped it away, acting as though he was scratching at his beard. Bobby didn't comment when John swallowed hard, several times, trying to hide the way his chest was threatening to hitch with pent up emotion.

Instead, Bobby recognized that this man, for better or worse, had made a decision and was now bound by it. Maybe Bobby wouldn't have made the same decision, but then, Bobby had never watched his wife being burned alive on a ceiling. Nor had Bobby had his sons harried by a demon all their lives.

Who knows what decision Bobby Singer might have made if the tables would have been turned. In the end, John Winchester was his friend and Bobby was nothing if not loyal to his friends.

"What do you need me to do, John?" he asked quietly. "I'll do whatever, for you, for Sam, and for Dean."

Arizona State Psychiatric Institute Chronic Care Ward Next Day

The hospital's stark walls somehow reminded Dean of the bleak, unwelcoming aura that had surrounded Roosevelt Asylum. Even though this place was supposed to be far more modern, it still oozed the unnerving atmosphere that he'd felt in abundance back in Rockford.

Death.

That was something he could relate to a little too well right now. His head was buzzing with what he guessed normal people called a migraine – except this wasn't something he could just pop a pill for. The disorientated feeling and nausea had steadily been growing worse ever since he'd removed the amulet, until he was sure Sam would soon notice the bauble was gone.

Hiding his fatigue the previous evening had been easy, there were excuses to be had after his ordeal at the hands of the hunters, but each hour that he grew worse instead of better meant Sam had to realize, and soon.

Maybe if I just keep him focused on Alyssa? Maybe he won't see my hands shaking and my friggin' skin oozing sweat as I try to keep my balance even though my ears are hearing Quasimodo's finest.

"Dean?" Sam paused mid-step, noticing his brother was somehow distracted. "We're not here to do a survey on Arizona's hottest nurses, dude!"

"Huh?" Dean shook himself, realizing he'd already slipped up. "Distracted Dean" was only normally evident in the presence of women, beer, or fast classic cars. Recovering as quickly as his befuddled brain would allow, he shrugged. "I'm looking, Sasquatch, but I ain't seeing. This place wouldn't know a sexy nurse if one jumped up and..." He eyed the nearest burly porter with distaste and headed for the small reception desk without finishing the crude comment whirling through his brain.

"We're here to see Nurse Russo," Sam offered warmly as they came to a halt in front of a short, beady-eyed man in uniform who had obviously seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* a few too many times. "We're Alyssa Medina's cousins-

"Of course you are," The man whose nametag read "Walt" sniffed sarcastically, somewhat unimpressed with the brothers' announcement. He began to search down a list on the clipboard in front of him with his forefinger and after a short pause, his moustache twitched and he looked up. "Nancy's on her coffee break in the staff room. Straight down that corridor, first door on your right." He stared pointedly at Dean. "And no straying anywhere else." He tapped a monochrome computer monitor. "I can see your every move on the security cameras..."

Dean smiled broadly even though he already hated the security guy. In fact, after his little trip to a very non-existent "Sherwood Falls" one time, he hated all security guys with a vengeance. "You sure your name wasn't *Howie* in another life?" He mumbled as he turned to walk towards the staff room. "Cause he sure had a camera fetish too-

Sam inhaled deeply and shook his head but followed as Dean took a slow amble down the passageway. It hadn't gone unnoticed that his brother was doing everything a little slower since he'd taken a beating at the hands of Rennie and her hunter buddies, but Sam was trying to be coy and not mention it – at least for a few days.

Dean could be stubborn when he was hurt, and if he'd gotten bruised badly or even a couple of broken ribs, Sam knew he'd try to breeze over it and mask the pain. As long as he started to get better, not worse, Sam would keep his mouth shut, even if his eyes were keeping a close watch on his sibling.

"Nancy?" Sam rapped his knuckles lightly on the staff room door and then stuffed both hands in his tan jacket pockets while he waited for an answer.

Two seconds ticked by and then the same nurse they'd spoken to about Alyssa before appeared, coffee cup in hand. She scrunched her brow in confusion, momentarily unsure where she'd seen the two handsome young men before. "You're Alyssa's cousins!" She eventually blurted, quickly ushering them into the meager staff quarters. "I'm so sorry about what happened..."

"Exactly what did happen?" Sam pulled out a chair, noting Dean flop onto a second seat as if his knees had suddenly decided to give way. "We were informed that Alyssa is missing. Did she recover enough to escape?"

Nancy shook her head, her face once more a mask of mystification as she refilled her cup and then gestured for the boys to grab a mug if they wanted a drink. "That's the thing," she explained, slipping a cookie from a packet on the table and taking a bite. "Alyssa was just as catatonic the day she vanished as she was when you boys brought her in. The doctors say there's no way she could have just upped and walked out of here, even if we didn't have great security."

"You think maybe Alyssa could have been faking? You know, fooling the docs somehow so she could up and out?" Dean tried to keep his gaze focused on the nurse, but the room was swimming like he'd been at Liberace's infamous tequila bottle all night.

The hunter blinked and put a hand on the table to stop his body swaying. *Can't let Sammy see...*

"I really don't think Alyssa was faking. I've worked with patients like her for a long time, trust me." Nancy picked up the packet of cookies and stuffed it under the elder hunter's nose.

Dean waved her off with an unsteady hand. His usually huge appetite was suffering just as much as the rest of him. "Could we see the video footage from Alyssa's room? I mean, she's practically the only family Sammy and I have left..." He batted the long lashes Nancy had been so intrigued with on his last visit for good measure, knowing it was usually enough to gain control of anyone of the female persuasion. *Who needs freakin' mind control?*

"Well...I really shouldn't..."

"We'd be discreet," Sam promised. "We really do owe it to Alyssa to find her – especially if she's in no state to be on the outside-" He smiled wanly, knowing exactly the right buttons to push to make the nurse feel guilty and sympathetic at the same time.

"Okay," Nancy acquiesced, setting her drink down. "But we can't be too long. Walt has a thing about people messing with his footage."

Dean's eyes rolled to his brother, silently conveying the message that "Walt" was indeed the jerk he'd already pegged him as.. "I'll bet he does." The hunter pushed up from his chair stiffly, the mockery in his tone proving his body may be waning, but his mind had far from dulled.

After a brief teeter, he regained his composure, falling in behind as the nurse led them through two security gates into a small CCTV room. A row of monitors lined one wall, but no one appeared to be manning them.

"Walt has everything on a main feed down to his desk," Nancy explained, ushering the brothers to the opposite side of the room. "All the archived footage is over here." She slid lithely onto a wheeled desk chair and pushed herself up to a keyboard. The hospital's logo appeared as she touched a key, and the nurse quickly tapped in a password that gave her full access to the recordings.

Sam leaned forward as the screen came to life with footage from the night Alyssa has disappeared. Watching the girl's room was like viewing a still image. Nothing moved, nothing changed – it was simply Alyssa sitting in a chair, her eyes staring blankly at the wall, the glimmer in her pupils that should have been present blatantly absent, like her mind was a deep void of nothingness.

"Hell, this movie is friggin' Oscar material." Dean scrutinized the time stamp in the corner, watching as seconds ticked by even though the image never changed. "Hey wait. Can we take it back a few seconds?" He raised a brow and Nancy nodded.

"I saw it too." Sam fidgeted, moving slightly until he was overly close to the nurse without even noticing it.

Nancy didn't complain.

She wasn't really sure whether it was his unruly mass of hair, height, or just plain cute looks, but her stomach got a myriad of batting butterflies in it every time he spoke. Not that the shorter brother was hard on her eyes, either.

"There." Dean pointed to the monitor, bringing the nurse back from her guilty thoughts. "Do you see that?"

Nancy paused the feed as the screen seemed to flashover with an opaline glare for what the time stamp said lasted no more than half a second. When the whiteout dissipated, Alyssa was gone from her chair.

"It must be a camera glitch," The nurse offered, not really believing the coincidence herself. "I mean, no one can vanish in half a second, right?"

"Not unless you got a *Star Trek* transporter stuffed up your ass." Dean stepped back from the desk area and folded his arms. "Or your name is Jimmy Hoffa..."

Sam pouted but refused to shift his gaze from the anomaly on the screen. Something was very wrong here – and not just because it was an ex-psycho psychic kid they were dealing with.

He'd long since learned that he could trust his senses, even when they were telling him something was impossible. Those unwelcome feelings were screaming at him right now like an air raid warning.

"We're missing something..."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Yeah, one catatonic chick who likes to fry memories instead of bacon."

Nancy glanced from one brother to the next but thought better of asking just what the last comment had meant. She liked Alyssa's cousins A LOT, but there was no question that, like the girl, they were a little strange.

“Can we see Alyssa’s room?” Sam took his eyes from the monitor as Nancy logged off. “There might be clues...maybe we can tell if someone tampered with the camera...”

The nurse bit her bottom lip but shrugged. “I guess it’s okay, you being family and all. Not that I think you boys will find anything. The police already scoured that place with a fine tooth comb.” She pushed up from the chair and pulled a swipe card from her pocket. Two corridors and three electronic locks later, they were outside Alyssa’s room.

Sam looked inside from the open doorway, realizing just how sparse the quarters really were. There was very little inside save for a chair and bed – but then, in Alyssa’s condition she really had need for little else. The meager trappings also meant there was really nothing much to search through for clues to the girl’s whereabouts, and that worried Sam.

If Alyssa had recovered and fooled her doctors, she could already be up to her old tricks. Sam looked over his shoulder at his brother as they walked into the cell-like area. Dean had been a target before, what if he was again?

“Has anyone moved or touched anything?” Dean kneeled, letting a hand probe under the chair Alyssa had been seated in on the video footage.

“Like I said, only the police have been in here-”

The hunter pulled a cynical face and continued his examination of the seat. “Yeah, I bet they were real thorough.” He shifted his gaze to Sam. “You know, I’m thinking Alyssa just might’ve whammied Walt and his buddies with her memory magic and walked on right outta here. It’s the easiest explanation.”

“I don’t know, Dean. Why now?” *Alyssa can’t have gotten her powers back. She just can’t. Not now, it’s too...too damn convenient.*

“Memory magic?” Nancy’s brow furrowed and she fumbled with the card key in her hand nervously. It was one thing to be worried about a missing cousin, but the conversation between the two brothers was getting alarmingly weird.

“Yeah, well, maybe you’ll change your mind, when you see this.” Dean had moved over to Alyssa’s bed, and ignoring the nurse’s query had begun to examine it as if there was a cache of diamonds hidden within it somewhere. He’d come to a halt just short of where Alyssa’s chair had been resting when she’d vanished from the CCTV frame.

The sulfur wasn’t exactly easy to spot, just the tiniest trace smeared on the metalwork where the mattress rested on the frame.

Dean rubbed the substance between his fingers knowing what it was without even smelling the tell-tale odor from hell. He looked up to Sam, new concern mingling with the fatigue that contorted his features. “It’s sulfur, Sammy-”

“You think Haris decided to break Alyssa out for some reason?” Sam hunkered down, his boyish looks changing to show a different side – a hardened, and yet deeply disturbed countenance that could easily have been worn by a much older hunter. “Dean, this could be bad...” He raised a brow, suggesting rather than saying that their nemesis was up to something new.

“Okay, guys, just who is this *Harry*, and what has he been doing on my watch?” The nice side of Nancy – the side that had to deal with patients and their families had vanished - succumbing to the real woman beneath.

And suddenly, she was pissed.

Dean pushed up from his stooped pose, unconcerned with her newfound bravado. “Sister, let’s just say you wouldn’t wanna meet this freak down a dark alley. Hell, you wouldn’t wanna meet him period. Just be thankful you weren’t around when he broke our dear cousin out of this joint.”

“I’m calling the police...”

Dean shrugged. “Be my guest. Oh, and be sure to mention the sulfur.”

“Dean! We don’t have time for this. C’mon, Alyssa could be out there with Haris right now, plotting their next victim.” Sam grabbed his brother’s arm and tried to guide

him towards the door. Remarkably, Dean yielded all-too easily, as if he hadn't the strength to fight back. "In case you hadn't noticed, dude, you're kinda the top of both their hate lists."

Dean huffed but allowed Sam to push him down the hospital passageway towards the nearest exit sign. Thankfully, Nancy had been kind enough, or maybe slightly too scared to think, and had left the security gates open.

"Sammy, I'm telling you, I don't think we need to worry about Haris and his right-hand bitch." *Once Dad's finished with the amulet, we won't have to worry about Harry and his crew ever again...* Dean slowed, finally pushing Sam's hand from his arm as they scooted through the last exit and made a beeline for the Impala.

"After all we've been through how can you say that so easily?" Sam placed a hand on the Chevy's roof, clearly not intending to climb inside until he had an answer.

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "I just can, Sammy. Trust me on this one. Whatever those two are planning, it isn't gonna work." Without further enlightenment he dropped behind the car's wheel and cranked its engine to life, making it blatantly obvious he had no intention of explaining further.

Motel

The drive back to the motel room had been pretty silent. Dean had simply cranked up the music and stared at the blacktop as if his eyes were mesmerized by it. The silence and the bravado weren't fooling Sam one bit.

As far as the younger hunter was concerned he was sure he already knew what was going on.

Dean was faking it.

Big brother was scared that Haris was going after Sammy again. He was scared of a replay of the events in New Jersey when Sam had nearly died, and yet he didn't want Sam to see that fear. So, instead, he was pretending Alyssa's disappearance wasn't significant.

Sam bounced down onto the end of his bed and considered confronting Dean with the truth. He wasn't a kid anymore after all, and he didn't need to be watched over and hidden away – even if he was a freak.

One look across the room made him change his mind.

Dean had flopped onto his own disheveled bed and was now stretched out on it, flicking through TV channels with a battered remote. He didn't look scared – he didn't look *anything* – except maybe dog tired.

Seeing Dean that way made Sam wonder just what was really going on. His brother wasn't acting normal, hell, if Dean even had a normal bone in his body.

"Hey, Samantha, quit staring at me. You're creeping me out here..." Dean pulled a face. "I know I'm friggin' cute, but dude..."

Sam cleared his throat and considered telling Dean he was actually looking at the huge bags under his brother's slightly bloodshot eyes. Or that he was worried about the fact that said brother hadn't appeared to eat for hours, even though he was usually a human trashcan.

After a second, he thought better of both and pulled over the laptop that had been balancing precariously on the edge of his duvet. If he couldn't get answers from Dean, then maybe he could get some from the internet.

The sleek silver machine beeped and gurgled as it booted, only surpassed by the abrupt throaty ringing of Dean's cell phone as it blasted out AC/DC's *Big Gun* a little too loudly.

Sam pouted, looking quickly across to see just who would be calling. *Knowing Dean it's some hot chick he's already hooked up with out here.*

Dean didn't notice his brother's attention, but seemed to sit just that little bit straighter on the bed as he responded to the caller. "Dad-"

“Dean, Bobby and me are going to melt down the amulet today and then head on out to Big Horn to summon Haris. We’re about ready to finish that bastard, son...” John’s tone was deep as ever, but somehow clipped.

It was hard to talk to Dean, hard to tell him the events as they were about to transpire given the consequences that would surely follow. How did a father really choose between two sons? But then, there really had been no choice, no chance but this one.

“Sounds good, Dad.” Dean’s gaze flicked to Sam, knowing his sibling was hooked on every word. Hell, he was psychic boy, maybe he knew what they were saying anyway.

“We should be done in a couple of days...” John’s voice wavered and the sentence hung unfinished for a few seconds. Did Dean even have a few days? “How are you holding out, son?” *I could bring the amulet back, before it’s too late?* The grizzled hunter thought the latter part of his sentence, but didn’t offer the option to his eldest. It wasn’t the Winchester way.

And even if he had, John knew what Dean’s reply would have been.

Dean wanted Haris dead. Dean wanted Sam to live. This was his gift to his brother. A last parting offering that no father could deny his child from brother to brother.

Dean didn’t miss the inflection in his father’s voice but he couldn’t respond to it. Sam was watching and listening too closely. Instead, he pushed away the bleak topic, evading his brother’s probing glances. “We’re doing okay here, Dad. We’re following some leads on the missing psychic chick. Yeah...” He glanced over to Sam. “Yeah...Sammy’s looking some stuff up right now. I’ll keep you posted if we find anything more on Haris...”

Sam waited as his brother hung up and then raised a brow. “What did Dad Want? He never calls, it had to be important?”

Dean tossed the cell down next to him on the bed and stretched back out. It wasn’t hard to lie to Sam, but it hurt that it was necessary. “Dad and Bobby think the hunters might regroup. They’re checking out some stuff they heard...” He clasped his hands behind his head and sighed, feeling the pounding in his temple getting more and more intense as the hours wore on. *Can’t take anything, Sammy might see me.*

“Hunters, huh?” Sam’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t press the issue. There was something going on – something between John and Dean that he wasn’t being allowed to be part of. It wasn’t the first time, and he guessed it wouldn’t be the last.

There was a time when the exclusion would have angered him, but he’d become so used to the foibles of the Winchester clan that it now became second nature. No doubt they were trying to protect him once again, and he was just going to have to show them he didn’t always need a chaperone.

“Whatever,” Sam finally mouthed. “While you were plotting with the old man I think I found something important-”

“Important as in directions to the local bar?” Dean smiled, thinking if he was going to have a headache, he may as well have a good reason.

“Listen to this,” Sam continued unabashed. “I found an article from Oxford, Nebraska...”

Dean stopped fiddling with the TV remote and looked up. “Oxford as in the town with a platoon’s worth of spooks?”

Sam bobbed his head, reading more from the screen without voicing what he saw. “Dude!” His eyes widened. “David Mitchum was reported missing over a week ago. This can’t be a coincidence. Two special kids vanishing without trace is no accident.”

“Maybe they went to Disneyland together...”

“Or maybe Haris is finally playing his cards,” Sam countered. “Dean, I think we should go to Nebraska and check this out.”

Dean blinked, keeping his eyelids closed for a prolonged period while he took in the idea. Going to Oxford, going anywhere wasn’t going to do a damn thing. Haris

would soon be dead at the hands of John and Bobby, and all he had to do was stay alive long enough for Sam not to suspect anything.

But then again, if going to Oxford and chasing their tails meant Sam wasn't scrutinizing his every labored move, then maybe, just maybe the trip was worth it.

Motel Next Morning

Sam rolled over, squinting as the morning light filtered through the crack in the motel room curtains. It was early, he could tell, and yet the familiar whoosh of a steaming shower was buzzing in his ears.

The young hunter groaned and checked his watch just to be sure. Dean couldn't be up before him, could he? It was always Sam's job to be the early riser - the guy who fetched the coffee and food while big bro snoozed, one hand under his pillow for at least an hour longer.

"Dean?" Sam pushed up on his elbows and glanced at the nearby empty bed.

Apparently, Dean was up and showering, even though it was only just past 6 a.m. The last time that had happened... Well barring during a hunt, it had never happened.

Sam ran a hand through his unruly mop, tousling the already tangled mane. Maybe Dean had rested too long, slept too long, and now he was feeling better he was getting ready for an early start on the hunt for Alyssa. It made sense.

"Guess if Dean is gonna spend half the day in the bathroom preening himself, I could be working..." Speaking to no one in particular, Sam grabbed his laptop from the bedside table and quickly booted it.

The hunter wasn't sure what else he could find before they started out for Oxford, but it was always better to check and then check again rather than be caught with your pants down.

As the laptop used the motel's slightly sporadic wireless connection, it pinged, signaling the brothers had mail. Well, specifically, Sam had mail. Dean's "friend's" tended to be technologically impaired, for the most part.

With a second ping, Outlook opened to reveal one solitary message – a message with the subject line "Time to say goodbye."

Sam instantly clicked on the ominous sounding mail, swallowing hard without thinking as the message opened up on screen. It was short, and very much to the point.

Hello, Sammy

You didn't really think I'd let your brother get away so easily, did you? I'll be seeing you around. Who knows, I may even let you say goodbye.

Alyssa

The e-mail seemed to blink at him, even though it was really quite static on the small screen. Sam forgot to breathe for a second, his attention fully focused on what he'd read over and over twenty times already.

When his small PDA began to warble, the hunter finally inhaled, sucking down a long breath before putting it to his ear.

"Hello?" It was a simple greeting, but in his line of work he could rarely afford to offer his real name unless he recognized the caller I.D. first.

"Well hello right back at you, Samuel..." The voice was quite clearly Alyssa's, but somehow, the way she used his full name reminded him of Haris – of how he might actually belong to the thing that stalked him somehow. *Alea iacta est... Samuel...*

"What do you want?"

"Why, you know what I want. I want Dean, or should I say, I want to finish what I started with him." Alyssa paused, letting her plan sink into Sam's thoughts. "I'm free now, Sam, free to kill your brother. Maybe you should go say goodbye now..."

The line clicked ominously and then began to buzz with static but Sam didn't register that Alyssa had hung up for several seconds. She was pissed at him, and she was going to channel that anger into hurting Dean even more than she had originally. And this time, maybe she'd have Haris' direct help.

Sam flipped his PDA over in his hand and looked at the caller I.D. again. It was a local landline number that seemed strangely familiar. Luckily, unlike Dean, he tended to keep records of each and every one of their gigs on the laptop's hard drive. Sam liked to think of it as a more advanced version of his father's journal.

Closing Outlook, he clicked into "My documents" and pulled up the notes he'd made and any contact numbers during the Medina case. Glaring at him almost right away was the phone number listed for the Medina house where Dean had lost his memory.

"Why go back to the very place I'd look for her?" Sam bit into his lip. Criminals sometimes returned to the scene of their crimes, but demons and their minions? Hell, they only ever did that kind of thing when it was a trap.

But Dean?

Sam made a quick, conscious choice and closed the laptop without even powering it down. He had to find Alyssa and put a stop to this before she even got the chance to get to Dean.

If that meant he was the one taking the wild risks for a change, then he was quite willing to do it. Grabbing a clean t-shirt from his bag he slipped it on, followed by the jeans resting on the bottom of his bed. He had no time to shave, shower or even try to tidy up his windswept hair, but that was the least of his worries.

Rapping his knuckles on the bathroom door he felt his heart begin to thrum faster in his chest. It was hard to lie to Dean – far harder than his brother actually realized. "Dude, seeing as you've decided to groom like a girl for an hour, I'm gonna go grab some coffee and donuts, okay?"

A muffled reply of, "Bring me a burger" made Sam wince. Dean rarely ate well, but this was a new breakfast low, even for him. Still, it gave the younger brother more credence to his excuse to leave the motel before Dean finally exited the shower.

"Man, you're so gonna harden your arteries eating that crap," Sam chided as he deftly tossed his Glock, holy water, and a selection of other items into his backpack. "How the hell do you eat a burger at this time of day anyway?"

The hissing of the shower stopped, even if the steam venting from under the door did not. "Trust me, Sammy, it won't be any greasy burger that kills this hunter."

Sam smiled and tossed his bag over his shoulder, scooting out of the motel little realizing the truth behind his brother's words.

Dean could eat what he wanted; drink what he wanted, because he could probably pinpoint the day, time, and maybe even hour of his death with alarming accuracy. If anything, Louisiana and a certain Shadrack Mann had taught him that much.

* * *

Sam spun the wheel of the Ford he'd stolen as if the car had been his for a lifetime. He looked perfectly at ease in the driving seat, even though not five minutes previously he'd been furiously picking the driver's door lock with one of his special tools.

Lying to Dean was one thing, but there was no way he could walk to the old Medina house in the time it would supposedly take him to grab coffee and food. No, he had needed transport to facilitate his lie, and that transport had been sitting outside the motel manager's office calling to him like a beacon.

The little white car wasn't exactly easy on his overlarge frame, but it did the job. In fact, its battered bodywork and off-white paintwork reminded Sam of Kyle Williams' beat up little vehicle. What he'd give to have Kyle's help now – hell, anybody's help except Dean's.

I don't want Dean near this bitch. What if I can't use her gifts against her this time? Did I really reflect Alyssa's powers, and Max Miller's too, like some freaky mirror?

Maybe only Haris had the answers Sam sought. Maybe he'd find the yellow-eyed sonofabitch right along with Alyssa. Maybe, just maybe he would finally be able to get to the truth and end it all.

The Ford shuddered as Sam accidentally asked too much of it, his mind so lost in thought he didn't even realize he was accelerating too harshly on the rough road surface of the back alley that led to the Medina home. He slowed, tapping the brakes a little as he swerved the wheel to avoid a pothole.

What if I can only pick up on the powers of the other kids when I'm stressed? Maybe the fact that Dean's life was on the line both times it happened somehow amped up my gifts?

Sam recalled how he'd turned Alyssa's "mindwipe" against her to save his brother.
Dean...

A memory etched into his subconscious burned into his brain as if it were permanently implanted on the back of his eyeballs. Somehow, these last few days, Dean wasn't Dean – not in the sense that he really wasn't Sam's brother – but he wasn't himself. He wasn't the sibling who had fought being possessed by a demon and won. He looked tired, fatigued, all the fight drained out of him somehow.

And then there was John.

Dad's seemed sad since he returned – like he's shouldering more than just finding Haris...

Sam hit the car's brakes again, this time bringing it to a stop at the rear of the Medina home. The alleyway was empty, devoid of even the usual fluttering litter or stray cat that normally frequented such places.

Warily clambering from the battered Ford, Sam dragged his backpack out with him and took out his Glock. Checking the clip, he glanced over to the house he'd come to search. Part of him hoped Alyssa and Haris were inside, part hoped that he would never have to set eyes upon either ever again.

Against Haris, his handgun would be useless, so Sam stuffed a flask of holy water into his jacket pocket as a backup along with the weapon. Not that the liquid would have any effect on the demon – but it at least gave him some mental comfort.

Taking long strides, Sam left the Ford behind in favor of the rear of the Medina home. Once at the door, he carefully withdrew the Glock and felt at the handle. He'd expected it to be locked, but the door swung inwards, allowing a gloomy view of the house's interior.

Sam took a long breath and stepped inside, stretching out his arms to scan the passageway with his gun.

There was nothing, not even the skitter of a rogue mouse.

Sam moved on, keeping the "ready for action" pose until he'd scoured both stories of the building and come up empty. If Alyssa or her demon boss had been here, they were long gone.

Have they lured me away from Dean?

Sam suddenly felt the urge to sprint back to the car he'd stolen and floor the gas back to the motel, only the warbling and vibration of his PDA stopping him in his tracks.

Sam dared to pull out the overly-large phone, some part of him expecting the leering voice of Alyssa to taunt him once again. When the caller I.D. read "Dean" he exhaled and felt his heart rate slow considerably.

Dean was okay.

In fact, Dean was probably pissed that he wasn't back already with a huge greasy burger.

Sam took a second to conceal his gun back under his jacket and then exited the Medina house without answering the telephone call. Dean would ask questions – hell, he'd ask where Sam was, and that was one query he didn't want to lie about.

No, it would be better to grab food and coffee before returning. Dean would forget all about how long Sam had been once his nostrils smelled the fresh aroma of a caffeine overload and his beloved burger, extra onions et al.

Sam smiled to himself as he crossed over the sidewalk to a small café he'd spotted. The place wasn't exactly gourmet cuisine, but it was a typical Dean-style establishment.

You really shouldn't worry about Dean...

The words popped into Sam's head as if he'd thought them, and yet he knew the sentence's origin was not his own mind. It was like he'd been privy to another's thoughts – another that felt close.

Sam stopped dead, spinning so fast he had a brief loss of equilibrium as his senses caught up with his body's rapid move.

Someone was watching him, following him so closely his intuitive gifts had picked up on them when common sense had failed.

Sam peered around the empty sidewalk, eyes latching onto every detail around him that could give some clue to his invisible stalker. They were here somewhere, he just couldn't see them.

The dreary, un-yielding street glowered back at him in all its stark morning glory. There was no one to confront. Was he just getting jittery because of Alyssa and her mystery phone call?

Sam moved on again, quickening his stride until he was stepping through the glass door of the café. A bell jingled somewhere above him as he pushed through the entrance, and he was momentarily distracted by its innocent chime.

When he looked back where he was going, he realized his mistake.

Someone was in front of him, and he'd almost walked headlong into them. Worse still, even without getting a look at them, Sam felt the same tingle he had on the sidewalk.

This was the person who had been watching, waiting – not outside, as he'd thought – but from within the very café he'd chosen to get food from.

Hello, Sam...

The voice stealing its way inside his brain wasn't Haris, it wasn't Alyssa, but as Sam was engulfed in a blinding mountain of pain, he realized that maybe the voice was something far worse...

Dean

Dean came out of the bathroom, peeking around the door and listening to see if his brother had returned yet. Relieved when he was greeted with silence and an empty room, the young hunter slowly crossed over to the edge of his bed and dropped limply to the mattress.

The fact that he'd managed to hide out in the bathroom for nearly an hour without his brother being suspicious still amazed him.

Sammy must be really freaked about Alyssa and now the Mitchum kid going missing.

Still, if it was keeping his kid brother from noticing that the amulet was gone and that Dean was nearly falling on his face, then so be it. In truth, he felt way worse than the last time when he'd lost the amulet in the swamp, the vertigo and headache were off the scale. Even the hot shower hadn't done a thing to revive him. In fact, if anything, it seemed to have sapped what little energy sleep had provided him last night, leaving him nearly too exhausted to even get dressed.

Dean looked at his watch. How long had Sam been gone now? Surely long enough to get a cheeseburger and coffee and be ready to walk through that door any minute.

"Gotta get your shit together, Winchester," he admonished himself. "Either that or come up with some excuse that Sammy's gonna buy, 'cause if he finds you looking like this, he's gonna bust your ass."

But deep down, Dean knew that time was running out. He knew it the moment he looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror this morning. The dark circles under his eyes in sharp contrast to the pale tone of his skin, the shaking of his hands that simply refused to obey the commands of a mind that struggled to focus, or even the stomach that lurched at the mere mention of coffee or seized into painful cramps out of sheer spite it seemed.

No way I'm gonna hide this from Sam. You better hurry it the hell up Dad, times runnin' out here. Once Haris is taken care of, then Sammy can be as pissed as he wants to be with me.

Looking at his watch once more and then to the motel room door, Dean was becoming a little worried. Shouldn't Sam have been back by now?

He contemplated going out to look for his baby brother, but firstly he had no idea where Sam had gone for the food, and secondly it was simply more inviting to fall backwards on the bed and pass out.

Dean was about to choose the latter when his cell phone began to ring. Fishing it out of his jeans pocket, he spotted his father's name on the caller ID and anxiously answered.

"Dad?" *God, please let him tell me that they've got that yellow-eyed bastard already.*

"Dean. Where are you?" John's voice demanded.

"Still in Phoenix, Dad. Why? What's going on?" Dean asked worriedly.

"I need you to meet me as soon as possible. I'm not far from you, in Prescott. Meet me at the first rest stop just outside of town."

"Prescott? Dad, I thought you and Bobby were headed to Big Horn?"

"Dammit, Dean. Do as you're told," his father harshly ordered. "And come alone. Do not tell your brother."

"Okay, but Dad..." But before Dean could ask anything further, the call abruptly ended.

He sat there for a minute more, staring incredulously at the cellular in his hand.

"What the hell? YOU ASS!" he shouted at the phone. "After all this? After these past few days, nothing's changed. It's the same shit with you. Secrets, orders, treating me like I'm a child. What the hell do I have to do?" *Apparently giving you everything I've had my entire life wasn't enough. Apparently giving up my life to save my brother isn't enough!*

Dean raged for several more minutes, pent up emotions venting and stealing away precious strength and energy. It wasn't that he had changed his mind in the least about what he had committed to doing, but that phone call had certainly caught him off guard.

Calmer now, the little voice in the back of his head began to scream. What had happened? Why was his dad now in Prescott when just yesterday he'd been headed toward northern Wyoming? Was he following Dean after all? And then there was the cryptic order to not to tell Sam. Was it still something to do with the amulet and Haris?

Worried, slightly panicked, Dean called up every ounce of strength and determination he possessed and pushed up off the bed. He walked over to the small table, casually noticing the laptop was on and Outlook open, but he didn't bother to check out the emails.

Grabbing a piece of paper from the motel notepad, he hastily scribbled a note for Sam, telling his brother that he was taking the Impala to check out the still-faulty alternator before they left for Oxford.

Dean figured that ought to buy him enough time to get to Prescott and back, and besides, he'd already initiated that particular lie a couple of days back, much easier for his addled brain to perpetuate an old one than to start a new one.

Grabbing his keys, he hurried from the room, hoping he could get out of the motel parking lot before his brother returned and saw him. Breathing a sigh of relief, Dean pulled out onto the highway and was well on his way to Prescott, still vaguely concerned as to why Sam hadn't returned.

It took Dean nearly an hour to reach the meeting point, having driven like he had the very Hounds of Hell trailing him the entire way. Plagued by a mixture of emotions the entire drive, once he pulled into the little roadside area, he forced himself to push all the feelings of anger, suspicion, and even fear aside as his eyes searched eagerly for his dad's black truck.

Quickly scanning the area, it didn't take long to see that besides his Impala and two other semis, the place was empty. Dean looked at his watch. Granted, he hadn't exactly followed the posted speed limit getting here, but he'd assumed that his dad would have been here waiting when he got here considering how demanding he'd been on the phone.

Dean settled back, sinking into the leather seat and closing his eyes, fighting back the vertigo that had been threatening for miles. The annoying pounding in his head was keeping time with the beating of the heart in his chest and it felt ominously like a clock, ticking off the remaining seconds of his life. Dean wasn't stupid, he knew his body was failing him, organs beginning to work overtime to compensate for having the very life force being drained out of him.

And I'm out here chasing my dad down?

He sat there for thirty minutes more, counting vehicles that went by that weren't his dad, counting heartbeats that were being wasted while he waited. Growing more and more irritated, Dean finally yanked the cell from his pocket and hit the speed-dial for John.

It rang once, twice, three times, and Dean worried that it was going to voicemail when suddenly his dad's voice sounded in the receiver.

"Dean? What's wrong? Are you alright?" John answered in a panic.

"What's wrong? Am I alright? My ass is going numb sitting here waiting on you," Dean snapped back.

"Waiting on me? Where are you?"

"Prescott, exactly where you told me to meet you."

"Dean, I'm not anywhere near Prescott. Why would you think that?" John asked.

My God, he's disoriented. "Dean, where's Sam?" *Gonna have to tell Sam now, Dean needs help.*

"I didn't bring Sammy, Dad. You told me to come alone. You said not to tell Sam. Dad, what the hell is going on? Did you not call me two hours ago and tell me to meet you in Prescott ASAP, no questions asked?" Dean reminded, the intensity in his voice tinged with confusion and anger.

"Dean, I never called you. I swear. Bobby and I are nearly to the Big Horn Medicine Wheel. I figure we'll be ready to summon Haris by tonight."

"Dad, I'm not crazy." *Or am I? What if my brain is melting down now too?* "I know that call was from you, er... well, it sure was someone with your voice," Dean stammered.

"Dean, have you found out anything else about that Alyssa girl?" John asked suspiciously.

"Uh, nothing about her really. But, Sammy did find something about that Mitchum kid from back in Oxford. He's gone missing too. We were going to take off today and check that out since there's nothing more back in Phoenix," Dean explained.

There was a moment's silence when suddenly Dean rose up in the seat.

"SHIT!" he shouted across the phone. "Dad, I gotta get back to Phoenix now."

"Dean, what is it?" John asked worriedly.

"I dunno, nothing I hope. I'll call you as soon as I get back there." *Please don't let me be right*, he thought, thumbing off the call before firing the car back to life.

He pulled back onto the highway, narrowly missing an oncoming truck as the Impala fishtailed violently between the lanes.

If he was speeding on his way to Prescott, then he was nearly supersonic on his way back to the motel. Never considering himself a praying man, Dean was close to sending up a few silent words to the Big Guy as he rushed to get back to his brother.

Don't let there be any State Troopers; don't let me throw up right now; please let me keep the car on the road; please, dear God, let Sammy be there when I get back!

First Alyssa, then David Mitchum; if it was Haris, then the coincidence of psychic kids now suddenly going missing was too much to ignore. Add in the bogus phone call from his dad, and Dean felt pretty certain he had been baited away from his brother.

Please let Sam be there when I get back, please let Sam be there when I get back... the litany played over and over in his head.

Dean pulled into the parking lot, stopping the Impala with a screech of tires and the smell of hot brakes. He stumbled/staggered out of the car, barely containing the bile that had risen to the middle of his throat and burned there. He knocked on the door, calling out Sam's name even as he fumbled with the key.

"Sammy! Come on dude, open up," he yelled, finally managing to get the key into the hole despite seeing three keys and four keyholes with his currently blurred vision.

Flinging open the door, he rushed inside to... *emptiness*.

"Sam?" Dean called out, running quickly to the bathroom. *Please let him be in the bathroom, please let him be in the bathroom...*

Returning to the main room, Dean looked around. All of their belongings remained untouched, yet there was no sign that his brother had ever returned. The note Dean had left earlier remained on the small table next to the laptop.

Dean sagged down into the chair by the table, staring absently at the screen. He rubbed angrily at his uncooperative eyes that insisted on blurring, pushing the base of his palms roughly into each orb until he could focus on the monitor.

And then he saw it. "Time to say goodbye" in the subject line. In a flurry, he opened the email and read it.

What an idiot he'd been. While he'd been trying to avoid Sam and keep his own little "secrets," Sammy had obviously been keeping one of his own.

Dean pulled the cell phone from his pocket and although he knew he wouldn't get anything different than the last fifty times he tried his brother's cellular on the way back, he dialed Sam's number.

"Come on Sammy. Please answer the damn phone," he pleaded.

Dean waited with bated breath as the call began to connect, waiting for his brother's voice to tell him to leave a message. But instead, he heard a familiar female voice.

"We're sorry, but the wireless customer you are trying to reach is currently out of service..."

Dean listened to the message repeat twice more before he numbly disconnected the call. His head was spinning, his stomach twisting spastically, but he wasn't sure if it was the result of the amulet being gone, or because of the horrible fear that was now gnawing at his guts.

Scrolling down the list of contacts in his phone, he found his dad's number and waited for John's voice to answer.

"Dean? What's going on? Are you okay? Is Sam okay?" John fired off rapidly.

Dean couldn't speak, he couldn't breathe, his brain couldn't even process what was happening. He could only manage two words.

"Sam's gone..."

Sam

Something was burning into his flesh, cutting with its rough ridges until he was sure if he looked he would have red welts impressed into his skin. The pain was palpable and yet somehow dulled by the fact that he couldn't see its cause in his current state.

Sam was tired, tired not because he needed sleep, but fatigued by a more mental exhaustion that had taken away his consciousness hours before and even now stopped him becoming fully awake.

I was at the Medina house, then the coffee shop...

Coffee shop.

The memory brought back fresh pain and in an instant Sam recalled his unknown attacker and the agony that had come with the newcomer's presence.

Sam tugged at his bonds, the pain turning to adrenalin-fuelled anger that made him become more alert – more awake. His eyes fluttered as he willed them to open – to see the place where he had been deposited.

The place wasn't what he had expected. There was no roof above the hunter's head, only a bleak rustle as overhanging branches chafed one another as the outdoor breeze teased at them.

There was very little light, but it was hard for Sam to tell whether it was the trees blocking out the sun's rays or whether it was early morning, or indeed dusk. Since his abduction he had managed to lose track of all time, and any sense of direction.

Without something to use as a starting point, he couldn't be sure, but Sam guessed he was no longer in Arizona.

Blinking, Sam tried to push away the gritty, blurred vision that plagued his view, trying to look down at the ropes that bound him to the tree trunk. The twine was thick, like something from a turn of the century sailing ship, and it was the rough fiber from its strands that he could feel digging into his flesh.

The rope held his arms back around the tree, as well as securing his waist and legs so tightly he hardly felt any sensation anymore, beyond a searing tingling.

Sam tilted his head back against the bark, letting his eyes clear enough that he could see other shadows in the small glade – all of whom appeared to be secured in a similar fashion to himself.

"Hey! Can anybody hear me?" The plea came out rough and uneven, and Sam realized his throat was so dry it felt like his vocal cords might actually crack if he spoke again. He coughed, trying to use his own saliva to lubricate his suffering throat.

From the shadows, several groans responded to his voice, if not his actual question. His presence had been noted, but apparently he was the only abductee strong enough to make actual conversation at this point.

Shit...

Sam took a calming breath. *What would Dean do right now?*

Thinking back, Dean didn't have such a great track record when it came to being strapped tight to a tree either. Back in Burkitsville and Kentucky the elder Winchester had relied on outside assistance for escape.

Great, Dean, that means I have to rely on you to save my ass.

Except Sam had no clue where Dean was, or if his brother was even alive. Hell, for all Sam knew, Dean might be one of the other bodies he could see strung up in the dell.

"Dean?" Sam forced his eyes to refocus on the nearest tree and the person that was tied there.

As he scrutinized the human shape, he realized it was too small to be his brother. It was a girl, a girl he recognized all too well.

Alyssa!

Alyssa's arms seemed to be bearing her weight as her lifeless husk hung limply from the tree. Congealed blood covered her lower lip and chin where it had obviously once flowed in abundance. More of the sticky red liquid clung to her blouse, covering her chest with a bizarre red patchwork of startling color.

There was no way for Sam to be sure, but from the waxen shade of her features and the amount of blood loss, it was a fair bet that the girl was dead.

Why rescue her to simply kill her?

The move didn't make sense – not even in Haris' warped little world. Which led to another more startling possibility.

Maybe none of this was Haris's doing.

Sam felt a fire begin to kindle in his stomach and bile rise in his throat. If Alyssa was here, and very dead, that meant she had never sent any e-mails or made any mystery phone calls to him. If Alyssa was innocent, that meant that the yellow-eyed freak probably was too.

So who the hell else would kidnap psychic kids only a handful of people even know about? The hunters again?

If Rennie had really regrouped so soon, would she waste time like this? Sam didn't think so. She was most likely so pissed at the Winchesters he'd have had his brains splattered all over Arizona by now. She certainly wouldn't drag him off to some wilderness location to do it.

So who else is here trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, and why?

"Hey, c'mon, somebody's gotta hear me!" Sam strained again, pulling at his restraints to look to his left just a little more.

There was again no reply, just softer, almost inhuman moans like he had been deposited in some corner of Hades where the souls of the innocent dead were tormented.

Still, the maneuver had its benefits. With a slightly clearer view, Sam could now see another victim's face enough to recognize his features.

David Mitchum, the psychic from Nebraska, was yet another special kid who had apparently been taken against his will.

The kid was bloodied like Alyssa and his skin was pale, but Sam at least thought he saw the shallow rise and fall of his chest, signaling that he was still breathing – albeit barely.

"David? David, it's Sam Winchester. C'mon David, you remember me..."

The youth whimpered in response, his head still hanging loosely on his chest. There was no fight left in him, no strength to even acknowledge he'd understood the hunter's questions.

"C'mon, dude, I know you can hear me-"

"He can hear you, they all can. Well, at least, those that are still alive can..."

Someone stepped from the gloom, his face only millimeters from Sam's as he looked into the hunter's eyes. A smile played across the kidnapper's lean features, and he backed up enough so that Sam could get a better view.

Without any questions, Sam knew this was who'd attacked him at the cafe. "What do you want from me?"

The man's steel-blue eyes peered at Sam, his smile never wavering. He wasn't charmingly handsome in the way that Dean was, but Sam guessed there was something about him that would no doubt attract the opposite sex just as easily. His hair was closely cropped, almost prison style, and his musculature suggested he worked out more than just once a month.

"Who says I want anything?" The voice matched the face perfectly. It was soft, alluring, but most of all deceiving.

"Then why are we here? All of us," Sam demanded, muscles tensing against his bonds as he glanced at the other captive figures around him.

The man moved closer again until he was leaning next to Sam's ear. "Because you're my bait," he whispered tauntingly. "It doesn't matter to me, though, if you're dead bait..." He stepped back into a shaft of light breaking through the tree cover, allowing the newfound luminance to reflect off his eyes as they momentarily flashed a stark glistening black.

Sam sucked down a breath before retorting. "You're a demon? Am I supposed to be impressed? Do you know how many of you bastards I've sent back to hell lately?"

"Oh, I know." The demon crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the tree Alyssa was tied to. "My master knows everything you've been doing. Everything, Sammy..."

"That's because we've hunted his ass for so long he sees us every time he looks over his shoulder."

"Hunted?" The demon ran a finger over Alyssa's lips until it came away covered in a film of thick, coagulated blood. He peered at the glop, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger before reaching out and smearing it on Sam's forehead.

The shape was rough, but the upside down triangle, complete with what appeared to be a large "X" transecting its center was clearly some kind of symbol or sigil.

"My master is the hunter, not the quarry. Luckily for you, today you are merely the lure. You'll die far less painfully than otherwise." The man's eyes once again colored over into shining balls of pure raven and he began to chuckle at the frown on his captive's face. "Why Sammy, I do believe you're lost for words-"

Sam jerked his head backwards trying to avoid the demon's sullied hand any further. He had no idea what Alyssa's blood had formed on his brow, but the sensation of the drying liquid on his flesh was somehow repugnant. Sam didn't like being bait, and he didn't appreciate not knowing who he was conversing with. Meg had been one thing, so had Alyssa, but this new demon was *different*.

And what if he was actually the lure to draw Dean or John out? *Something was going on between those two back at the motel. What if they've hidden something from me again? More secrets, more lies?*

Sam squirmed, letting the rope cut into his skin without even noticing the soreness and blood it brought with it. If this was about his dad or brother, then he'd stick the damn demon out to the end.

John and Dean had protected him from Haris for years, and now he was going to extend that courtesy right back by not telling the bastard in front of him a thing.

Not one damn thing.

"I'm not helping you draw anyone out to this place. I know what you can do to me. I've seen your kind's work first hand, but I'll never help you. I'll die first." Sam spat the words in the demon's face, spittle from his mouth making the creature flinch as it touched his skin.

The thing wiped away the moisture with the back of his hand, smiling again – that oh so subtle and very evil smirk that meant he was still in control. "You shouldn't say things like that, Sam. I can do so much more to you than Haris ever did to your brother back at the cabin that night..."

"Go get a life, sulfur breath."

"Oh, but I have a life. A very nice one since I inhabited this body." The black-orbed thing began to circle Sam. "The question is how much life do you have left, hunter? You see, my master taught me well, and he has forgotten more about inflicting pain than you could ever hope to imagine. Than even Haris can hope to imagine..."

"Dude, I can imagine a lot." Sam smirked back at the creature, finally resigned to the fact that maybe Dean's gung ho philosophy was sometimes right. If you were going to go out, then never give the bastard you were fighting the satisfaction of seeing you give in.

The demon stopped its long strides around the tree and cocked its head inquisitively like an animal. The rumors it had heard about the Winchesters were apparently true after all. Watching this one suffer would give it almost more pleasure than seeing its *real* target destroyed.

Almost.

The thing dipped its head as if in mock prayer, and when it looked back up to Sam, only the black of its eyes showed. Intense concentration governed its features as it converged all of its unholy powers on the youngest Winchester.

"Tell me, Sam, have you ever eaten at one of those fancy restaurants? Have you ever imagined what it must be like to be boiled alive like a lobster?"

And in that instant Sam didn't need to *imagine* anything.

Somehow, he wasn't in the woods anymore. He wasn't tied to a tree. Sam was being boiled alive until his flesh felt like it would drop freely from his bones, leaving only a bleached white skeleton as evidence he'd ever existed.

The hunter yelled out as a white hot version of Niagara seemed to engulf him in its steaming fountain, flaying his skin like a vaporous whip until he could see the oozing, raw tissue below.

Sam tried to scream again, tried to fight the pain as Dean once had from a demon's attack, but this time there was no Colt, no rescuing brother.

As the barrage of heat continued, even his cries were stifled as the cascading water seemed to melt the soft tissue on his lips, welding them together into silence.

John and Bobby

John finished the call with Dean feeling as though he was about to be sick. He knew Dean was taking the brunt of Sam's disappearance and on top of everything else, John could tell that his eldest wasn't handling it well.

There was a weakness to Dean's voice that the young man couldn't hide over the phone. John was certain that he'd even heard his son unsuccessfully stifle back a fit of coughing that turned into retching although Dean tried to cover the noise by putting his hand over the phone.

I'm losing him! I thought I was so smart, had it all planned so well. But that bastard Haris was smarter and now I've lost Sammy and I'm losing Dean for no reason.

He threw the phone on top of the dash with an angry curse that startled Bobby seated next to him. Defeated and uncertain, for the first time in his life, John Winchester wasn't sure what to do next.

"John, how's Dean holding out?" Bobby asked.

"How do you think he's holding out? He's dying, Bobby and there's not a damn thing I can do about it now. I've been so goddamn stupid," John snapped back.

"John, you gotta calm down. We gotta think. We're not going to do either of your boys any good if we don't think this through."

"Bobby, Haris has Sam, God only knows where, so we can't exactly summon him. We've already melted the amulet down and recast it into a bullet, so there's no going back for Dean. So tell me, exactly what is there to think about? Whether or not to bury my boys side by side?" he demanded.

"John Winchester! Damn you to hell! How dare you give in now. You got those boys into this mess. I'm not sayin' that I don't understand your reasoning but dammit, now's the time to get your ass in gear and fight to save them, not to sit there whining like a friggin' bitch. Now what's it gonna be?" Bobby demanded.

John swallowed hard, feeling his hand clench as he considered planting it into his friend's bearded face. But even as he glared at Bobby, he knew the harsh words were spoken not to be hurtful but to gain a necessary reaction.

"I'm not giving up, Bobby. I'm just so damn tired. Every damn time we get close enough to get that sonofabitch, he just seems to pull further away from us. Now he's got Sam and I don't know what the hell to do," John replied back wearily.

Bobby softened slightly, he hadn't meant to be callous or insensitive, but he also knew that time was against them.

"So, we heading to meet up with Dean?" he asked, hoping that John was at least considering going to get the older boy.

"Yeah, I want him with me at the... well, we can use all the help we can get to track down Sam," John quickly covered. "He's on his way from Phoenix, figured we could hook up somewhere near Provo."

"And then what?" Bobby asked, a tease of a plan forming in his mind. "How will you go about finding Sam? It's not like you can still summon Haris and shoot him with the amulet bullet."

"I don't know, Bobby. I just know I got to get to Dean first. I can't leave him alone right now, no matter what else happens. He doesn't deserve to be alone at the end."

"I agree, so I was thinking. I need you to drop me off in Salt Lake City," the seasoned hunter added quickly.

"Salt Lake? Why?" John asked, feeling as though his friend was deserting him.

Bobby sucked in a deep breath. He knew he was about to tread into some dangerous territory, but he just wasn't willing to throw in the towel and idly sit by while John buried his eldest son. Granted the amulet had been destroyed, but that didn't mean that there couldn't be some other options for the eldest of the Winchester sons.

"Look, I know you said you checked high and low and I'm sure you did. But I'm gonna go find that Mann character again and see if he has any other information. Maybe there's still some way to save Dean since we haven't used the amulet yet. Maybe there's some way to put things back right, some way to still save Dean," he implored.

John shook his head sadly. "Bobby, I told you, I chased every lead, tracked down every reference to the amulet. I've been to Mann's twice already. I did everything but put a gun to the old man's head. He doesn't know anything more. There's no way to break the link between the amulet and Guardian. There was no turning back the minute that amulet began to melt. I've as good as killed Dean with my stupid plan to destroy that demon and save Sam."

"Well, what do we have to lose at this point?" Bobby suggested. He looked out the passenger window of the truck, trying to hide the sudden knot that had risen in his throat.

"John, look, I love those boys like they were my own. Hell, they might as well be my own for as much as they grew up around me. I can't, I won't, stand by and watch your son die. It's just that simple. Give me one day. I'll fly down to New Orleans, find Shadrack Mann and see if he can tell me anything more. We just can't give up."

John Winchester didn't have to force the small smile that spread across his haggard face. For a man with few friends in this world, Bobby Singer was easily the closest thing to a best friend that John had left.

While he held little hope that Bobby's mission would be successful, John was grateful that the experienced hunter was willing to try. At this stage, he was so overwhelmed with desperation that, short of a miracle, he held little hope of seeing either of his sons celebrate their next birthdays.

They continued down the highway in silence, neither man having anything to say that would be appropriate under the circumstances, John consumed by worry and self-recrimination while Bobby wracked his brain trying to recall any useful piece of legend or lore that might help them in this situation.

Arriving in Salt Lake City several hours later, John pulled up to the airport's departure terminal, letting the engine idle as Bobby swung the passenger's side door open and dropped down from the cab. He turned and paused for a moment, trying his best to offer John some semblance of an encouraging smile.

"You'll find Sam," he said positively.

"I will," John replied.

"And you'll make that bastard Haris pay."

He'll never pay enough, Bobby. Not for all the grief he's caused."

"I'll call you as soon as I get to Mann's place," the hunter stated. "Tell Dean to hang in there for me."

"I will."

Bobby nodded a goodbye before grabbing his bag from the bed of the truck and walking into the airport terminal. John watched him walk away, feeling a quick pang of solitude strike him.

He'd never minded working alone before, but just now, with his world feeling as though it was crashing down around him, John felt very much deserted and on his own. When Bobby's tattered and grease-covered baseball cap could no longer be seen amidst the throng of travelers, John pulled the black pickup back onto the roadway and head out to meet Dean.

Good luck my friend! And if there's a God in heaven, maybe He'll shine down on you, 'cause He's he sure turned away from me. But what can you expect? He might have been willing to sacrifice His only Son to save the world, but I hardly think He respects me for screwing up and losing both of mine!

Sam

The pain hadn't gone away, not even when unconsciousness had finally taken him. It had still been there, gnawing, biting, searing into his flesh even as his mind had tried to black it out. Was this how Dean had felt after Haris' attack back in Wisconsin? Had Dean felt the sharpened demonic talons tearing into his insides long after he'd appeared comatose?

Before, Sam could only try to imagine what his brother had gone through that night. Now, now he was feeling hell's embrace from his own perspective, and it was telling him in no uncertain terms that Dean must have wanted to die a thousand times over as he'd been pinned to the cabin wall, blood dribbling from his mouth as his innards were torn apart.

Dean...

The one sole thing save his father that Sammy wanted to live for, to fight for, to kill for even, if need be. Once there had been Mom, Jess; but now, all that was left were the last vestiges of a family warped by an evil they could only try to suppress, never beat.

Dean...

The name burned into Sam more than the steaming water from the demon, urging him, begging him to awaken. *Gotta wake up. Gotta find Dean before the demon does.*

Sam's eyes flashed open wide and he sucked down air like a fish tossed from its watery home - the breathlessness brought on by panic for his sibling rather than his own wellbeing.

After two more lungfuls, the panting subsided, leaving only the sensation that his body must be blackened and charred from its earlier immersion in Hades' searing waterfalls.

Sam leaned his head back against the tree, wanting but not quite daring to glance down at his body. He could still feel the hot liquid melting his clothes to his flesh until the upper layer of his skin had simply flayed away, leaving a raw, oozing pulp behind.

But then, nobody could live through that, could they?

Plucking up courage, he swallowed hard and finally let his eyes meet his chest. The familiar tan jacket looked innocently back at him fully intact. No scorch marks, no flaps of cloth sticking to his reddened and crisped skin.

"You *bastard!*" Sam wasn't sure if the demon could hear him. He wasn't even sure if the thing was even in the clearing, but it didn't matter.

The thing had tricked him – stealing into his mind and using his own gifts against him – there had been no steaming vapor, no stream of jetting hot liquid lashing away his skin.

If the demon was around it didn't respond and Sam exhaled, all the fight draining from him as suddenly as it had appeared. He was tired again. The mental illusion he'd been forced to endure had been ten times more powerful than one of his own visions, and those visions took enough strength from him on their own, without the intrusion of a demon controlling them.

Sagging back against the trunk, Sam let his tingling limbs fall limp, relaxing as much as his static position would allow. Around him, he realized that the glade had darkened. If it had been daytime before, then surely now, night was fast approaching.

As if to prove his theory, a lone wolf howled somewhere out in the wilderness. The animal was far enough away to sound muted – unreal – and yet, Sam knew, still close enough to be dangerous when the sun finally gave way to the stars.

Wolves were hunters, drawn by the scent of their weakened prey, and tonight Sam was smack in the middle of what could only be called a lupine banqueting hall. How many of the bodies around him were already dead? How many would succumb finally to the sharpened fangs of the wolves as they tore at the sweet, bloody flesh drawing them here?

"Sam? Sam Winchester?" The voice was weak, pathetic, but it was evidence that he was not the only living thing in the clearing.

"Over here." Sam strained once more against his bonds, needing to put a face to the semi-familiar tones he was hearing. With the added darkness, it was even harder to see, but somehow he pinpointed the young man who had spoken among the shadows to his right. "Matt? Is that you?"

The young man nodded as if speaking was more than an effort. He was a psychic, a freak like Sam who had the added ability to set fire to things like some mentally-controlled pyromaniac. It had been a year, maybe more since the Winchesters had encountered Matt in the town of Odon, but Sam had never forgotten him.

Sam never let himself forget any of the special kids. They shared an unknown link – a bond of sorts – and it was probably that link that would see them all die here today.

"Sam." Matt struggled to keep his head up, the blood and bruises on his face telling a familiar tale. "Sam, what's happening?"

"I...I don't know," The hunter answered apologetically. "Do you know how you got here? Think, Matt, it might be important."

"I don't remember. I was...was moving around a lot. Keeping a low profile after what you told me." Matt coughed, the harsh sound emanating from his chest making Sam flinch. "No one knew what I could do, Sam, *no one*." Finally the psychic drew enough fear-induced strength to peer at Sam, his muscles shaking with the effort. "Is this...is this *the demon* you told me about?"

Sam thought about it. About everything that had happened, everything he'd seen and heard, but nothing, not one thing pointed to Haris. Maybe that was the trick, because hell, demons lie, but he just couldn't see the point of that. He couldn't see the point of anything in the whole damn warped world he inhabited anymore.

"I don't think it's the demon," he answered truthfully. "But it's something close, maybe even something worse."

"Oh, don't you two know it's particularly rude to talk about a person behind their back?" The black-eyed creature from earlier stepped from nowhere, like some Vegas illusionist. "Perhaps it was remiss of me not to tell you my name, though? Maybe if you'd known who you were dealing with?" The thing huffed melodramatically, eyes for now a more human icy-blue. "My close friends call me Eli..."

"Should we be shaking in our boots? Because, trust me, *Eli* just makes you sound like some country yokel. You know the type? Grinning half-wit sitting on a bridge, playing *Dueling Banjos*?"

Sam made the vocal retort his brother would have been proud of, but inside his mind was desperately trying to focus on just what “Eli” might mean or be an abbreviation for.

“Oh, very amusing, Samuel, but I think I’m a little further up the hierarchy than that. Maybe I can help you out with the shaking in your boots, though?” Eli turned, not to Sam, but to Matt, this time clasping his hands together in front of him as he focused his demonic abilities.

Matt screamed, but at first Sam couldn’t tell what was happening. Was the demon making the psychic think he was boiling, as he had Sam?

Matt yelled again, and this time Sam realized the kid’s legs were both shaking violently. With a sickening pop, Matt’s left femur snapped in two, followed by his right less than a second later.

There was no outward evidence of the damage, but the way Matt simply sagged against the ropes, letting them take his full weight, told half the tale. If that wasn’t proof enough, there was more torture yet to come.

Eli held up a hand, whirling from Matt to push his face so close to Sam’s he could smell the acrid stench of death personified. “Can you hear that, hunter?” He smiled. “That’s the sound of your friend’s bones grinding together until they’re just dust.”

Sam flinched, but the unmistakable noise of something slowly crushing made him want to be sick. *It’s just another mind game. Who the hell is this freak?* “Let him be you bastard!”

Eli seemed to read Sam’s mind. Apparently, it was a trick he was good at. “I’m not a freak, Sam. I’m a warrior serving a master, just like you-” The thing shrugged. “Of course, I hold far more power in my realm than you ever will. You with those pathetic little gifts... whereas I was *made* for war...”

Sam blinked, eyes narrowing as he finally realized who he might be dealing with. *I’m a warrior, I was made for war.*

Eli was a contraction, an abbreviation of a name Sam had seen long ago in a book given to him by another hunter. Eli was short for Eligos or Abigor, as he was sometimes known. The book had been *The Key of Solomon*, and the demon in question was no small fry. He was a leader, a demon who held control of fifty legions of his kind.

And his one sole purpose was war.

There’s a storm coming...

Sam closed his eyes as he heard Bobby’s voice over and over in his head. He was getting answers, but answers that made no sense. Eli claimed not to work for Haris, and yet they seemed to both have the same goals. Was it all a lie? Just another trap elicited by the yellow-eyed monster?

“I’m not afraid of your tricks anymore, Eli.” Sam opened his eyes and stared right through the demon. “I know who you are. I know you think you’re some big shot who controls fifty legions, but really? You’re just a faker, an illusionist...”

“Oh, I like magic, Sam,” Eli confessed, sauntering back to Matt. “I really do. But I like pain too...” The demon ran a finger along the unconscious psychic’s thigh just enough to press into his flesh.

With a sickening squish, white splintered and deformed bone stubs erupted from Matt’s skin, cutting through his jeans like carved spikes. The edges of the milled femur dripped blood, and in a few places, fatty tissue still clung to their surface.

Matt’s legs had sagged beneath him before, but now as they half-collapsed he appeared more like some ugly, deformed rag doll than a human.

Sam felt his stomach growl, the urge to retch only stifled by the fact that he’d had little or nothing to eat for hours. “You sick sonofabitch.” He shook his head, unable to look at Matt’s torn body any longer. “I’ll make sure you and Haris go down for this. And if you kill me? Hell, my dad and brother are just gonna be so much more pissed when they get their hands on you...”

“Hands?” Eli smirked again, looking down to where Sam’s huge paws were tied around the tree. “*Funny* you should mention *hands*.” The demon took a hold of the hunter’s chin, roughly twisting Sam’s head to the side. “Did you know there are two hundred and six bones in the human body, Sammy? And twenty-seven of them are in each hand...”

“Don’t call me, *Sammy*.” Sam jerked his head from Eli’s physical grasp, but the demon didn’t try to reaffirm its grip.

The creature appraised Sam like it was choosing meal from a menu. “You have to be so careful what you say to demons, Sammy. Aren’t you glad you didn’t say ‘bite me?’” Eli stepped dead center into the middle of the dell, letting the first rays of moonlight play of its now oily orbs.

With a chortle it waved a hand in front of Sam’s face, wriggling and stretching its fingers in some bizarre show of both power and ridicule. As the strange display continued, Sam began to feel his left hand begin to thrum, all four metacarpal bones vibrating with such intensity that his whole hand shook, throbbing through his palm, wrist and arm.

Sam howled as the earthquake beneath his flesh came to a crescendo, the bones finally snapping with the stress placed upon them. He squeezed his eyes closed, biting into his lower lip until he drew blood – anything to stifle not only the pain – but also his cries of agony.

Never show a demon you have any weakness...

Eli nodded, satisfied as he watched the muscles on Sam’s face contort and twist as he attempted to hide his suffering.

“If we’re just bait, why is Haris having you do this? Doesn’t he need the kids like me for some Godforsaken purpose?” Sam spat out the questions through gritted teeth, his chest heaving as he absorbed the pain, trying to keep it at bay. *It’s not real. It’s not real...*

“Haris? Oh, Sammy, you just don’t listen. Didn’t I tell you I don’t serve that second-rate traitor?” Eli rolled his eyes playfully, teasing his victim. “*My* master is much more powerful. Let’s just say, this is my boss’s way of teaching Haris a lesson-”

“Your boss?”

Eli’s eyes sparkled like the dark night sky, illuminated by a myriad of stars. He reached out, flicking a hand over the bloody sigil he had scrawled on Sam’s forehead in Alyssa’s blood, but he gave no further explanation. “I’m bored of this *game*.”

Sam opened his mouth, but abruptly closed it again as he felt his already broken hand begin to pulse anew. Anatomy wasn’t his strong suit, but he knew enough to realize that the eight tiny carpal bones were the next on Eli’s list of things to crush.

The familiar thrumming was followed by something new, something like bone grinding on bone until Sam could contain the pain no more. He yelled out, the unexpected noise disturbing nestling birds from the trees where they had perched for the night.

Eli smirked with pleasure as Sam writhed against the tree trunk, unable to escape the pain. But the demon was still not sated. As the hunter squirmed, he focused on yet another bone, making his way up Sam’s arm like he was completing a puzzle.

A lone bat fluttered overhead, scared by the fresh cries, but it would not be the last scream that interrupted its nightly hunt.

As Sam’s radius snapped in two like a twig, the sheared ends grinding on one another like flour being milled, Eli began to laugh, his chortling filling the bleak Wyoming landscape like the wild howl of some indigenous predator.

“Oh, and, Sammy?” He finally snickered. “It’s *sixty* legions...”

Dean

Dean struggled to focus on the road ahead of him. He’d considered sticking to the interstate, the four-lane offering a faster route to Provo, but blurred vision and high

speed didn't tend to make the best driving companions and he didn't need the unwanted attention of some Highway Patrol officer pulling him over for erratic driving and conducting a field sobriety test, or worse.

So the back country two lanes would have to do. Problem was, this particular two lane country road hadn't seen a highway road crew in several years and was so scored by pot holes that Dean was certain the Impala was likely to lose part of her transmission in one of them fairly soon.

That was if he didn't lose control of his stomach first and wreck the classic car while he was heaving all over the interior...

Great! Never figured to check out with my stomach and intestines coming out of my nose! Always thought I'd go out in a blaze of glory, taking as many evil sonsabitches with me as I could!

The tires struck another asphalt crater and Dean's body lurched forward. His free hand clutched at his abdomen as the spasms there flared unmercifully, then rushed to his mouth as his already barren stomach threatened to invert, although he had no idea what could possibly be there to bring back up.

He rolled down the window further, allowing the air that was whipping by to cool his face and help clear the unsettling sense of "sickness" that was enveloping him. Wiping a sleeve across his forehead, he wasn't horribly surprised when it came back saturated with perspiration.

It had been that way in Louisiana, back in the swamp when the amulet had been lost before. The headaches, the blurred vision, the stomach pain, the drowning in sweat. None of this was new, but it sure seemed worse, almost as if his body knew that this time, the amulet was gone for good and was never coming back.

So long, see ya, wouldn't want to be ya! Have a nice life there Winchester. Now why did this Guardian-amulet thing have to be like Superman and Kryptonite but in reverse? Why couldn't it just be something quick, instead of this prolonged agony bullshit?

"Yeah, and when has anything in my life ever been quick and easy?" he asked aloud. "Well, except for that nurse in Pittsburgh. Now that was quick and easy, but ooh, was she ever good."

Dean jerked the steering wheel sharply, his momentary reminiscence causing him to veer over into the oncoming lane. The jerky movement sent a jolt of pain up through his stomach and deep into his chest that stole his breath away and he barely managed to pull the Impala over to the side of the road before losing control.

He sat there for a moment as the pain subsided and he risked taking another breath. Satisfied that his chest wouldn't explode, he sucked in another lungful of air, feeling his heart slamming against his ribcage as the adrenaline continued to pump through his system.

"Now what the hell was that all about?" he demanded of his body. "Dammit, this shit didn't happen before."

Before, Mann had told him he had three or four days before things would start to progress. How long had it been so far? Two days? Three, since he'd given his dad the amulet? He counted backwards in his head. Three days! His time was nearly up then according to the crazy old coot.

But no, Shadrack Mann didn't know Dean Winchester, didn't know his determination or sheer willpower.

Not gonna let this beat me! Gotta get it under control. For Sam! Gotta find Sam! Just hang in there, a little longer!

Dean let his head sag against the top of the steering wheel. He forced himself to breathe through the pain, through the nausea, through the myriad of swirling thoughts that plagued his mind.

Focusing on the crisis at hand which helped him not focus on how lousy he felt, Dean pulled the car back onto the road, allowing his eyes to watch the highway while his mind chewed away at his brother's disappearance.

Haris had Sam, there could be no doubt about that fact now. First Alyssa, then David Mitchum, now his brother: whatever the demon was up to, the bastard was definitely rounding up the psychic kids for some final battle plan.

But why now, of all times? Dean wondered. Could Haris have possibly gotten wind of their plans to destroy him with the amulet? Was this some tactic to stop his dad? Maybe this was the yellow-eyed demon's way of taking out the Winchester clan in one fell swoop: killing Dean without the amulet while capturing Sam with no one to protect him.

Dean could feel the anger boil up inside him. How could they have been so stupid? Surely the demon must have had spies that watched their every move and reported back?. He must have been waiting for a move just such as this on their part, waiting till they slipped up so he could move his piece on the chessboard and declare "checkmate" once and for all.

And they had given him this opportunity the minute he'd handed over the amulet and his dad had melted it down. With his dad and Bobby focused on summoning and killing the bastard, and Dean resigned to his fate, it had been nothing for Haris to swoop in on the distracted group and steal away the one person they were all desperately trying to save.

The minutes turned into miles and the miles turned into agony of mind, body and soul as Dean drove on to meet his dad. Three days ago he had thought that this trip would be made to hook up with his dad one final time, to say his final goodbyes to Sammy, to Bobby, to Dad. But now, it was his last mission, one he hoped he could complete. One he prayed would be successfully completed.

As the afternoon sun began to lower on the western horizon, Dean finally reached the truck stop in Provo. As he pulled the Chevy among the rows of idling semis, his mind flicked back to a similar place in Wisconsin only a mere week and half ago. That night he'd been on a quest to save his father.

What a difference a few days made!

Dean pulled the Impala over to a parking spot underneath the shade of a large oak and next to the idle hulk of his dad's black truck. John was already out of the vehicle, leaning against the front hood, his hands tucked in his pockets, but Dean knew that was only so that he could quickly retrieve either a gun or Holy Water, depending on the threat. The elder Winchester looked up when the creak of the Impala's driver's door groaned loudly.

Dean pulled himself from the car, taking a step toward John but stumbled forward against the fender of the Chevy. John dashed ahead, racing to catch his son as Dean grabbed the metal of the bumper stopping himself before he hit the concrete curb and just as his dad's hand caught the material of his left sleeve.

"Dean!" John cried out.

But Dean grumpily shrugged off his father's arm, slowly pulling himself back up and sagging against the front of the car.

"I'm alright, I'm alright," he insisted with a weak wave-off of his hand.

John backed away a single step, but remained within quick reach, his eyes never leaving Dean, taking in his son's frail-looking form. He wanted to help Dean, needed to help him, feeling the overwhelming guilt that it was his fault that his son was in this condition.

Condition? Who the hell am I trying to fool? Dean is dying right before my eyes!

"Have you found out anything?" Dean asked.

John snapped alert, noticing that Dean had managed to basically right himself and was standing semi-erect, although still using the frame of the Impala to hold his shaking body up.

"And where's Bobby?" the short-haired young man added, anxiously looking over John's shoulder toward the black truck.

So typically Dean. Pretending to be strong, staying focused on the job at hand despite what he's feeling, despite how he's hurting. Is this what I made you to be?

"DAD!" Dean nearly shouted. "You with me here?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry. I don't have any leads yet. Hell, son, I don't even know where to start. Did you pick up anything in Phoenix? Maybe we need to go back there?" John suggested.

"There was nothing, Dad. No sign of him at the motel and I have no idea where he might have gone. Haris could have snagged him at any point once he left the room."

There was quiet between them for a second before Dean spoke again.

"It's my fault, Dad," he began quietly. "That bastard got Sammy because I wasn't there to watch out for him."

John moved to stand beside his son, taking up a spot next to Dean and leaning against the shining black quarter panel. Their shoulders were nearly side by side, touching but not quite, and in that distance, John could feel the heat pouring off his son's fevered body, could detect the tremor of his muscles. "How's that, Dean? What are you talking about?"

"I was hiding out from Sam, trying to keep him from seeing me... seeing me like this. I didn't want him to know what we were doing. If I would have only come out sooner, if I would have seen that bogus email, gone with him wherever he went. Dammit, Dad, he'd be with us right now and you'd have that yellow-eyed bastard in the sights of your gun by now."

John shook his head, turning to look at his son, but Dean's gaze remained fixed ahead.

"Dean, now listen to me... Hey!" John raised his voice to a commanding tone, waiting till his son responded.

Dean looked up tentatively, meeting his father's eyes, his body making a feeble attempt to snap to something that resembled attention.

"You listen to me and you listen to me good, son. You had nothing to do with what's happened to your brother. How can you feel responsible for him disappearing when right now you're dy..." John stopped abruptly, his voice failing him. He swallowed back the lump that collected in his throat. *Forgive me, Dean.* "This is all my fault. You were willing to sacrifice everything and I failed you, I failed Sam. And now, what you've done, what's happening to you..."

"Stop, Dad. Please! I can't do this with you. I don't have the energy," Dean pleaded weakly. *I don't have the time!*

"Awwww, so touching! Father and son bonding together." A new voice spoke from behind them.

John and Dean whirled around, startled by the newcomer. Standing on the far side of the Impala, a tall male figure appeared, his face obscured by the hood of a black sweatshirt that was drawn over the figure's head. Imposing in size, the man was every bit as large as John and despite being hidden by the hoodie, Dean felt that there was something "familiar" about him.

"Who the hell are you?" John demanded.

"Just someone that needs to talk to you buddy," the stranger replied.

"Come on, son, let's get out of here, leave this nutcase be," John ordered, reaching out to guide Dean away.

"Hey now, that's not very friendly," the stranger called out. "Could you at least spare some change for a drink? It sure is hot out here today and an ice cold beer sounds awful good, doesn't it Dean?"

John spun back around when the stranger called his eldest by name, his hand automatically reaching for the weapon in his pocket. Beside him, Dean did likewise.

The stranger laughed mockingly, raising his hands in submission.

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. Calm down now. I just want to talk."

"Like my Dad said, who the hell are you and why shouldn't I just add your body to the long list of probable serial killings at rest stops that happen all over the U.S.?" Dean threatened.

“Oh Dean, it’s so good to see that you haven’t lost that defiant façade, even though we all know it’s bullshit.”

“How do you know me and my son?” John demanded. “Why should I listen to anything you have to say?”

The stranger smiled, slowly pulling back the hood and revealing short hair that was so blond it was nearly white. As he lifted his head, both John and Dean both reacted visibly as ice blue eyes suddenly flashed over to vibrant yellow.

“Oh, you’ll listen to me, John. You’ll listen if you want to save Sam,” Haris answered, the smile broadening on his face as he watched both John and Dean stare in disbelief.

Sam

Sam wasn’t sure what was worse – the agonizing pain in his hand, or the deep-seated ache in his heart. The demon had finally gotten bored with its taunts and left him to go play elsewhere, but all the “free” time had given him was a chance to worry more.

Knowing and expecting Haris was one thing, but Eli had posed a new mystery with his comments about another “master.”

The demon had insinuated his boss was more powerful than the yellow-eyed freak had ever been – *and* he was pissed at Haris to boot. Just who or what in hell could be high enough up the hierarchy to not be scared of Haris? And why did it involve all the psychic kids?

Maybe whoever is controlling Eli is trying to stop Haris’ grand plan for us all. So why doesn’t Eli just wipe us out instead of all this cat and mouse crap?

Sam winced at the thought, then winced again as he tried to move his left arm slightly. Movement right now really wasn’t an option if he didn’t want his hand and forearm to explode, and yet he felt the need for the pain on some level. It was keeping him awake. Hell, maybe it was keeping him alive.

Even though he couldn’t see his crushed appendage, Sam had a pretty good idea the damage was bad. The rope he was bound with was tight around the already swelling flesh and he guessed if he could see the hand it would be blackened and bruised.

How many more are left alive even? Is it just me now?

Where’s Dean...?

Sam looked across to Matt, hoping the kid showed some signs of life, but there was nothing. If he was breathing, it was too shallow to see his chest moving anymore. And then there was the blood. The garish red liquid had stained the young psychic’s jeans a new shade of crimson – only the stark white of his broken femurs protruding from the denim breaking the mass of scarlet.

Other bodies still hung in the clearing, and although most were too far away to discern any features, they all appeared in a similar condition. David Mitchum was still among them, lifeless – dead.

Am I the only one left alive?

It didn’t seem fair. How could it be? “Matt? David?” He called out; already knowing his breath was wasted, save for the comfort the sound of his own voice gave him.

I can’t just stand around and wait to be next. What would Dean do?

Despite the bolts of lightning it sent coursing down his arm, Sam began to pull at his bonds anew, testing their strength, daring them to hold him.

The rough rope bit into his smashed wrist and he felt the small pieces of bone there grating on one another until he thought he might pass out.

Can’t give into the pain...can’t...

Sam yanked again, this time with just his good hand, but the thick twine simply taunted him. It was loose enough around the tree just to tease, but never to truly allow escape.

Even with that small motion, though, his throbbing hand felt like it was being crushed all over again. Breaking a bone was one thing, but this was so much more. Sam had seen hunters with far less damage never truly regain full use of their hands. Was that what he'd succumb to? Being some kind of cripple?

Sam yanked at the rope again, using his midsection as leverage this time. He was angry now, angry with the demon, angry for being tricked in the first place so easily.

"Why, Sammy, you'll hurt your hand that way..." Eli reappeared as if on cue, smiling smugly. "You really shouldn't cause any more damage, you know? I mean, I'd hate for you to lose it. Maybe you could have a hook like that Jacob Cairns friend of yours? Of course, I bet it would mean fun times trying to wipe your ass..."

Sam glowered, puckering his lips into a snarl, but he managed not to snap back, refusing to be baited further.

The demon's smile turned into a chuckle and Eli moved closer. He waved a hand back at the other hanging bodies dismissively. "I bet you're wondering why I saved you till last. Simple really, because you're *his* favorite. Not to mention, it's fun watching your futile attempts at escape. Don't you realize there is nowhere on this puny planet you can hide from my master, especially here?"

"If you're going to kill me, can we just get on with it?" Sam feigned boredom, exhaling and looking away into the tree line as if the demon's taunts were mind-numbingly tedious. "I'm kinda getting sick of your foul smelling breath in my face, dude."

Eli unexpectedly spat on the ground at Sam's feet, his sulfurous spittle causing a small spiral of smoke as it ate into the loam. "You'll die when *I'm* ready," he growled through gritted teeth. "I'd get thrown out of the demon club if I didn't torture you a little first, now wouldn't I?"

"Gee, you must really be out of practice then, 'cause, dude, I've seen way better torture from a bunch of Minnesota hicks with too much time on their hands."

Eli shrugged off the insult. "Don't worry, I really have only just gotten started. Didn't your daddy ever make you read the Bible, Sammy? We demons are all about tormenting souls and inflicting pain. And when I get bored, well, I have friends who will do the job for me out there in the wilderness..."

Eli stepped back just enough for Sam to see into the darkness. From somewhere close by, a wolf's cry pierced the enveloping gloom, followed by the flash of several red orbs, like someone or something caught in a camera's flare.

The howl came again, and this time a fanged and very hungry creature came with it. The animal sprang from the edge of the trees, no longer afraid to break from the darkness, so deep-seated was its hunger.

The blood from Eli's first victim had begun to dry like some thick paste, but the thing was still drawn to its color and odor. It sniffed at the corpse warily at first, only sinking its incisors into the still warm flesh once it was sure it was safe to do so.

Once tasted, the coagulating blood was like an elixir and the creature began to tear into the body with fresh vigor.

As Sam watched, more of the thing's brethren dared to venture from their dark haven until the area around the small tree had become a rabid feeding frenzy. He swallowed, trying to keep down the bile that was slowly creeping up his gullet, but this time he couldn't stifle a bout of retching.

Being a hunter was a dangerous job – a job that had led him to many gory spectacles, but never anything like this.

Arms were shredded and torn from their sockets. Fingers were chewed away and then tossed aside for more succulent offerings. Tissue and muscle were gorged upon until the creatures' fur became stained the color of death.

And through all this, Sam realized that soon he might be next to be fed upon.

The dry heaving made his mouth feel drier than a desert, and he licked his lips desperately, closing his eyes in the hope that it would stop any further urges to be sick.

"Why would you make them do that?" Sam's voice quivered and every muscle in his body shook with rage. "What could you possibly gain by letting wolves feed on your victims that way?"

"They're gorgeous when they feed that way, aren't they?" Eli watched with pride as a second hanging body was set upon. "But they're not wolves, Sammy. Let's just say they're my master's hounds, here to collect a soul or two while we wait for the main event..."

The leader of the pack stopped its uncontrolled attack on the corpse, turning as if it had heard Eli's words. Its head cocked in some kind of mutual understanding with the demon before it sprung into action, bounding towards a new quarry.

A new soul to reap for its master.

And that soul was Sam's.

Dean & John

"You sonofabitch, where's my brother?" Dean demanded, straining against John's arm that strongly gripped a handful of his son's flannel shirt. The young hunter drew out his .45, heedless of the panicked stares of the other travelers as they quickened their pace past the threesome.

"Oh Dean, so quick to jump to conclusions, shoot first, ask questions later. Put that thing away. You're scaring all the poor little humans. Besides, you know it won't do any good on something like me," Haris sneered.

"Maybe this won't, but Dad has..."

"Where's Sam?" John interrupted, silencing Dean's near slip of the tongue although his own hand toyed nervously with the amulet bullet within his pocket.

"What? No time to chat about politics or the weather? You know, that's the problem with you Winchesters, well at least you and Dean, you never take the time to stop and smell the roses. Its all hunt the demon, kill the demon. You guys need to get a life."

Dean lunged over the top of the car, managing to grab a fistful of the demon's sweatshirt as he thrust the muzzle of his pistol between the sickening yellow eyes.

"You bastard, you can do whatever you want to me, but I swear to God, when I get to hell, I'm coming directly after your ass. Now what have you done with Sam?" he demanded.

John immediately darted to his side, one hand going to Dean's right arm, half in an effort to get his son to lower the weapon, half to steady Dean's quaking hand. He could see that it was nothing more than sheer will and determination being fueled by anger and fear that was keeping Dean on his feet, and then only barely.

Haris looked down into the green eyes that were glaring at him, duller than he recalled, but no less defiant. He also didn't miss the unsteady waver of the weapon, mere inches from his face, or the slight faltering as the young hunter stood in front of him.

"Big talk there, Dean. Looks like you might not be able to back it up."

Haris lifted his hand, making as though he was about to toss the young man aside as he had done so many times in the past. Dean flinched in anticipation and John moved around, pushing Dean back towards the car and placing himself between his eldest son and Haris.

The demon laughed snidely, his hand dropping to his side, the threat of action abandoned. Haris had gathered a fair amount of knowledge and more than just a little amusement, in that play. *Curious...*

"Alright, alright. Are we done playing 'who's got the bigger dick' here?" Haris quipped. "I'm surprised at both of you. I would have thought that the mere mention of dear little Sammy would have had you both groveling at my feet, begging for him, offering up your own pathetic selves in trade."

Haris raised white-blond eyebrows, his head cocked sideways as his shoulders shrugged. "Oh well, guess maybe I can't blame you. It's gotta get tiresome, always chasing after the kid, trying to protect him, keep him safe from me!"

"Where do you have Sam?" John demanded, grabbing a fistful of the demon's sweatshirt and lifting the large body a fraction off the ground.

"Well, now that's more like it," the demon replied cockily. "There's the John Winchester I've come to know and despise."

"WHERE IS SAM?" John shouted this time.

He unleashed all his anger and frustration and propelled the demon-possessed man backwards into the hard metal trailer of the big rig that was parked beside them. Dean drew up behind his father, his .45 replaced by the silver flask containing holy water.

"You better talk you sonofabitch. I don't think my dad is gonna ask again," he snarled, uncapping the flask and waving it threateningly. "And I sure as hell ain't."

"Okay, settle down the both of you. The truth is I don't have Sam," the demon stated plainly.

"Yeah, right!" Dean snorted back.

"If you don't believe me, you might as well drag your ass into that shiny black car of yours and go find a good body bag for your brother then. Even if you do believe me, you might still need that body bag if you don't shut up and listen to what I have to tell you and manage to save your brother before it's too late," Haris rebutted.

John released his grip on the demon's clothing, taking a step back and placing a calming hand on Dean's raised arm.

"We're listening. If you don't have my son, then who does and why the hell are you helping us?" he asked suspiciously.

Haris ran his hands down his rumpled shirt indignantly, scowling as he tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

"Well, let's just say that there is one of my 'brethren' that has come off his medication and gone a little crazy. He's out there now, rounding up all of my special little boys and girls, one after another, and doing some pretty unspeakable things to them, crazy bastard that he is."

"Now why would he be going after your psychic kids? What did you do to piss him off?" Dean asked warily.

"I didn't do anything to him," Haris readily answered. "He's a rogue; power hungry and looking to carve out his own special little kingdom in Hell. Not to mention, he wants me out of the way."

"And why should we give a damn about what he does to you?" John asked.

"Because, Johnny, for all that you perceive me to be the most evil thing in your life, there are much worse, much greater evils in the universe than your pathetic mind can even imagine. You should consider that. The thing that has Sam right now is *infinitely* worse than me."

"So, you're telling us all this why exactly?" Dean interjected. "What do you get out of it? And why don't you just bust ass in there yourself and take out this badass? I thought you were like the all-knowing, all-powerful Oz down there south of the border."

Haris laughed loudly, running a hand through thick blond hair.

"Ah, you know how it is. The wolves are always nipping at your heels. The higher you climb, the more people are always looking to drag you down. There are certain politics involved here that preclude me from going after this rogue on my own. Besides, I have my ulterior motives."

"And what would those be?" John posed.

"You want Sam alive and so do I. He's no good to me dead. So, it's simple. I help you find Sam and the rest of my kids, and you rescue them, effectively keeping my name out of it," Haris replied.

"Yeah, 'cause we really care about what your buddies down in Hell think about your good name," Dean snarked.

"You know, Dean, I really thought you gave a damn about your brother," Haris began angrily. "But maybe you don't. Maybe I was wrong and I should just let that demon peel the flesh from Sammy's carcass. Then maybe just for fun, he can crush each and every bone in your brother's body just before every organ turns to Jello and oozes out his nose. How's that sounding to you big brother? 'Cause your sarcastic mouth doesn't intimidate me at all and it sure won't work against the likes of the demon that has your brother."

John intervened, holding one hand out to Haris while another extended out toward his eldest. He knew that Dean's sarcasm grew out of nervous bravado, but at the moment the demon before them was their only apparent connection to finding Sam.

"Tell us what you want us to do," John offered quietly.

Haris calmed, yellow eyes swirling less frantically as he looked from Dean back over to the older hunter.

"The rogue has been gathering my *special* kids and taking them to a place in eastern Wyoming. I know he's already killed several of them, but Sam and a few others were still alive the last I knew, so you'd better hurry."

"And if we catch this demon? What do we do with him?" John asked.

"What do I care? Kill it, preferably! Isn't that what you hunters do? But John, if you and Dean are successful, there is a little 'catch' as it were."

"I knew it!" Dean groaned, eyes rolling.

"What? What do you want?" John demanded.

The demon smiled, eyes closing slightly, savoring the moment almost as if he were inhaling a fragrant rose.

"I want Sam!"

"No! No way. Never!" Dean shouted, straining to lunge at the demon even though John had immediately positioned himself between his son and his lifelong nemesis.

"Think about it. I don't want Sammy dead. You don't want him dead. I just want him and his powers, working with me. It's a far better fate than what awaits him if the rogue has his way. I promise that his *life* with me will be quite pleasant and well rewarded. I can make Sam very happy."

"You'll never get my brother you bastard. None of you demonic sonsofbitches are gonna have Sam. I'll kill every last one of you first!" Dean screamed at the top of his lungs.

But despite his protest and his continued attempts to reach Haris, John could tell that his physical struggle was quickly waning. The demon noticed something too, his eyes narrowing as he watched the young hunter suddenly begin to sag back against his father's restraint.

"Hmmm, doesn't look to me like you're in much shape to be killing a gnat right now there, Dean, much less me or any of my brethren. Sure hope Johnny here can manage that rogue on his own. I'm not feeling super confident in your ability to 'kick-ass' right about now," Haris taunted.

"Screw you!" Dean hissed back through clenched teeth. "You just mark my words, my brother won't ever be yours."

Haris dismissed the weakening young man with a wave of his hand, turning back to face John.

"So, do we have a deal or not, John?"

"Yeah, we have a deal," the elder Winchester replied.

"Dad! No!" Dean implored his father, but his words fell on deaf ears.

"Alright then," Haris continued. "Sam is being held near Devil's Tower National Monument. I shouldn't think you'll have any problem finding the place, just look for the circling vultures."

"And if and when we manage to get Sam back?"

"Oh, don't you worry. I'll find you," Haris promised. Pausing for a moment, the demon then glanced at the now silent men. "Well, it's certainly been a pleasure. You boys take care. And ah, Dean, I sure hope you eat your Wheaties or something. Hate to think you weren't at the top of your game when poor little Sammy needed you the most."

Dean glared at the demon as he pulled the dark hood back up to cover the mass of blond hair. He smiled sinisterly at both hunters before turning and casually strolling off toward one of the parked semis.

They carefully watched Haris leave, wary that he might double back and attack them when their guard was down. But when several minutes passed and the demon failed to reappear, both father and son relaxed slightly.

It was Dean that broke the silence first, his verbal explosion more than making up for the physical strength his body was currently lacking.

"Dad, what the hell are you thinking, promising that bastard that we'll give up Sammy to him? How can you even think to do that? Sam would be better off dead!" Dean angrily challenged.

"Dean, do you think I would really do that after all this? Do you think that demons are the only ones that know how to lie?" John began. "I just needed to buy us some time and to find out where Sam was being held."

"Then what? Let's just assume that we do manage to get Sam back and kill the rogue. What happens when Haris comes to collect?"

"Oh, we'll have something for him alright. I plan on putting that amulet bullet right between that sonofabitch's yellow eyes," John stalwartly answered, his face suddenly hard.

He softened slightly when he saw the look that crossed Dean's face. It was a look that he had seen on his eldest's but once before, and that night in the cabin was a night that John Winchester would rather forget. Still, that night, and this afternoon, the look on Dean's face both times was one of fear, desperation and *dying*.

"Dad, I don't think... I mean, I'm gonna try, but I don't know..." Dean stammered, unable to force himself to tell his father that he didn't think he was going to make it to see that culminating event.

John moved over to where Dean was leaning against the Impala. He noticed the heavy layer of perspiration covering Dean's forehead; a stark contrast to the occasional shiver that cascaded across his son's entire body. It reminded him of when one of his boys had the flu, and it would have been much easier to have lived in that illusion had the situation and the consequences not been so utterly dire.

"Dean, I'm not going to lose Sam to the one thing I've been trying to save him from. I promise you that! I'm not going to let you... everything you've sacrificed, be for nothing."

He waited briefly; wanting, needing to see some glimmer of hope in his eldest son. The most painful part of watching Dean submit to this fate was now watching him succumb to knowing that his time was running out and that just maybe it had all been for nothing.

"You're gonna make it, dude. You're gonna be right by my side when we get your brother back and you're gonna see that bastard go down and rest easy in knowing that Sammy's gonna be safe from him forever," he steadfastly promised.

Dean looked up and smiled halfheartedly. "Yeah, Dad. I know."

John gently squeezed his son on the shoulder, offering his own weak smile before moving toward the driver's side of the black Chevy.

"Time's wasting. How 'bout I drive? Haven't driven the ol' girl in a long time. Kinda miss her sometimes, bet she misses me too," he offered.

Dean feigned a wounded look, but slowly rose and loped toward the passenger's side of the Impala.

"I dunno, can you get her engine rev'ing? I mean, she's not used to an old man inside her," Dean teased, his eyebrows raised suggestively.

“Old man, my ass. Get in the car and put on some Metallica so I don’t have to listen to you snore all the way to Wyoming.”

Bobby

Bobby Singer looked at the crumpled paper in his left hand, trying to make out his own unintelligible scrawl whilst keeping the Jeep he’d procured with a fake MasterCard in a straight line.

The directions John had given him to Mann’s backwoods home were vague to say the least, and on top of that the grizzled hunter was tired. The flight to New Orleans had been a rough one – not because of traffic or turbulence, but because all Bobby could think about was the Winchesters.

The family was his lifelong friends. Hell, they were *his* family to some extent, and now they faced being torn apart and lost forever.

Bobby couldn’t, wouldn’t let that happen.

The hunter tugged at the grimy peak of his baseball cap, shielding the light from his grit-filled eyes. The road ahead was nothing more than some overgrown grass track with mammoth potholes for good measure. It was the sixth such lane he’d traversed in his hunt for the white haired old shaman, and would probably be yet another wild goose chase, just like the rest.

It had taken too long to get out here, and now it was taking too long to find the ancient old fart that had been part of the cause, not the cure.

Bobby dropped the notepaper to his lap and grabbed at the steering wheel as the Jeep’s front wheel hit a rut, tossing it sideways towards a slime-filled ditch. The Louisiana swamps weren’t the place to travel unless you had a clue about the terrain. Luckily, this wasn’t Bobby’s first hunt on a bayou.

The Jeep straightened with the hunter’s guidance, engine roaring as Bobby poured on the revs.

Dammit, John, why the hell did you trust this old coot? Why the hell couldn’t ya just take the boys and run when ya had the chance?

Bobby cursed more under his breath, hating every spirit, every demon, every damn creature both in Heaven and Hell that had let this happen. He wasn’t a God-fearing man, but if he had been, he’d have cursed the big fella too.

Of all the stupid...idjit...

Something glistened ahead and Bobby slowed, realizing he was seeing the glint of sun reflecting on glass – albeit pretty damn filthy glass. Some of the locals had suggested the hunter try out here for the elusive Shadrack Mann, and it looked like his short burst of legwork had paid dividends.

Shutting off the 4x4’s engine, the hunter tucked a revolver behind his torn gilet and walked warily up to the overgrown shack. It was hard to tell if the encroaching swampland had been allowed to hide the home on purpose, or if this was simple neglect due to Mann’s age.

Keeping a hand on the butt of his gun, Bobby trudged closer, pushing his way through marsh grass and in some places a thick muddy quagmire that appeared to threaten the porch of the wooden structure.

The house looked abandoned – dead – just like Dean would be soon, maybe Sam too.

Bobby rubbed at his beard and then edged forward, tentatively placing his weight on the decking to see if its rotting mass would hold him.

The blackened, decaying timbers groaned, but held fast, and the hunter skirted carefully to the open screen door. Flies buzzed around the opening, like something within was enticing them, drawing them to feed, to reproduce.

From his position, Bobby couldn’t get a view of the cabin’s interior, but even at this distance he could smell the rank odor that was driving the flies and other wild creatures into a feeding frenzy.

Something was dead here.

Palms sweating, Bobby pulled the revolver from its hiding place and slowly moved inside, years of experience allowing him to ignore the stench of necrotic flesh that was assaulting him.

The Winchesters needed his help and no stinking piece of meat was going to deny them that help.

Taking careful steps, Bobby headed for the dire smell first. It was some home drawing him like an ominous portent, and he knew that if what he feared was correct, his trip may have been for nothing.

The cabin wasn't large, and it didn't take the hunter long to find what he was searching for. The remains of what he assumed was Shadrack Mann lay on a grubby old cot that wasn't very high off the floor.

Flies buzzed around the almost mummified remains, maggots feeding on what very little fresh flesh still clung to the bones. Long masses of white hair sprouted from the shrunken skull, making it even more apparent that this was the corpse of the shaman.

"Aw dammit to hell!" Bobby leaned over the frail husk of the old man, searching for signs of a cause of death. From the state of his home and his age, it was probably old age, but then, he was connected to the Winchesters, so foul play couldn't be ruled out. "Why'd you have to go up and die right when your family needed ya? Ya ornery old cuss..."

Despite a thorough search, Bobby found nothing on the body. It was like nature was taunting him, daring him to defy it and save the lives of his friends. Pulling off his cap and wiping sweat from his brow he looked around the room. Mann may have been dead for some time, but that didn't mean there wasn't a clue left here somewhere.

If he had to tear the rotting shack to pieces to find it, then Bobby was up for the task.

Slapping the cap back down on his head, he stuffed his revolver back into his waistband and moved into the next room. The place looked more like a salvage yard than his own house once had.

'Cept this place didn't get blown all to hell by a bunch of yahoos, he internally griped.

Books were strewn across an old wooden table, their pages yellowed with age and neglect. An old ink pen was tossed next to sheets of empty white paper as if Mann had used it to frequently scrawl on.

Bobby zeroed in on the pages, picking up the top sheet to see if any indentations had been left in it from when the old coot had written last, but there was nothing. *Has somebody been here before me?*

Bobby didn't know why the thought came to him, but it clung like a leech. If Shadrack had knowledge of the guardians – hell, of the amulet – then it made sense that maybe Haris' boys had gotten here first.

Maybe that's why there were no marks on the body?

Bobby huffed and began rifling through the books and manuscripts on the table. Some of the documents were from the very dawn of US history, some were from other parts of the world, but there was nothing here that made sense.

Nothing that could save Dean.

Bobby stepped back from the mess and took a calming breath. If Mann truly was as smart and wise as his reputation suggested, he wouldn't just leave important information lying around. He'd hide it.

The question was, in a ramshackle structure like this, was there really any safe place? It was hardly Fort Knox.

If I was the ol' coot, where would I hide somethin' so darn valuable?

Bobby looked to the ceiling, but his concentration was broken by a creak from the only room he'd yet to search. The noise had sounded like weight being placed on the decaying wooden decking, and it sent the hunter into full alert mode.

Retrieving his gun yet again, he sidled up to the doorframe, listening for further sounds. He was no good to the Winchesters dead, and he might have demonic company.

He waited, keeping his breathing low even though his heart was hammering against his ribcage. *Maybe it was some dang critter after a meal?* He justified. But some inner voice told him otherwise.

Bobby swallowed and peeked into the gloom, taking a tentative step forward, gun outstretched. Before he'd fully entered the darkness, an arm swung at him, catching him on the jaw with just enough force to send him tumbling forward, the revolver jarring from his grasp and clattering to the floor out of reach.

"Sonofa..." Bobby rolled, using the dull light in the room to his advantage. If it was hard for him to see the attacker, it was hard for the bad guy to see him if he clung to the shadows. Not a demon then, he surmised. *'Cause those boys don't go around tossing right hooks when they can pin ya up a wall...*

Another punch flew from the gloom, but this time Bobby was ready and dodged the flying fist, returning a quick jab of his own that impacted hard with someone's jaw.

The hunter heard his foe gruffly huff, but he didn't go down.

"Quite a punch you have there, old man." The voice sounded quietly calm and not at all angry. Even still, Bobby could imagine the man to be rubbing blood from the edge of his bottom lip.

Bobby might not be as young as he used to be, but he was still pretty much the meanest pugilist in the state. "You might wanna watch who you're callin' old there, son." He lunged again, this time narrowly missing his target as a fast return kick to his legs caught him off guard.

Bobby felt his knees buckle under him reflexively from the blow, and he hit the hard timbered floor with a grunt. Not to be outdone, the elder hunter kicked out his own legs to lash out at his opponent, bringing him down until the pair were a mass of tangled, thrashing limbs like some jungle fight in a *Tarzan* movie.

Bobby lashed out again, not even sure where his punch was headed, but the stranger seemed equally as well-trained and ducked away from the blow, catching Bobby's fist in his hand and holding it there in a show of strength.

"We could do this all day, but you know I'd win in the end." Again the low, calm tones made Bobby flinch. Whoever this was, he could hold his emotions perfectly in check. "What say we call it a truce, old man, before I do some real damage."

Bobby looked into the man's eyes, trying to read if he was telling the truth. It would be easy for the hunter to give in only to be murdered. It would be the demonic thing to do. Except, he still didn't think this person was possessed. "Hell, you were the one who started the damn fight..."

Bobby relaxed his hand and the stranger did the same, both men scrambling warily to their feet and glaring at one another in some bizarre eye-to-eye standoff.

Stepping into what little light illuminated the room through a broken shutter, Bobby scrutinized the stranger more closely. He appeared to be in his mid to late forties, around Dean's height and stature, but with a much more mysterious air than the normally roguish hunter. He was handsome, but definitely had a rough hidden side that made Bobby edgy.

"What do you want here?"

The stranger smiled playfully and began to walk around the room, running a finger over the dust covered surfaces. "I was here first," he offered wryly. "Shouldn't it be you telling me?"

Bobby's eyes narrowed. "Did you kill the old man?" His beard ticked nervously as he waited for an answer. Of course, there was no way to tell if the answer would be truthful, save for his own instincts.

"I'm not interested in killing, that's not what I'm here for." The man slipped a hand into his brown leather jacket and pulled out a metallic-looking object which he began to twirl nervously in his fingers. "I have *other* interests at stake here. Let's just say I was looking for something very important to me..."

Bobby honed in on the stranger's hand, watching the man's "tell." The coin he was whirling with thumb and forefinger was obviously a habit he'd had a long time – and the coin – well, that was even older. Dating things wasn't Bobby's speciality, but the thing looked ancient. "Yeah, well, maybe I was lookin' for something important to me too. So what say we just do our own thing and then get the hell outta here?"

The man smiled again, just a little too sardonically. "And what if we're both after the same thing that Mann was keeping?"

Bobby shrugged. "Then you're shit outta luck, boy, because a friend's life depends on what I'm after, and I ain't about to have qualms about kicking your ass all over again to get what I need. Ya understand?" The elder hunter stared defiantly at the outsider even though he suspected the man could beat him if their earlier fight resumed.

Sometimes a little poker face and a whole lotta Singer luck had to be relied upon.

The stranger chuckled unexpectedly. "Mann may have information here about an ancient group – think of them as some early form of freemasons, if that helps. I simply want the information. I'm not out for money, objects of value...just information." He continued to finger the strange piece of gold currency, finally flipping it up in front of Bobby and catching it. "How could information about such an ancient society help you save a life?"

Bobby rubbed at his beard again, aware that it was probably his own "tell." Could he trust some stranger enough to tell them what he wanted? No, *needed*? And if he didn't, was he risking losing what he'd come for? "You're talking about the Guardians," he eventually admitted. "They melted down a sword – a special sword and made it into talismans that could protect them from demons."

The man nodded. "I'm aware of the legend. Aware only too well..."

Bobby raised a brow at the stranger's easy acceptance of the myth. Reading something was one thing, but to actually not balk and laugh at the suggestion demons were real wasn't exactly an everyday thing in today's society. "Catch is, if the guardian ever loses the amulet he dies," Bobby continued. "And my friend, he err...kinda melted the sucker down into a bullet to kill a demon that's haunted his family these past twenty years..."

"And you're here for answers?" The stranger flipped the coin back into his pocket and stopped his pacing. "Why here?" His eyes narrowed. "Did Mann give your friend this amulet?"

Bobby hesitated. Had he already said too much? Right now, did it even matter? He apprehensively glanced at his watch. Was it "Game Over" for Dean, or could he still be of use? "Yeah, the old coot gave my friend that thing. If I'd known I'd have kicked the old fart's ass for this. But that's in the past. I need to search the house. See if there's anyway to reverse this damn curse or whatever it is."

The stranger sighed and took a seat. It was hard to tell if he was genuinely bothered by the hunter's tale, or simply frustrated that his own hunt was being slowed.

"Your friend made a wasted gesture," he eventually replied. "The talismans made for the guardians may once have been a demon-killing sword, but on their own, without something more, they only offer protection. They can't kill a higher level demon." He took out the coin again and stared at its worn surface. "Your friend is as good as dead. His life wasted for some toy that won't work..."

Bobby squirmed. Was he being fed false information? Just because this person wasn't a demon didn't mean he wasn't working for one. Haris had had his cult followers before. "Just who the hell are you, and how do you know all this?" he barked, not caring if he angered the man anymore.

“Who am I?” The stranger shrugged. “Trust me, I often ask myself that question. I’m an enigma, a piece of a puzzle long forgotten. All you need to know is that I’m telling you the truth. Maybe you should tell your friend that too, before he suffers a far worse death than that caused by losing the amulet.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Why would I lie?” The man looked at an old cuckoo clock on the mantelpiece that amazingly still seemed to be ticking. Who or what had wound it was a mystery in itself. “I’d be calling your friend right about now, if I were you. Death by demon is gonna be far the worst of the two ways to go...”

Bobby’s own eyes flicked to the clock as the cuckoo popped from its home and began to “sing” that another new hour had passed. His expression turned from angry to pained and he fumbled in his trouser pockets for the battered cell phone he rarely used.

Hitting the speed dial, Bobby put the phone to his ear only to realize there was no signal. What had he expected out here in swampland?

“Aww shit!” The hunter made a dash for the porch, knowing that sometimes in low signal areas being outside made all the difference. He had to warn Dean, he had to let the hunter know that facing Haris was doomed to failure. If not Dean, then at least John.

Bobby hit the slime-covered portico so fast his boots skidded in the Louisiana “ooze” and he fell forward, the cell torn from his grasp as he hit the steps with a loud crack.

The hunter lay dazed for a second, a decrepit Dreamcatcher above him whirling in and out of focus as his brain tried to re-orientate itself with the real world. Bobby coughed and squinted, searching out the lost phone like a prairie dog latching onto a scent.

The harsh landing on the steps had left him dazed, but he still only had one goal, one mission.

Dammit, if that friggin’ cell is damaged...

Bobby’s rough fingers grasped the phone as if it were gold, flipping it over to check that the Motorola was still intact. The screen showed a weak signal and he heaved a deep sigh – not entirely relief – but hope.

Maybe the stranger was working for the other team, maybe he wasn’t, but John and Dean deserved to be put in the picture. They deserved to know there was a good chance they’d be facing Haris with nothing more than a “blank.”

“C’mon, dammit, connect!” The tiny cell finally picked up a dial tone and Bobby held his breath. “Pick up the damn phone...”

“This is John Winchester. Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you...”

Bobby’s heart sank far deeper than a certain White Star liner and he closed his eyes in defeat.

If this was the start of the demonic war they’d all been expecting, then humanity was about to lose three of its key players, and there was nothing anyone could do to save them.

Here I stand, helpless and left for dead...

Sam didn’t remember much about the pseudo-wolves past their leader’s glowing red eyes and dripping fangs. The thing had pounced at him with unnatural speed, stopping only as it reached the base of the tree he was tied to.

It had remained there for hours, demonic orbs never moving from him as if it were on sentry duty. Whether it was guarding the gate to Hell was yet to be seen.

I think it’s a given I’m headed that way before the night is over. Maybe this is payday for getting out of the deal with Haris on my birthday...

Sam's head drooped further onto his chest and he jerked back, knowing he had to try and stay conscious. He couldn't feel his damaged hand anymore, only the blood that had dampened his shirt from Eli's most recent round of torture under the watchful gaze of his hellhound.

It seemed the higher-demon enjoyed an audience from the way he had carved sigils and symbols into Sam's chest with the mere tip of his finger, stopping every now and again to smile at the long-haired creature.

"You don't get my soul just yet, you freaky fur ball..." Sam watched the hound's reaction as he cursed at it, but it was like a gargoyle cast from stone.

It knows I'm weak. It knows I can't last much longer, just like the others.

And then what? Would it and its brethren feed on *his* flesh and bones?

Sam shuddered at the thought of teeth tearing into his body until there was nothing left. Maybe that would be better than the cold sensation of death that was slowly creeping over him now.

Was it really death, or just mental defeat?

What about Dad? What about Dean? Will they ever know what happened to me?

Sam felt moisture well in his eyes, and he tried to stifle it back, convincing himself he couldn't show weakness in front of Eli. And besides, the salt would sure as hell sting in the wealth of cuts and sores covering his face and upper body.

"Help... me..." The sound was pitiful. The sound of someone who knew they were dying.

Sam flinched, trying to turn his head without making his tortured frame scream anew with pain. It didn't work, and instead he was forced to grunt back a piteous cry of his own as his broken hand exploded like a star going supernova.

Once the sensation abated enough for Sam to stop panting, he sought out the voice he had heard, knowing all he could probably do was offer comfort.

"David?" Sam softly yelled the name, realizing the latest victim was David Mitchum, a young man who had suffered enough in his short life. His father had sent a whole platoon of men to the deaths, and had paid the ultimate price later when their spirits had returned.

David had had to live with that stigma, and that of his gifts. It would seem he wouldn't have to live with anything for much longer.

Blood was seeping from his mouth, covering his chest and upper body as it dripped from his quivering lips.

Dad! Dad, don't you let it kill me...

Sam's mind flash cut to another time, another place, but the effect was just the same. He was back in Wisconsin, in the cabin, watching as his brother bled to death before him, tortured by yet another demon. It shouldn't be this way.

Not ever.

Where was God when you needed him? Where were all the angels?

Sam tried to tell himself that the thoughts had been forced upon him by Eli, but he knew they hadn't. His crisis of faith was born of years without seeing the forces of good in the world, let alone seeing them triumph.

All he'd ever known in this fight were other hunters - and they barely maintained the equilibrium between dark and light.

"David, David look at me... try to stay awake. You have to stay awake..."

David's eyes slowly blinked and Sam saw his lower lip tick slightly, but only more crimson liquid ebbed from his mouth. If he had tried to talk, it would surely have come out a gurgle.

"David..." Sam's own frail voice trailed as he realized there were no more words of comfort to give. Perhaps it was better to let the kid die in peace than to try and force him to remain conscious and in utter agony.

"You really shouldn't keep the children up past their bedtime, Samuel." Eli appeared at the side of the hellhound, patting the top of its head affectionately. "But

then, David should know better than to talk to the likes of you, now shouldn't he? I'm afraid he'll have to be punished-"

Eli side-stepped the hound and strolled to the tree David Mitchum was shackled to. Rubbing a hand across the light stubble that was forming on his chin, he shot Sam a glance. "You humans are full of too much hot air. In fact, you're full of too much air, period. Let's see if we can change that, shall we?"

The warrior-demon dipped his head and David suddenly began to scream even though he had little or no strength left.

"NO!! Stop it you bastard!" Sam screamed too, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

As he watched, Mitchum's chest seemed to collapse in on itself as his sternum, ribs and lungs were crushed into a bloody pulp of liquefied organs and ground bone.

An almost black ooze gushed from his mouth and nose, stifling the very last cry for help into a gurgling, wet burble in his throat. As the bubbling sound faded, Eli looked up, satisfied with his work.

Is that what would have happened to Dean in the cabin if Dad hadn't stopped Haris?

Sam shuddered anew, trying to forget the past, but after the manner of David's death, it wasn't easy.

"Just like old times, eh, Sam?" Eli clicked his fingers and the wolf-dog sprang across the dell, tucking into the latest meal with relish. Even at this distance, Sam could hear it slurping down Mitchum's blood as it dug its teeth into his obliterated chest and then lapped at the human-mulch that oozed forth. "I bet you always wondered what would have happened to Dean if Haris had finished the job, huh?"

"Screw you..."

"Oh, language, Sammy." Eli ambled back towards the hunter, arms clasped behind him. "I do believe you're starting to sound like that brother of yours. Still, not to worry, you'll both soon be dead-"

"You'll never get Dean." Sam watched the demon for a reaction. Had it already harmed his brother, was he the bait?

Eli reached back and slowly clapped. "Bravo, Sammy! You're quite right. I won't." He leaned closer. "Because I don't have to." He cocked a brow and cheekily pursed his lips, unexpectedly whistling the chorus from *Suicide Is Painless*. "Of course, in your brother's case it won't be painless, but oh well..."

"What are you talking about? Dean would never..." *Demons lie. Ignore him.* Sam clamped his mouth closed and refused further conversation with his tormentor. Forcing his head to the side he refused to even look at the thing masquerading as a man.

Eli nodded. "Don't worry, Sammy, I'll make sure you go first..." He bowed his head one last time, brows knitting in concentration. "See you in Hell!"

Sam squeezed his eyes closed, feeling his chest constrict as muscles popped with the strain forced upon them. The air was pushed from his lungs with the pressure and he suddenly wanted to gasp for breath, to choke down the sweet night air like nectar.

But there was no air.

Only the sickening laughter of Eli enjoying the spoils of a demonic war.

Easy to find what's wrong, harder to find what's right...

The terrain was so bleak, so desolate that it overwhelmed him, filling him with even more feelings of hopelessness than he ever felt possible in his entire life. He'd driven the last hundred and fifty miles in silent contemplation, having turned off the music when Dean succumbed to his exhausted body's need for sleep.

John spent the first fifty miles glancing over at Dean. Taking in the haggard and worn look to his son's body, the pallor of his skin, and the ragged breaths he sucked in even in restless slumber. Despite the threat of the Reaper's touch, John could still see the traces of the stalwart warrior and the hint of the playful child Dean had once been.

Ironically, it had always been when Dean slept that John could still see the innocent four-year-old, and then when he rued that innocence being lost. Maybe that's why he had pushed his son away, had forced Dean to toughen up, knowing all along that the innocence had to go, perhaps for a time just such as this. Then again, maybe it was simply because John himself had been too much of a coward to continue looking into those green eyes every day and realize that a day like this lay ahead.

And so, with those thoughts in his mind, John spent the next fifty miles thinking about Sam. If Dean had been his four-year-old innocent soldier, forced to be tempered into hardened steel, then Sam had been John's hope for the future.

Contrary to what his youngest had ever thought, John had wanted nothing more than to see Sam be successful. The boy had always shown such aptitude and potential in everything he'd ever undertaken, always driving himself to excel whether it was in scholastics or sports.

Maybe their vagabond lifestyle hadn't exactly made things easy for Sam, but he'd never let it or any other hardship stand in his way of achieving anything he set his mind to. After all, hadn't Stanford been a prime example of that?

Potential; that was Sam. And if it seemed that he had ignored that potential or had tried to downplay it, it was only because John Winchester had unconsciously wanted to drive Sam away as well. Send him as far away from himself and his mission to bring Mary's killer to justice as possible. If he and Sam argued, it was simply because the son was surpassing the father, needing more out of life than simple revenge, needing more to survive on than someone else's memories of a woman that he didn't even remember as his mother.

That Sam couldn't remember Mary, couldn't pine over her loss; this was the bond that had always been lacking between John and his youngest son. Maybe it was just that simple?

But what did any of that matter now? The *tempered steel* lay silently next to him, battered, chipped, and nearly broken. The *potential* was being held somewhere up ahead of him, possibly lost forever as well. And so John Winchester spent the last of the hundred and fifty miles silently considering that if he lost both his sons at the close of this day, would he'd even have a reason to carry on himself?

Somewhere in the silence of the road, he planned his final action, strangely walking himself through the motions of burying both his boys, side by side just as they'd spent most of their lives. After that he would summon the yellow-eyed destroyer of souls and end that bastard once and for all. Then, and only then, would he join the rest of his family in some semblance of eternal peace; hoping that the four of them could find in the hereafter that of which they had been robbed in this pitiful life.

"We there?" Dean's scratchy voice seemed barely more than a whisper, but it was enough to snap John from his trance.

"We're pretty close I think. The Tower is just ahead. How you feelin'?"

"I'm fine! Why'd you let me sleep so long, we should have been planning our attack," Dean grumbled, struggling to sit up in the seat.

"You needed to sleep dude. Besides, I have a feeling that once we get there, planning isn't going to mean much," John suggested.

Dean managed to pull himself upright, but John didn't miss the way he kept one arm wrapped tightly across his midsection.

"Do you know where you're going?"

John nodded, motioning his head through the windshield and out beyond them into the uninviting terrain. Just above the desolate landscape, large black carrion birds dotted the sky.

"Guess Haris was right about the buzzards, good as any flashing neon sign I s'pose."

"Dad, do you think Sam's okay? I mean, after everything..." Dean began.

"Yeah, Sammy's gonna be alright. I can feel it. I believe it. You should too," John insisted.

He turned the old Chevy off the main road and onto a dirt track, grimacing slightly as the painful impact of the jarring was reflected in the tense set of Dean's jaw.

Just hang in there kiddo, just a little longer, for me, for Sammy!

As they continued on, the huge monolith looming ever closer, the vultures becoming clearer as they circled, the tension in the car was palpable.

Dean fumbled in his pocket, retrieving his .45, ejecting the clip and checking it even though he knew it was fully loaded. He left it in his lap while he next retrieved the silver flask filled with Holy Water. The flask was small, not nearly large enough to hold any significant amount of the precious fluid should they encounter a horde of demons. But then really, if what Haris had told them was true, they were going to have their hands full with just this rogue, much less any more of the demon spawn.

The dirt road ended abruptly and John slowed the car, eventually bringing it to a complete stop and pulling it off to the side. He killed the engine, but didn't immediately step out of the car. For the briefest moment, he simply sat in the driver's seat staring ahead.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, I know," John softly replied. "You ready to do this?"

Dean smirked. "No, not really," he answered, slowly pulling himself from the car. Once outside, he turned back around to face his dad, leaning heavily against the roof of the Impala. "Dad, promise me you'll do whatever you have to to get Sammy back. If I can't keep up or I go down, you leave my ass behind."

"Let's don't have this conversation, Dean, okay?" John pleaded, turning away and moving to the trunk.

Dean followed him to the rear of the car, sagging against the back fender, one hand reaching up to hold onto the raised trunk lid for support.

"I'm serious. Let's don't forget what we set out to do originally. We gotta focus on the mission..."

John stopped and slammed a shotgun back down into the Impala's hidden compartment, a flash of irritation crossing his face when he looked back up.

"Do you mind? I don't know when I gave you the impression that I didn't give a damn about what happened to you or that it isn't absolutely killing me inch by inch to even look at you right now and see you like this, but dammit Dean, don't you dare ask me to pretend like it doesn't matter. You better believe that I'll go to my grave despising ever finding out about that goddamn amulet and hating myself for the choices that I've made in my life. But nothing, EVER, is gonna hurt me as bad as losing Sam or you. So don't you dare ask me to stop fighting for either of you. And don't you dare expect me to just toss you off to the side like you're expendable for your brother. That's never been what this has been about. I love you, Dean, not any more or any less than Sam. Do you get that?"

For the longest moment only the gentle breeze scouring the high plains and the occasional screech of the carrion feeders broke the stressed silence as John locked his gaze on his eldest son. He watched Dean's response, seeing the ragged increase in breathing but not knowing if it was from emotion or due to the rapid failure of his son's body due to the loss of the amulet. He waited for Dean to say something, wondering if his firstborn had ever really known how much he truly had loved him since this had been perhaps the first time he had ever verbalized the actual word.

I'm too late. Too many years have gone by to try to make him understand now. He thinks it's always been about Sammy, why should he think any different just because I finally have the courage to tell him I love him?

Dean cleared his throat, shuffling nervously but still maintaining the eye contact with his father.

"That night, back in the cabin when you were possessed by Haris, you, well he, said some pretty awful things to me. You said that you and Sammy didn't need me and that even when you both argued, it was really more attention than you had ever really paid to me ever..."

"Dean, you know that wasn't me... that was the demon," John insisted. "I know, I know that now. But then and even a while after, I guess I just thought, well... I figured it was kinda true ya know. I mean, Sammy left, you left, hell, you always leave Dad. You don't tell us what's going on, you didn't tell us the truth about the curse, you keep us in the dark about so much stuff. And then, I thought about how much alike you and Sam really are. Way more than you and me, even though that's what people assume. So yeah, I guess somewhere along the line I kinda thought that my whole responsibility, my reason for getting up in the morning and taking another breath was to protect Sam, to keep him alive. I figured that's what would make you proud of me, Dad. I figured that was pretty much all I was good for," Dean rambled on.

"Dean, why... how could you..."

"No, wait, please let me finish," Dean begged, raising his hand to stay off his father's interruption. "But, now when I think back to the cabin and how awful that night was, I think about how you managed to beat that sonofabitch. Dad, you took control. When Haris was ripping me apart, and I was begging you to save me, you *did!* You fought your way back and you kept that bastard from killing me. It was your love that did that. If I never knew it before, I knew it then and I know it now."

John smiled. *He does know!* He took a small step toward Dean when the young man stopped him with an outstretched hand.

"And as I constantly tell that overgrown brother of mine, I'm sooo not going for the chick-flick moment here. So, can we please go kick some demon ass now and save Sam, before I fall on my face?" he snarked.

Laughing, John nodded, reaching back into the trunk. He withdrew two shotguns, tossing one to Dean along with several shells. Rifling through the remaining contents he came across a large tarp. Pulling it out, he held it out towards Dean.

"I've got an idea." John announced.

Father and son quietly skirted around an outcropping of rock, drawing closer to the small clearing that lay just below them. Edgy, wary, they had first watched the sky, allowing the vultures to help them head in the right direction, praying that the birds weren't merely circling over some dead mammal, then almost praying that they were when the smell of rotting flesh assaulted them.

From their vantage point, the hunters could make out the forms of about a dozen bodies. Male and female, mostly young, were scattered about in no certain order. It was apparent that some had been there longer than others by the amount of decay that had already taken place.

Each of the bodies had been tortured, that much was apparent, bones jutting out of torn flesh, others with organs erupting out of their abdomens, still others with no flesh remaining at all. Worse still, the brutality the demon had started had been finalized by the wildlife, swarming in for a free meal on the bloated remains of Haris' *special children*.

All in all, the scene was horrific and it took everything both seasoned hunters had to keep from becoming ill from witnessing the remnants of the wanton slaughter.

From out of the corner of his eye, John saw the shiver that swept over Dean as he looked away from the carnage.

"We're too late," he groaned.

The elder Winchester watched his son sag dejectedly against the rocks, feeling his own hope waning as well. John sat back on his heels, his eyes scanning among the bodies, looking for one in particular. He saw Dean doing likewise, knowing that despite the deadly silence that filled the clearing, the stench of death that cloyed the air, there was still something they had to do and that was bring Sammy home.

Dean saw him first, hanging lifelessly from a large tree, his shaggy brown hair covering his face as it drooped down to his chest. Despite his own weakness, Dean surged to his feet, a primal scream of his brother's name echoing across the pine woodlands as he tore down into the clearing. Dean dropped his shotgun to the ground as his hands glossed over Sam's body, cupping his sibling's chin and lifting it gently, searching his brother's face for any sign of life.

Sam never responded, never so much as twitched while Dean tried to shake him awake, frantic to garner some reaction. Like those surrounding him, Sam remained still.

Around them, the air began to crackle with ozone, the strong smell of sulfur covering the rankness of the decomposing bodies. John spun, alerted to the presence of a demon in their midst.

"Dean!" he shouted out a warning as he turned to face the threat simultaneously chambering a shell in the shotgun.

"And who would you be?" the demon asked, black eyes wide in sharp contrast to gleaming white teeth that showed in a snarl.

"We're your travel agents come to send you packing back to Hell," Dean growled from Sam's side.

"You must be Dean," Eli mused. "I was hoping to have the pleasure. And that would make you the infamous John Winchester."

"And let me guess, you must be the psychotic jackass that's bent on world domination. I take it this is all your handiwork?" John threw back.

The demon glanced about, slowly taking in all the carnage around him, smiling with pride and nodding thoughtfully.

"Yes, I've been quite busy wouldn't you say? I am Eligos, but my friends call me Eli. Oh, wait, how silly of me, I don't have any friends," the demon laughed. "And I suppose you two are here on some stupid half-assed rescue attempt? Well, you're too late. Sammy belongs to my master now."

"My brother never belonged to any of you bastards," Dean shouted back, lifting up the shotgun.

"Oh and what are you going to do with that?" Eli asked mockingly.

"This!" Dean replied, pulling the double trigger and firing off both barrels of the breakdown at the same time. The loud report of the gun reverberated off the massive wall of the tower as the slugs tore into the host's body opening up huge wounds in the creature's chest.

The demon staggered back, momentary shock and the violence of the attack surprising it. Across the clearing, the recoil of the double barreled shotgun threw the young hunter backwards as well and Dean cursed loudly as he dropped to a knee.

John checked that Dean was okay, but immediately went after the demon, unloading his own shotgun on the creature as he advanced. He knew the rounds would be ineffective, but he was only hoping to buy time.

Pumping another shell, he was nearly within five feet of Eli when the demon jerked its head sharply and John felt himself lifted off the ground. In an instant, the older hunter was being thrown through the air and landed with a heavy thud at the feet of an emaciated and maggot-infested young woman. Head spinning, he put his hand down to steady himself, immediately regretting it when something warm and

jelly-like squished between his fingers. With chagrin, John flicked intestines from his hand and forced himself to swallow down the bile that had risen in his throat.

"Lookin' a little pale there, John. You don't seem too impressed with my handiwork."

"Oh, don't be disappointed Ellie Mae, we're actually not impressed with you at all," Dean answered instead, having closed on the distracted demon. His arm whipped out in a blur, afternoon sunlight glinting off a flash of silver just before the demon screeched in pain.

As Eli backed away, Dean relentlessly pursued him, continuing to douse the demon with the holy water.

"Jeez Eleanor, you scream like a little bitch. Does that hurt much?"

Beneath the hiss of smoldering skin, the demon glared up at the young hunter. "You want to talk about screaming, Dean? You should have heard Sam. You should have heard him scream, and cry, and beg while I crushed every single bone in his body."

Dean paused, the demon's taunts having their intended effect as his mind conjured up the image of his baby brother suffering at the hands of this rogue. It was the opening that Eli needed and with a wave of his hand, he launched Dean away from him and into a nearby mound of thick brush.

Eli rose and casually strode to stand over the fallen hunter. Looking down on the barely conscious young man, he laughed.

"And to think Sam thought that you could save him." he mocked.

Dean struggled to take in a breath, his vision blurring between the lack of oxygen and the impact of his head and spine on the hard-packed ground. He could see the demon looming directly above him, leering at him as it closed in for the kill. Despite his weakened and abused body, Dean smiled back.

"Ah, the infamous Dean Winchester defiance, laughing in the face of death. Do you know that you're a bit of a legend down where I'm from? Of course, we all think you're full of shit, but still, that whole false bravado thing you do, its good for a few laughs over a round of beer," Eli sneered.

"Eli, Eli, Eli. You poor, simple fool. You demons just won't ever get it. It isn't bullshit when you can actually back it up. Dad..."

Behind the demon, John Winchester appeared, the large green tarp outstretched between his hands. Eli spun, suddenly sensing the threat behind him, but it was too late as John cast the tarp like a large net, covering the demon like an oversized shroud.

Eli thrashed, dropping to the ground and rolling around under the cover, entrapping himself further in the canvas cocoon.

"What the hell is this?" the demon screamed out from underneath the heavy wrapping.

John moved over and extended a hand down to his eldest, lifting Dean slowly to his feet, stunned by the weakness in his son's grasp, the unsteadiness in his stance, and the pain that was evident in his every breath and movement.

But despite the betrayal of his body, Dean staggered over to where the demon lay wrapped up like a poorly chosen Christmas present and managed to look down at the struggling form with contempt.

"That, you bastard, is a Devil's Trap, drawn on the inside of the canvas and you are wrapped up nice and tight inside. Now, let's see how you like it when you face a little hunter justice," Dean snarled before rearing back and kicking the tarp with everything he had.

"That was for Sammy..."

I can see right through all your empty lies...

Eli's frenetic thrashing seemed to go on for several more seconds before the demon finally realized it had no place to go – and that further resistance would only meet with additional attention from the toe of Dean's CAT boot.

The kicks from the hunter didn't exactly hurt the way they would have hurt a mere human, but under the Devil's Trap it was an annoyance the creature preferred not to have to suffer.

Instead, Eli seemed to curl in on himself until he was huddled like a ball – silent, subservient – at least, for now.

"Now look who's all outta sarcasm when he's had his ass kicked?" Dean stole a furtive glance at the tarp but nodded to his father.

While John took care of the demon, his priorities belonged with Sam. Hunkering down again, the waning hunter placed a hand at his brother's neck and was relieved to hear a small groan accompany the throb of blood beneath his fingers.

"Its okay, Sammy, I got you..."

Sam huffed at the word "Sammy" remembering how the demon had taunted him with it, tormented him with the fact that Dean would never come find him. "He called me that," he winced trying to open his eyes and search for Eli.

"Yeah, well he won't be calling anyone anything once Dad's fried his ass."

Dean plucked the small knife from his boot and began to carefully cut away the ropes that had bound his brother for so long. Seeing Sam's left hand he paused, abruptly sickened by the amount of swelling and purple-black bruising that swathed the taut skin there.

"I'm screwed, huh?" Sam's voice grew stronger as he realized his family's presence wasn't another of Eli's mind games. He tried to look down, still not totally free from the ropes, but the effort to look at his own crushed limb was just too much.

I'd hate for you to lose it. Maybe you could have a hook like that Jacob Cairns friend of yours? The demon's voice was in Sam's head again, teasing, cutting deep with the truth.

Sam didn't need any medical degrees to know that. Hell, Dean's pained gaze was telling him right now, before he even saw the damage himself.

Dean flinched, his pale features contorting into a small smile as he picked up on Sam's fears. *Can't tell him the truth. Not here, not now. He'll have enough to deal with soon...* "Nothing that a few weeks R and R watching the Porn Channel won't fix. C'mon..."

Dean sliced through the final bonds holding his brother to the tree and gently helped Sam slide to the floor of the glade. Sam was pale, hurting, but alive.

Hell, given the circumstances, Sammy's got more life in him than I do right about now...

Ignoring the mordant thought, Dean glanced over to his father, giving a quick nod of his head that Sam would be okay – mostly.

John bobbed his head back, quickly flipping open the leather binding of his journal to reveal the full version of the *Rituale Romanum*.

"Deus et Pater Domini nostril Jesu Christi invoco nomen sanctum tuum..."

The Latin continued as Dean turned back to Sam, carefully probing for any more broken bones or deep cuts. From what he could tell, other than the mangled left hand and forearm, most of the damage was superficial – ugly as hell, but certainly not life threatening.

"Do I pass inspection?" Sam mumbled, staring through bleary, bloodshot eyes. "Because either I'm drunk or you look worse than I feel..."

Dean stopped his ministrations, following his little brother's gaze to where the amulet should be hanging around his neck. There was always the option to lie and say it was under his tee, but then Sam would only ask him to show it.

“Dude, I’ve been hauling my ass all over the US looking for your scrawny butt. I been fighting demons and generally kicking ass, and you expect me to look like I just came outta a health spa?”

“Dean, where’s your amulet?”

Sam didn’t mince words, he didn’t even give his brother a chance to wrangle out of the question. It was point blank and as clear as the fact that Dean was sick – really sick. In fact, Sam had only ever seen him look like this once before, and that time he’d been *dying*.

Dean faltered, his waxen, perspiration-covered face telling everything with just one look. “I lost it, back there while we were fighting the demon. It’s no biggie, okay? We can find it later once we’ve turned the freak into Kentucky Fried Demon.”

“Dean...” Sam’s expression contorted, partly from the pain that was slowly ebbing back into his limbs, but partly because he could tell his brother was lying.

What the hell is he thinking? I saw how he was back in Louisiana. He’s been without that amulet for way longer than a few minutes...

“Dean, how did you find me out here?”

Dean stumbled to his feet, spinning away from his brother. He couldn’t look at Sam and respond without breaking. He couldn’t stare into those soft, caring, damn puppy eyes and not break down. “Sam, don’t go there. Just don’t.”

And that was all the answer Sam needed. Dean hadn’t lost the amulet – he’d given it up willingly – knowing what the consequences would be. Sam didn’t know the how, but it didn’t take much of a genius to work out the why.

Dean had given up the amulet to find his brother – given his life if they didn’t get it back – and all for Sam.

Is he so blind he thinks I can go on knowing that? Living my life without him after he sacrificed his own for me?

Sam lay his broken hand over his stomach, trying not to jostle it as he used his good arm to force himself from the ground. He had little strength left, but if he used all of it knocking some sense into his brother it would be worth it.

After precious seconds of struggling, Sam managed to push up until he could wedge his back against a knot in the tree trunk and use it for support.

“Dean...”

But Dean wouldn’t look at him. Couldn’t look at him. *He knows. He KNOWS*, was all that the elder hunter could think, over and over until his head felt like it would explode with the weight of the revelation.

“Bastards!”

The abrupt, pain-filled cry made Dean flinch.

The until-now silent demon had begun thrashing beneath the tarp again, drawing all three Winchesters’ attention rather than dwelling on their own woes.

As John continued the exorcism, Eli was finally opening up, filling the glade with profanities and hate-fueled remarks.

“You Winchesters think you’ve won? Do you know what my master will do to you when he finds out about your interfering?”

“Maybe your boss picked on the wrong family,” Dean suggested, lunging at the tarp again with his foot as he thought of Sam’s mangled hand.

Eli laughed despite his obvious pain. “This was never about your pathetic little family! You were just pawns in a far greater game.”

The thing paused and as John began the Rituale once again tiny smoke curls began to spiral from the edges of the sheet.

“Fools!” Eli spat through half-choked retching. “You sided with the wrong team! Now you’ll pay by burning in hell and I’ll get to watch...especially you, Dean, you’ll be there before me now that you’ve given up your little trinket...”

“You’re a rogue – a scumbag even to your own kind. I don’t think you’ll be too welcome back down there any more than you are here.” Dean tugged his .45 from his waistband and pressed it against the writhing tarp, his hand shaking with the

weight of the weapon. "Always wondered what would happen if I tried blowing a demon's brains out while they were in a Devil's Trap..."

The thing beneath the sheet stopped all movement, uncertain exactly what *would* happen. "You think I'm a rogue? Is that what Haris told you?" Eli chuckled again. "Dean, Dean... I thought you knew demons lie..."

"Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus omnis incursion adversarii, omne...!"

Eli screamed as John's words bit into his form, trying to tear its demonic presence from the human body he inhabited. "I work for *Lucifer!*" He spat. "And when my lord and master finds out what you've done, there won't be a place on this planet you can hide. You've ruined everything..."

Dean's jaw dropped simultaneously with that of his father's. They had come here on a rescue mission with no clue as to what they were actually walking into.

Lucifer...

Dean swallowed, pressing the barrel of his automatic deeper into the tarp, but it was Sam who regained his composure quickly enough to actually speak.

"Why would Lucifer want to kill the special kids? Aren't we just Haris' playthings?" Sam tried to push away from the tree and stand at Dean's side, but his knees seemed to have locked and any attempt at moving would surely cause him to fall.

"Let's just say my boss was pissed at Haris for trying to um... attempt a little 'coup' in hell. It's not fun to try and undermine your superior, don't you know? See, Lucifer was the one supposed to bring about the End of Days, but Haris wanted the glory, the infamy. He tried to assemble you kids as his army."

"But some of us didn't like being drafted," Sam pointed out.

"My master wasn't interested in you set of freaks anyway, only the fact that you could draw Haris out into the open for him. Once Haris got wind that the master was angry, he hid up, sneaky bastard that he is. We knew if he thought his little prodigies were in danger he'd come running, though..."

Eli tried to pull away from the cold steel of Dean's gun, but despite his lack of strength the hunter managed to keep it pressed firmly against the thing's skull.

"So basically you used my brother like some piece of demonic bait?" Dean's hand began to tremble more, this time with pent up anger as much as the effects of losing the amulet. His finger itched to pull back on the trigger, even though he wasn't sure it would do any good.

Eli's head cocked to one side mockingly beneath his canvas prison. "I used Sammy, but Haris used you more, didn't he? The bastard wasn't dumb enough to just walk in here, so he used you and Johnny boy there and you let him. Tut tut, the Winchesters lose again..."

Dean closed his eyes and swirled around the gun in his hand, slamming the butt down hard on the demon's forehead until he was sure he felt bone give beneath his blow. "Don't call my brother Sammy!"

Opening his eyes back up, he squinted, wavering slightly before grabbing the nearest tree for support. He didn't have long left and he knew it. The pain, the disorientation had become almost too much to bear.

But it was over now.

All they had to do was finish Eli and use the bullet on Haris, and Sam would be safe.

Or would he?

The implication that Lucifer was involved wasn't a good sign – even if Eli was telling the truth and Lucifer wasn't interested in the special kids.

Dean looked up to his father, not wanting Sam to see his moment of weakness last any longer than he needed to. "Finish it..."

John took a breath and stepped closer to the flailing form beneath the sheet. He had come here with hope they could end everything, but after Eli's confessions he wasn't sure he'd gained anything except the loss of a son.

“Vivos et mortuos, et saeculum per ignem...” The words were ominous, like the clouds forming overhead expectantly as if a storm was suddenly brewing.

Black acrid smoke began to plume from the tarp, accompanied by a scream that sounded as if it came from the bowels of hell itself. A choking, almost nauseating smell of burned flesh seemed to follow – a smell John Winchester knew all too well.

Cringing, John closed his journal and slid it into his pocket. Taking an edge of the canvas he peeled it back, already knowing what to expect.

The demon, or rather its host, was nothing more than a crisped husk that steamed like something left smoldering on a summer barbeque.

The rank stench of sulfur filled the glade, adding to the strange moment.

John rubbed at his beard. Of all the exorcisms, he'd never seen anything like this happen before. Part of him had hoped they could save Eli's host as he himself had once been saved.

“What the hell?” Dean grimaced as two glaring orbs looked back at him from an otherwise scorched corpse. “I know I said Kentucky Fried, but dude...”

“Maybe it was the fact that the Devil's Trap was so close? Actually touching him?” Sam offered softly, ever the knowledgeable one of the family.

“Or maybe he just couldn't bear the thought of you getting to hell first, Dean.”

John spun around first, facing Haris off as he had known he would have to. Demons *always* collected on their bargains.

“We need more time with Sam...” John shot a wary glance at his eldest. *Time for the bullet*, his unspoken words conveyed the message.

“Oh, I'm afraid demons don't really know the concept of time, John. You see, we aren't bound by it like you puppets of flesh and blood.” Haris's almost-white hair seemed to glow in whatever sun was left peeking through the overhanging cloud, his pallid skin contrasting starkly with his surroundings.

The demon's eyes glowed too, the evil orange-yellow hue that identified him from lesser creatures spinning like a kaleidoscope across his pupils.

Dean tried to ignore the thing that had haunted the Winchesters for so long, concentrating instead on his father. When John gave the signal, he would need a distraction, a decoy to keep Haris busy. It was so easy for the yellow-eyed freak to use its powers to yank the gun away like he had the Colt back at the cabin.

“Oh, I see Sam is looking a little worse for wear.” Haris took a look at his prize, his eyes narrowing as he noted the sigil of Lucifer painted on the young hunter's head. “You Winchesters don't deserve him. He'll do so much better under my wing...”

“Over my dead body!” Dean's temper snapped and he aimed his .45 at Haris, repeatedly pulling the trigger until the weapon's clip was empty. It was hard to even take the kick back from the Desert Eagle anymore, but he fought it with every shred of control he had left.

He wasn't going down, not until he knew Sam was safe.

Haris's body jerked and spasmed with the impacts at such close range, but he didn't stumble backwards or fall as Dean had hoped. Instead, the creature smiled, rolling his head around and hunching his shoulders as if he merely had an annoying cramp in his neck.

“Over your dead body, Dean? Why, that shouldn't be too hard to accomplish in your condition!” The blond-haired freak outstretched his hand, snatching the .45 from Dean's feeble grasp like taking a toy from a child.

Once the weapon was safely secured, Haris reached out his free hand, sheer power dragging Sam from the tree trunk's safety like a demonic magnet until he was in the creature's grasp.

Wrapping his arm around the hunter's throat in a chokehold Haris smirked, knowing Sam had little strength left of his own to fight back with – certainly nothing that could rival his own. “Time to say goodbye, Dean...”

“I'm not dead yet, you bastard...”

“Dean no!” John tried to ram the amulet-bullet into the chamber of his gun knowing Dean wouldn’t back down when Sam was involved – no matter what the cost.

As his fingers worked he couldn’t help but be distracted at the sight of his eldest charging Haris full throttle, only to be abruptly thrown across the clearing.

Dean was too weak to fight. Too far gone, and yet somehow he still wouldn’t let go because of his brother. It was the only thought John could think of as he heard the bone-jarring thud of his eldest hitting the ground behind him.

It wasn’t a sound he was new to. Hell, Dean had gotten tossed more times than John could ever count – probably a whole lot more when John hadn’t been around too. But this time it was different, because John didn’t expect Dean to get up again.

The hunter, the warrior had given his all and had made his last sacrifice.

Dean had been dying for three days, and the infamous clock of life had about stopped ticking.

John looked up, ready to meet Haris straight in the eyes one last time before he put a bullet between them for what he had caused; but Haris was ready for him.

The demon bowed his head, eyes still shimmering as the first spatters of rain began to fall from the darkened heavens. “Nice gun you have there, Johnny. Pity it’s not the Colt, huh?”

Like Dean, John suddenly felt his body lose all control as his feet were pulled from the ground. He was tossed through the air, narrowly missing a tree stump as he landed hard within feet of his semi-conscious son.

Despite the bone-numbing impact, his arm jarring on a gnarled root as he went down, John clung to the precious weapon like a life-preserver. There was simply no option in letting go of that gun. Hugging it close to his chest, *sacrifice and salvation*, he simply would not let go.

Say goodbye, as we dance with the devil tonight...

John rolled over, putting his hands underneath his body and pushing himself up from the ground as he struggled to get back to his feet. He could see Dean just beside him, his son, valiantly trying to rise on arms that simply refused to hold his weight. In the diminishing daylight, John could see the line of blood that freely flowed from the corner of Dean’s mouth.

It’s just a busted lip! He assured himself, but the subsequent hacking, punctuated by patchwork staining of crimson on the dirt beneath Dean’s face told John otherwise. The soldier son was going down, unable to get back up this one last time.

Just beyond them both, Haris stood, holding Sam by the throat, yellow eyes swirling gleefully as a broad grin spread across a ghostly white face.

“Thanks a bunch, guys! I knew I could count on you to take care of my dirty work,” the demon jeered. “Although, I was a tad worried there for a moment that maybe you weren’t gonna beat that little pain in the ass. Nice touch with the trap drawn on the tarp. You ah, don’t have another one hiding anywhere do you?” he asked, faking a nervous glance around the area.

“Don’t be so smug you bastard. You haven’t won yet,” John snapped, taking a defiant step forward toward Haris and Sam.

“It certainly looks like I have from where I’m standing. Besides, we had a deal, John. Remember?”

“You let go of my son!” John demanded, pulling a pistol from by his side. He held the .45 at arm’s length, the muzzle pointed at the demon’s head.

It was time to go for broke. Time to make everything right. Time for the devil to get his due.

Haris tightened his grip on Sam, the younger man gasping as his throat was constricted underneath the demon's grasp. He clawed at the arm that was wrapped around his neck, fingers prying to release the demon's hand.

"You better be careful with that Johnny. You might miss and hit Sammy by mistake," Haris threatened.

"Oh, I won't miss." *This is for you Dean... and you too, Mary!*

"Well, I don't think I'm willing to take that chance, John," the demon replied, his head nodding toward the older hunter.

He was flung backwards like a rag doll, limbs askew as he was pinned against a nearby pine. The force of the impact drove the air from John's lungs and he bit down hard on his lip as his spine screamed out in protest from the abuse of slamming into the hard trunk.

"When will you ever learn?" Haris muttered, shaking his head. "You were never destined to win, John."

With another nod of the demon's head, the invisible hold was released and John dropped to his knees on the ground. Before he could recover, another unseen force grabbed him and began to drag him over the jagged rocks, each seeking out exposed flesh to chew into, but just as eagerly content to batter covered skin as well. Tossed to and fro, the hunter grunted as the assault continued.

It was like watching some bizarre one-sided wrestling match, where some behemoth took on the ninety pound weakling and beat the smaller opponent within an inch of his life. Except to Sam, the behemoth was invisible, and the underdog was hardly a "weakling," but rather, his dad. The young man strained against the demon's hold as he watched his father falter under the repeated attack. He knew the demon was toying with him, batting John around like a cat might paw at a mouse.

"Stop!" he begged, his voice raspy from Haris' strong grip. "Please, stop!"

"Aw, Sammy. Now why should I do that? This is just too much fun." Haris replied, as John's body was launched through the air once again.

"Please, you have me, isn't that what you wanted? Let my dad go."

For the briefest moment, the unseen attack on John ceased and the older hunter collapsed to the ground in an unconscious heap. Haris relinquished his hold on the youngest Winchester ever so slightly, his white-blond head tilted slightly to the side as the demon considered the young man held before him.

"Sammy, I've had you since you were born, it's only ever been a matter of time until you came back to me. You've got nothing to bargain with and besides, your father has been a pain in my ass for far too long. He's simply getting what he's had coming to him and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited you bastard," Dean barked out in defiance.

He leaned heavily against a taller outcropping of rocks, having nearly crawled to where his dad had dropped his weapon when Haris had initiated his attack. That same weapon was now in his grasp and as he mirrored John's earlier stance, it was once again pointed at the demon.

Haris "tsk'd," his head shaking from side to side as he considered the young man before him. He considered crushing the young hunter with a single thought, just as he had done in the cabin that long night before. But looking at the hunter, taking in the hollow set of the eyes, the ragged respirations, the hunch of the shoulders, Haris knew that whatever was wrong with Dean Winchester, a stiff wind could likely finish the man off.

"Am I supposed to be any more afraid of you than I was of your dad? What's to stop me from crushing you into dust right now? That pathetic gun?"

"No, more like the bullet inside it," Dean answered back. "I'm surprised at you Haris, after all our quality time together back in Tennessee, after everything you went through to get the amulet off me, even sending that bitch Alyssa to mess with my head and make me forget about it and everything else, and yet you haven't mentioned one word about it since you got here. Slipping up there, Harry!"

Dean took an unsteady step forward, willing himself to stay on his feet just a little longer despite his muscles' refusal to cooperate. He could feel his chest seizing up, like taking a deep breath outside on an icy cold day. Even the edges of his vision were darkened and narrowed, like watching a movie that was being broadcast in letterbox.

None of it mattered. He had to stay on his feet just a little longer, had to stay alert just a few minutes more, needed to maintain his focus just long enough to pull the trigger. Had to save Sam!

"Did you know what the amulet was all along?" Dean asked, seeing the sudden recognition in the demon's eyes. "Did you know what it was a part of?"

Haris smiled nervously, pulling Sam back in front of him and backing away slowly.

"Not at first, not when I had you at my compound. I knew it was protecting you, but not how, not why. That came later. So, did you know then too, Guardian-boy?" the demon mocked.

"What does it matter now? You're going down, you sonofabitch!"

Haris laughed, deep and throaty, it held nothing of the nervous laughter that the demon had shown just moments before. Still cautious, he maintained his hold on Sam, keeping the young hostage in front of him as a human shield.

"Your little stint as a Guardian hasn't paid off there, Dean. That bullet isn't going to stop me, even if it is part of Solomon's Sword. Sure, it might sting a little, but what's a paper cut when you're writing a chapter in the eradication of humanity?"

Dean moved closer, stumbled slightly, but caught himself without losing his aim on the demon. He squeezed his eyes shut quickly, blinking rapidly to restore his vision and maintain his balance.

"Besides," Haris continued. "I don't think you're gonna be around long enough to pull that trigger, Dean. See, I know what happens when the Guardian is separated from the amulet, pretty stupid binding if you ask me, don't know what Solomon's men were thinking when they came up with that one."

Dean saw Sam's eyes flash at the mention of him being separated from the amulet. He knew his brother felt angry, hurt, maybe even betrayed by what he had done. But at least he would be alive to feel those things and in Dean's mind, that was what was most important.

"I'll be around long enough to see the end of you, to see my brother free of you at last," Dean insisted.

"No, I don't think so, Dean. For all that you and John thought you were so smart, you never really got it. You thought I wanted Sam to carry out my plans, and that's true. But I wanted him because from the beginning, it was Sam that was the greatest threat to me," the demon explained.

Sam stopped struggling, his attention riveted by the revelation in Haris' words. Near to him, even Dean halted his forward movement, staring in disbelief.

"You see, Sam has always held the power to be my downfall. He's special alright, I've always known that. Why do you think I've tried every way possible to gain control of his powers, gain control of him? Barring that, if I couldn't have him, I had to kill him. It was just that simple. It's always been in Sam's blood to either join me or destroy me."

No, it can't have all been for nothing! The words screamed out in Dean's mind so loudly that he nearly crumbled under the barrage. All their plans, all for nothing? *Sam is lost, we're all lost...*

Dean sagged to his knees, the last reserves of energy expended, his ability to draw on determination now gone in that last disclosure from the yellow-eyed demon. Yet, something tickled the back of his oxygen-starved brain.

Sam has always held the power to be my downfall. It's always been in Sam's blood to either join me or destroy me.

The Guardian and the Quatre Yeux, you're stronger together than apart. You have a special synergy together, Dean. Trust Sam, trust your brother!

Had Marie known something? Had she been trying to tell him something that day? Even Samedi had let slip about the brothers being somehow linked together beyond their obvious shared genetics.

Dean's head buzzed, his brain whirled as he tried to make sense of something that he didn't necessarily believe in: *Destiny*.

Yet, maybe that's what it was all about. Sam's destiny, his destiny, inexorably intertwined. A family cursed joined with a family bound to a sacred guardianship, and what would be the chances or outcome of that?

It's always been in Sam's blood... Sam's blood, the amulet, two brothers', synergy, stronger together... DESTINY!

In that moment, time seemed to stand still, noise seemed to quiet and everything seemed suddenly clearer to Dean's previously addled mind. He looked over to his brother, still caught in the grip of the demon, seeking out Sam's eyes, needing that direct contact just one last time.

Hazel met blue-green, elder meeting younger, "Do you trust me?" being silently answered by "Always!"

Dean shifted his glance back to meet Haris' face again. This had to work and even if it didn't, Dean rested in the fact that at least his brother was going out on his terms and not at the whim of some hellspawn.

Determination and hardness set in his face, he lowered the gun slightly, allowing the muzzle to drop so that it pointed at where Haris' chest would be rather than between the repulsive yellow eyes. Seeing the weapon drop and mistaking it for surrender, the demon laughed, but it was short lived as Dean's eyes glinted.

"You lose!" he sneered, pulling the trigger.

The amulet bullet careened from the barrel, plunging through Sam on its path toward the demon. Covered in blood from the youngest Winchester it burrowed deep within Haris' chest, rocking the demon backwards, his grip on Sam loosening even as the expression on his face belied the shock of what was happening.

"NO!" the demon moaned. "You didn't, you wouldn't hurt your brother... never... inconceivable..."

Letting go of Sam completely, Haris staggered then dropped to his knees as his body jerked in a violent display of pyrotechnics. The air was filled with the smell of sulfur, burning flesh, and electricity as the demon erupted in flames, illuminating the growing darkness then just as quickly extinguishing and collapsing in a charred husk to the dirt.

Wounded by the bullet, Sam crumpled to the earth, his uninjured hand grasping his side in an effort to staunch the flow of blood. Gasping against the pain, Sam looked for his brother, but the effort was too great and his head dropped as he succumbed to this last insult to his body.

Just beyond him, Dean rose up on one knee. Blinded by the leftover smoke from Haris' burnt remains, he struggled to see Sam, needing to find his brother just one final time, knowing that he didn't have more than a few breaths left in his failing body. He rubbed at eyes that simply would not focus, gaining vision that was far dimmer than the growing darkness should have accounted for.

Then he spotted his brother. Sammy! Lying in a heap, surround by a growing pool of blood, Sam didn't respond. Dean didn't even bother to try to get to his feet, he simply put his hands down and began to crawl across the Wyoming soil towards his fallen sibling.

"Sammy!" *Pleasepleasepleasebealivebealivebealive!*

"Sammy... please... wake up bro... look at me..." he pleaded breathlessly.

Nearly within three feet of Sam, Dean stretched out his hand, straining to touch his brother's arm, needing that contact, needing to know that his brother would live before he took his own final breath.

"Saammmy..." Dean wheezed, his body dropping to the ground, his outstretched arm faltering, then falling too as he yielded to the weakening beat of his heart.

The peaceful stillness that settled over the clearing was in stark contrast to the battle that had taken place there. The repulsive odor of human cadavers, the stench of burnt demonic flesh only reinforced that there was nothing left alive, nothing moving under the imposing monument of the Devil's Tower.

Except... something did move.

John Winchester groaned and then rolled to his side. He wiped at the rivulet of blood that had found its way into his eye, before looking around him. He took in his surroundings in a quick glance, rapidly spotting the blackened remains of the demon before seeing his sons.

Springing to his feet, ignoring the pain and dizziness that resulted from the abuse his body had suffered, John scrambled over to his all-too-still children. Dropping to his knees in between them, he reached out a hand to touch both simultaneously, eagerly seeking a pulse beneath his fingers.

Neither moved, neither responded, neither seemed to be alive.

John felt his chest constrict. *It can't be! It can't have come to this!*

Even the charred remains of Haris did nothing to diminish the agony that was threatening to steal away his breath. He hadn't felt so utterly lost in nearly twenty five years, hadn't experienced such a deep-seated pain since losing Mary. This was the day he had feared, the day he had prayed would never come, the day he had fought to avoid at all costs.

Hands still clinging to his sons, John was barely cognizant of the newcomer that had appeared in the clearing. It wasn't until the strong smell of sulfur assaulted his nostrils that he was broken from his silent grief, the overwhelming blast of heat instantly baking exposed skin and drawing his attention.

Standing at the top of a small knoll, a tall, heavily-built man stood taking in the scene below him. He shook his head almost sadly, as though the carnage below him had been some sort of military miscalculation, a general taking in the catastrophic loss of his troops.

"Who the hell are you?" John asked, angry at the intrusion. Leave me alone in my grief. *Just let me take care of my boys in peace!*

Luciano Ferinacci smiled down at the bearded man standing before him. He'd heard about the Winchester patriarch and in light of the havoc the man's sons had created, he was curious.

"Hmmm, I'm surprised. I had heard you were a pretty top-notch hunter. All the years you spent chasing Haris, destroying demons, and you don't know who I am? Did you really think that Haris was the worst thing in your life, your biggest problem? Don't you know that even in Hell, we have our foot soldiers, our subordinates? Haris was nothing compared to me, a pathetic wannabe always scuttling around in my shadow."

John watched as the man's blue eyes suddenly flashed over to vibrant, hellfire red.

"Lucifer!" he acknowledged, as Hell's prince laughed smugly.

"You know, your sons were a royal pain in my ass," Ferinacci/Lucifer admitted ruefully, looking down at the still forms of the young men at John's feet. "But, I gotta respect them. Tenacious little bastards, right to the end. That little stunt they pulled in New Jersey, I would have killed them if it wasn't for the fact that I needed them. I guess it was good I kept them around, huh? But take pride in the fact that you raised them right, John, trained them real well."

John grunted. Compliments from a demon stung just the same when he was staring down at a perceived colossal failure.

"I failed them. I raised them only to lose them. All I ever wanted to do was protect them, to save them..." he replied, his voice trailing off as he verbalized his grief to the demon.

Lucifer laughed, his voice booming across the open field, bouncing off the rock of the daunting tower that seemed to be carved by his very hand for some evil purpose.

Eyes glowing like flares on a pitch black night, he leered down at the hunter, reveling in the anguish, absorbing it like it was ambrosia.

“Oh John, they were never yours to protect or save. They were never yours at all...”

Hold on ... hold on!

The End...

(Disclaimer: Bold chapter headers are lyrics from the Breaking Benjamin song 'Dance with the Devil.' No infringement intended)