

Episode Sixteen: Dezòd
By Kittsbud & Tree
Part One

Forest Lawn Cemetery
Slidell, Louisiana

White puffy clouds slid over the full moon like heavenly blankets, blotting out the only luminance in the tiny graveyard. A cool unnatural breeze ruffled through the hedgerows surrounding the tombs, whipping at the stone with its malevolent chill.

This was not a night for the faint hearted to walk the streets, let alone this lonely burial ground, and yet, the night animals were not the only creatures in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

Henry DuCroix was panting, the exertion from his frenzied digging making him sweaty and breathless. He didn't notice the chilly zephyr biting at his perspiring flesh. He was too tired, too weak, but he couldn't give in. The stakes were too high.

DuCroix's corroded, time-worn shovel hit something hard and he dropped it, focusing on brushing away loose dirt from the casket below with his grimy fingers. Soil crumbled from the earth walls surrounding him, but he ignored the pattering sound, desperate to open the coffin below.

"Chantelle... ma chérie..." Henry's eyes turned to two almost pan-sized white orbs and he clenched both fists, pounding on the casket lid until his muscles burned. "Chantelle!" His accent grew thicker as he began to babble in Creole – local words and phrases intermingling with a disembodied version of English until it seemed DuCroix had gone insane.

Above him, the clouds finally took heed of the uncanny breeze, their sprawling white masses moving just enough for a few stray shafts of moonlight to lighten the scene.

DuCroix at last noticed the changes around him – changes to the elements he had seen growing of late. Changes he feared more than Damballa himself.

Time was running out.

Henry grabbed at the shovel he'd dropped, using its sharp edge to hack at the brass hinges on the coffin. He was strong, days of road work making the muscles in his arms more powerful than most, but still, he wasn't strong enough.

The hope he had felt at the sight of the white casket was waning again. It had been too long. "Ah can't be too late. Can't be..."

DuCroix raised the shovel above his head, slamming it down into the casket lid time after time until finally the wood began to splinter one side. Once he was sure he could swing it open, he slowed, not wanting to damage what lay beneath.

"Poukisa? *POUKISA?*" Henry screamed the word over and over in his native tongue, begging to know why this had been allowed to happen. *Why?*

Bruised and bloodied fingers clambered at the edge of the lid, feeling for a place to gain a good hold. Henry had paid for the best for his Chantelle, but now, that love may have been the thing to take her life.

Ah should have known!

Henry pulled back on the lid, feeling the hinges move as he put all of his weight into swinging the casket open. The brass fittings groaned in protest, the remaining stray soil tumbling from the coffin as DuCroix finally managed to open it.

"Chantelle..." DuCroix fell to his knees inside the casket, eyes streaming with sudden, unchecked tears.

Beaneath him, the body of a young woman lay in a grotesque posture, her eyes bulging, her nails and flesh torn from her fingers where she had scraped desperately on the inside of her tomb.

Even now, eyes bleary from sobbing, DuCroix could see the grooves on the underside of the casket lid made by his wife's attempts to escape her underground

hell. She had clawed and clawed until the oxygen had run out, leaving her to die alone, in darkness, gagging for air that simply wasn't there.

Henry's tears dripped onto Chantelle's face, the moisture sliding down her graying flesh as if she were the one sobbing. He wanted to hold her, to pull her from this hell, but her normally nubile body had already begun to stiffen, turning her into some inhuman mannequin.

DuCroix's agony began to change, to morph into something more productive. He couldn't let this happen again. He couldn't let Chantelle's death be in vain. After all, if his suspicions were correct, he could well be next on the list.

Stumbling up from his knees, Henry wiped his soil-caked hands on his jeans and began to curse again in Creole under his breath. He couldn't look at Chantelle anymore – not when her pretty face had been turned into something so horrific. Instead, he looked away, sliding the coffin closed without any last goodbye.

DuCroix leaned, stretching to retrieve his shovel. He would need to refill the grave or risk prosecution. Before his fingers could connect with the rough wooden handle, something above him stirred. It wasn't a noise per se, and yet he sensed a presence – a presence he *knew*.

Henry forgot the shovel.

Temper replaced by sheer fear, Henry DuCroix climbed from his wife's open grave, limbs floundering in soft, recently dug loam. Here, in the cemetery he was most at risk. This was *his* place.

"Dis can't be!" Henry struggled to his feet, trying to run from something no human could, and still his mind screamed, *why?*

Something was wrong.

Something had changed the very forces he believed in, harnessing them, making them work against their true nature.

DuCroix faltered, his boot catching on a toppled headstone. He was losing ground, losing his very faith every time he looked back to his pursuer. This thing should never be his enemy.

His eyes grew wider as he finally saw what – who – was behind him in the full light of the moon. "No..." DuCroix stumbled again and this time he couldn't regain his balance.

Arms flying wildly, he landed on his back, his spine straining as it slammed into another tumbledown monument.

DuCroix groaned as the air was knocked from his lungs and pain spiked down his back. For an instant he felt paralyzed, not from the fall, but from the thing now looking down at him. His body began to shake, the fetid breath of his pursuer bombarding him to the point he felt nauseous.

He could smell the rotting flesh tainted with the odors of spiced rum and tobacco. He could see the bony white skull and the almost opaline eyes that burned into his very soul.

"Poukisa?"

DuCroix wasn't afraid anymore. He looked up at his enemy with a resigned defiance born of inherit knowledge of his own religion.

His enemy didn't care.

As the clouds recovered the watching moon, a guttural scream filled the cemetery and then all was silent. Not even the night creatures dare to make a sound, for this was his place, not theirs.

DuCroix's lifeless body lay where he had fallen, a thin white film forming over his pupils, his body stiffening, even though it was far too soon for the normal onset of rigor.

Another had fallen, and with each new death, with each worshipper's soul that was dragged back to the crossroads of the afterlife, *he* grew stronger.

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LaBauve's Bed & Breakfast Slidell, Louisiana

The Impala grumbled to a halt outside the largest house on the entire street and Sam killed the ignition. When he'd gotten the address from Missouri for a place to stay in Louisiana he hadn't exactly expected this.

The two-story building oozed local culture, its hanging baskets, archways, and fashioned upper balcony easily dating back to the 1800s. It was something he'd expect to see in some civil war movie, certainly not the kind of place he and Dean were used to staying in.

The fact brought a smile to the young hunter's face for the first time since the brothers' last gig, and he glanced over to Dean in the passenger seat.

Sam had almost lost his brother back in Pennsylvania, and the fact that the Alp that had fed on his brother's mind was long gone did little to make him feel any better. Dean had been driven almost to destruction with the nightmares instigated by the creature.

Even now, Sam could see his brother twitching and squirming in his slumber, despite the fact that this was the first occasion he'd actually been able to doze in a long time.

He's going to kill me. Sam smiled at the thought.

When Dean had finally curled up on the Impala's huge bench seat, Sam had taken to the wheel and just cruised to the nearest place he could think of where his brother might actually get some rest. They both needed a vacation. Hell, no, they *deserved* one. And while neither had a lot of money except for their fraudulent credit cards, they did have friends.

That was where Missouri Moseley had come in. Once Sam had hit Louisiana it had occurred to him they'd need a place to stay on his little impromptu holiday, so he had called up their old friend. Missouri hadn't lived in these parts for many years, but she still had good contacts.

After Sam had explained he wanted to get Dean to a warmer, friendlier environment for awhile, Missouri had instantly suggested they stay with Marie LaBauve. Of course, when Dean woke he was going to be pissed. Dean hated being watched over at the best of times, he hated vacations, and most of all he hated how Missouri treated him like he was still a kid. If Marie was anything like Missouri, they were in for some fun – or serious Dean snark.

Either way, Sam didn't care. Dean had been his protector for so long and now it was time to return the favor. The dark circles and pallid complexion said it all as he stared at his brother's snoozing form.

No, if Sam had to drag him kicking and screaming to the local beach, Dean was going to have a good time.

"Hey, sleepy head, I think I have something you might need here..." Sam pulled a thong from his jacket pocket and wafted it across Dean's nose until the elder hunter began to stir.

"Hmmn?" Dean fanned away the piece of beachwear as if it were a fly buzzing annoyingly around his face. When Sam floated it back again a second time, he started, sitting bolt upright in his seat. "What the..?"

Dean's eyes widened in frustration as he saw what was dangling before his eyes. "Dude, and I thought you liked girls..."

Sam rolled his eyes and then grinned mischievously. "It's for you, dork. You're going to need it now we're at the beach-"

"The beach?" Dean's face screwed up in miscomprehension. When he'd fallen asleep, they hadn't been near any kind of water, let alone a beach. He looked around through bleary eyes till he came to a street sign. "You freakin' drove us to Louisiana? Dude, I'm never gonna sleep again..." He shook his head. "Hello? *Baywatch*,

Sammy? Ya know, hot blonde chicks in skimpy bikinis? That's a beach, not bayou grandmas association..."

Sam's dimples reached new depths and he tossed the thong on his brother's lap. "You're just scared to wear it in case I get more chicks than you."

Dean huffed. "Dude, I don't do shorts, so I sure as hell ain't wearing *that!*" He flicked the thong back over his shoulder onto the back seat, wincing slightly as the motion made his muscles twinge from his recent injury.

Sam noticed the slight facial tick, but said nothing. It would be no use mentioning it anyway - Dean would shrug it off.

"Oh, and Sammy, I need to hunt, not *rest*. I don't *do* rest with that yellow-eyed bastard still out there." A look of hatred flashed across his tired features and he turned away to look through the Impala's side window. He could never tell Sam how close he'd come to breaking at the hands of Volger, but he suspected his little brother knew anyway. That, coupled with Haris' return was almost more than he could bear to think about.

"Dean, just a few days to catch up on some sleep-"

"Or die of boredom," the hunter countered. "What am I supposed to do here, sit in a rocking chair on the porch and friggin' knit me a sweater?" He pointed to a woman across the road that looked at least one hundred. She was dressed like Ma Clampett and was furiously clattering her knitting needles together to weave some unknown item.

"Just a couple of days, Dean? I need it too." Sam changed the dimpled grin for something more pleading. It was an expression he'd used on his sibling since being a kid, and if he couldn't get Dean to do something for himself, then this "look" usual got him to do it for his little brother.

He'll fall on his ass if he goes on like this much longer, Sam fretted; biting into his lip until Dean finally sighed and agreed.

"Two days," Dean acquiesced. "But I'm telling you, there better be a damn good bar around here, 'cause no way am I sitting on my ass listening to you whine how bad I look all day."

Dean smirked as he exited the Impala, knowing Sam would fuss anyway.

Sam opened his mouth to respond, but realized Dean was probably right and clamped it shut again.

This was going to be one weird vacation.

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Dean walked up the brick porch steps as if he were about to start dragging his feet any minute. Sam wasn't sure if his brother was just bone-tired or he really was reluctant to stay in this period house. Maybe it was a little of both.

"Tell me again where you got this address from? I swear I've seen this place on the back lot at Universal." Dean shook his head, pushing back the wrought iron "screen" to ring the doorbell.

"Dean, you've never been to Universal, and two, this is nothing like the Bates motel."

"Yeah, well, if there's a granny in a rocking chair and a suspicious looking shower, you get to bathe first." Dean scowled, impatience getting the better of him when no one answered after the first three rings. After a fourth push of the button, he was getting ready to retreat back to the Impala when the door finally swung open with a screech that would have made Bela Lugosi cringe.

"Hi, I'm Sam, this is my brother Dean." Sam quickly pushed in front of his brother with a smile as he made his introductions. "I rang earlier?"

The woman opened the door to reveal what Dean considered way too much a likeness of Missouri Moseley. Marie was thinner and younger, sure, but she still had that glint in her eyes that made her a threat - at least on Dean's snark meter.

Marie peered at the younger Winchester first as if she already knew him. “Sam, honey, it’s nice to finally meet ya.” She eyed Dean somewhat more warily. “Dean...”

Dean took a deep breath and shot his brother a look that said “you’re dead” in no uncertain terms. “And you must be..?” He queried, adding, “Old Mo’s twin” under his breath.

“Missouri wouldn’t appreciate ya’ll calling her that.” Marie shot Dean a stare that made him almost want to cringe and he half expected her to spout some line about whacking him with a spoon. Instead, she raised a brow as if he were a scolded child. “Ah’m Marie LaBauve, but you can call me Marie. *Just Marie*,” she reiterated.

Dean feigned a smile. “I wouldn’t dream of anything else.” Except, of course he was already thinking up some snide nickname for his host. If Marie wanted to play the snark game, he was so ready for it. Taunting Sam was fun, but having an opponent who appreciated the art was so much more interesting.

Sam scrunched his face up the minute Dean faked being a good boy. Dean just didn’t know how to behave, and Sam suspected Marie was already onto that fact. Maybe Missouri had warned her. *Jeez, maybe Louisiana wasn’t such a great plan after all.*

Marie seemed not to notice her younger guest’s pain and ushered both Winchesters through the house via a long corridor. “You boys can bring in yah bags later.” She offered in a somewhat mild local accent.

“Maybe we’ll be checking *out* by then,” Dean breathed out.

“Say what, *honey chile*?” Marie grinned at the hunter, using the slightly girlie sounding term to annoy him further.

Sam kicked his brother. “He said we’ll be sure to after we check out the town-”

Marie nodded knowingly and continued forward.

Inside the boarding house was just as period as outside. The ceilings were huge coved specimens complete with fleur-de-lis designs and small glass chandeliers. On the wall, Dean noted a carefully hung photograph of what appeared to be Marie’s son. At a guess, Dean put the kid to be about the same age as his brother. *Maybe that’s why she took to his ass way better than mine...*

“Would ya’ll like a bite to eat?” Marie already appeared to be heading for the kitchen where the strains of *St. James Infirmary Blues* were blasting from some unseen music system.

Dean visibly winced at both the music, and the mention of food. Both items brought back memories he didn’t want to share or even think about. St. James had been the hospital Sammy had nearly died in during the New Jersey fiasco. If he never heard the name again it was too soon.

Then there was the food issue. Normally, Dean could out-eat a Sumo wrestler, but since the Alp had almost sent him insane it was hard to just sit down and tuck in. Every meal was an effort.

Dean opened his mouth to refuse the offer, but Sam wasn’t about to let him get away that easily. “We’d love a sandwich, if it’s not too much trouble, ma’am.”

Marie’s piercing stare went from one brother to the next. Dean’s reluctance to go anywhere near the kitchen, for whatever reasons, hadn’t gone noticed with her either. There was no way to know why, but she sensed the boy was hurting – hurting something fierce. It wasn’t exactly a gift, more like an intuitiveness she’d built up over the years.

“Mah home is yah home. Anything for John’s boys. Come sit.” Marie pulled out two chairs and scurried into the corner to begin cutting up a freshly baked loaf. She didn’t elaborate on how she knew their father, but Sam guessed it was through Missouri.

As the elder woman worked, both brothers sat in silence, taking in the cultural differences they had never really gotten so close to before.

Everything here was bright and colorful – even Marie’s somewhat over the top clothes. Scattered about the kitchen, Dean also noticed various voodoo charms, mojo bags, an old railroad spike, and what appeared to be a set of chicken’s feet.

So close to the heart of the southern voodoo world the hunter wasn’t surprised to see any of the items. There was nothing here he hadn’t seen many times before, and yet, somehow it disturbed him.

Voodoo wasn’t normally the evil religion most people envisioned it to be. It was very spiritual, but not inherently evil like Hollywood usually depicted it. Most voodoo practitioners only used their art for good, and it was a sad fact the non-believers didn’t always see it that way.

So why was Dean getting a full-on red alert flashing in his brain right now?

The elder hunter shuddered and considered that perhaps it was the large slimy creature Marie kept in a corner vivarium that was currently staring at him as if he were lunch.

The snake was more than large, it was huge. What’s more, every few seconds its forked tongue flicked out at Dean and its serpentine eyes flashed to torment him.

The hunter decided he suddenly *totally* agreed with Indiana Jones. *I hate friggin’ snakes...*

“Oh, honey pie, I see you’ve spotted Hooper. Ain’t he the sweetest thing you ever did see?”

“Hooper?” Sam finally saw the snake his brother had been scrutinizing and leaned forward to get a better look.

“Awesome!” Dean raised a brow. “Tobe, the director of *Poltergeist* and *Texas Chainsaw*,” he informed his brother.

Marie chuckled. “Nope, he’s named after the Burt Reynolds movie. ‘Cause, my favorite was *Deliverance*...”

Dean and Sam glanced at one another knowingly. Neither would ever think of that particular movie the same way again after a certain Bender family back in Minnesota.

“Ugh,” Dean groaned. “I think Reynolds made better...”

Marie shrugged and placed two plates on the table, one in front of each Winchester. Somehow, she’d managed to know that Dean had a thing for a toasted B.L.T. the size of Everest.

Even so, the hunter just didn’t have an appetite.

Trying to veer away from the topics of food, and movies that imitated life just a little too much, Dean focused on the guest house that apparently had no guests. “So, how come a place this size only has our two sorry asses for customers? Don’t tell me Hooper scared ‘em all away?”

Marie’s pleasant features darkened and she moved away, turning her back to the brothers to tidy up the breadcrumbs and other items that needed washing.

“Ma’am..?” Sam pushed from his seat to stand behind their host. Even from the odd angle, he could see her hands trembling just a touch as she wiped over the work surface. “Is something wrong?”

Marie’s head shook. “Tis nothing. Just a local thing...”

“If there’s something wrong, maybe we can help?” Sam pressed, using his best “helpful Sam” timbre. “You know what we do-”

“Boys, this ain’t like nothin’ you’ve ever seen.” Marie whirled around, at last dropping the façade enough to explain why her boarding house was empty. “There are things happenin’ here in Slidell. Bizarre things. *Bad* things. Some recent deaths, rumors of dark magic and murder all filtering through to the tourists. Soon there won’t be no holiday trade here. Hell, soon there won’t be nothin’...”

“Dark magic?” Dean latched onto his host’s comment, ignoring the look from Sam that screamed “let it drop.”

“Dean, we’re not here to hunt...”

“The hell we are! If there’s something out here that needs its butt canning then I’m sure as hell gonna can it.” Dean scowled at his brother and then focused back on Marie. “Just where did all these rumors start?”

Marie rubbed her hands together and began to unconsciously pace back and forth across the dark tiled floor. “There have been four deaths in Slidell of late – the last one was Henry DuCroix only yesterday – he was a personal friend. Henry was found near his wife’s open grave, seemingly frightened to death. The police think he was so distraught after Chantelle died that he couldn’t go on without her, and that he tried to dig her up. Poor fools think the sight of her remains gave him a heart attack.”

“But you don’t think that, do you?” Sam prompted, finally taking a bite from his behemoth of a sandwich.

Marie hunched her shoulders and peered from the window, her face wrinkling as she observed a high cloud bank that seemed to have settled over the town. The sky was literally full of wispy cirrus swirls that seemed to form a veil over Slidell and the surrounding countryside.

“There are people who have their own theories,” she finally answered. “Especially ‘cause the other three victims were all supposedly scared to death too. Chantelle, Henry’s wife was one of them, along with two other local men who were found in their own homes, literally white with fear.”

“And just who are these ‘other’ people? Neighbors, what?” Dean left his sandwich untouched and began thinking up theories in his head. There was a gig here, he could feel it, and a gig was better than moping on the porch of a house that looked like it belonged to Rhet Butler – not that Dean didn’t think he was a match for Clark Gable when the chips were down – because mostly he didn’t give a damn, either.

Marie folded her arms and shook her head, her long dangling earrings bobbing with the motion. “Tis not something I should speak of.”

Sam looked to his brother and then to Marie. She was scared, and for a woman like her to be afraid of something it had to be bad. Sam had known her less than an hour and yet he knew she was strong willed and feared very little.

“Can you at least tell us where your friend Henry DuCroix was found?” Dean pushed up from his seat and picked up the Impala’s keys from the table, his snack left intact on the plate. “It has to be close by, right?”

“Henry was found at Forest Lawn Cemetery. Tis about a mile from here.” Marie put a hand out, touching Dean’s forearm with the nearest thing to maternal affection he’d felt since Mary’s death. “You shouldn’t meddle in these things, boys. Tis best if ya’ll stick to your vacation. I fear this is outta your league even...”

Dean smiled playfully. “Trust me, after the month I’ve had, anything is in my league.” He looked over to his brother. “Coming, Sammy? Or are you gonna stay behind and knit with the other girls?”

Sam took a deep breath and followed his brother out onto the back porch. What he had hoped would be a vacation was quickly turning into yet another Winchester hunt, and right now, that was something Dean’s drained body could do without.

“Don’t you ever stop?” Sam headed for the driver’s door of the Impala, but soon found he’d been headed off at the pass.

“Nope.” Dean face creased wider into a grin. “I’m the freakin’ Energizer Bunny, you should know that...” he climbed behind the wheel to be joined by his brother’s gangly frame seconds later.

“Ooh, all pink and *very* annoying?”

“Nah, dude, I can go *all* night...” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Just ask that brunette from the Laundromat in Boise...”

Sam slapped a hand to his forehead but chose not to reply. When Dean was in one of these moods, it could easily turn into a prank war that Sam really didn’t think he could handle right now.

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Forest Lawn Cemetery Slidell, Louisiana

Dean parked the Impala around the corner from the cemetery, deciding that it might not be such a smart idea for two supposed “cops” to turn up in a classic – not that he hadn’t dared to make such a brash move before, because he had – lately, though, with Ferinacci on their asses it was the sensible thing to take precautions.

“Looks like the local boys are still pretty much scouring the scene,” Sam observed as two obvious C.S.I.s brushed past them.

“Yeah, local yokels with no idea what the hell they’re dealing with. You know how I feel about cops in situations like this, Sammy.”

Sam nodded. It was funny how the police never believed in anything supernatural, and yet the Winchesters often faked being law enforcement officials to get the job done. Now was such an occasion. It had taken Dean all of twenty-two minutes exactly to muster up two technically perfect state police badges – technically perfect apart from the ridiculously obvious fake names on them.

Sam looked at the I.D. in his hand and couldn’t help but wonder just how the hell his brother continued to get away with such blatant fraud.

Dean had no such reservations, and as they approached the yellow police ticker tape he pulled out the phony badge as if he’d watched far too many episodes of the *X-Files*. Sam was pretty positive that someday soon Dean would actually have the gall to name himself Agent Mulder. It was only a matter of time, of that he was sure, and knowing his brother he’d actually get away with it.

Why the hell can’t I lie my ass off like that?

While Sam was good, Dean was always better at that particular skill.

“Hi, I’m Detective Sergeant Blaze and this is my partner Carter Slade.” Dean let the I.D. sit under the cop on duty’s nose for all of a second before closing the small leather wallet and stuffing it back into his jacket.

Sam followed suit, praying the uniformed officer wasn’t a comic fan, let alone a movie buff. Apparently he was neither.

With a wave of his hand, the bored and rather stocky cop lifted the tape and ushered the two brothers through. With all the extra commotion around the crime scene – if there had indeed been a crime – it wasn’t hard to spot what they’d come here for.

The body of the late Henry DuCroix had already been removed by the attending coroner, but the area where he had fallen was clearly marked, along with any other evidence that needed to yet be photographed before removal.

“Looks like we missed the stiff, already,” Dean observed. “Guess we won’t be able to take a look at this ‘scared to death’ expression everybody is talking about just yet.”

Sam glanced around, hoping none of the other attending detectives and lab guys had heard his brother’s words. Dean could just be so unprofessional sometimes; it was amazing they never got caught.

When no one seemed to pay them any heed, the younger sibling turned and headed towards Chantelle DuCroix’s still open grave. This area had also been carefully marked, but had already been photographed.

“Dean, look at this.” Sam hunkered down, running his fingertips over the ground as if he’d found gold.

“Huh?”

“It’s cornmeal. Look at the pattern.” Sam traced the outline of the sprinkled grain carefully, letting his brother see the shape. “It’s a veve, or vever – a symbolic design used in voodoo to invoke a loa – a spirit or intermediary to the greater gods.”

“So someone’s been playing summon the freakin’ voodoo prince out here?” Dean knelt at his brother’s side, suddenly taking an interest in the shape on the ground. To a casual observer, there wouldn’t be a shape at all.

Sam shrugged. "We're in a cemetery, so I'm guessing it was probably a ghede loa they were summoning. Those guys are the death loas. What doesn't make sense is that loas aren't normally evil. All I can think of is that Henry tried summoning this thing to take his wife's spirit to the afterlife."

Dean huffed. Meddling with any kind of "death" spirit was just plain dumb as far as he was concerned. He'd seen that back in Nebraska one time. "Yeah, well, I'm thinking this loa is a greedy ass that decided to take two for the price of one."

"You know, I think ya'll might have something there-" A thin looking deputy that hadn't appeared interested in their presence before suddenly joined the brothers, a sly smirk cutting across his features. He wasn't young, and his wily manner and looks instantly reminded Dean of "Teabag" from *Prison Break*. His accent seemed just as thick too, compared to Marie's.

"And you are?" Sam straightened, determined not to let the little man try to intimidate them – after all, they were in charge here – or would be, if their badges were real.

"Deputy Franklin C. Carlyle." The little man moved closer, his voice lowering as he took on an almost conspiratorial air. "These here murders? All down to some pretty nasty mojo goin' on in these here quarters. Me an mah frens? We got us to thinkin' we got us a bokor."

Sam smiled, finding the odd cop amusing, even though the situation really wasn't funny. "You think there's a rogue voodoo priest here in Slidell practicing dark magic?"

"Yessir," Franklin seemed in his element, totally out of character for any cop Dean had ever met. But then, maybe things were different here. "Ah is thinkin' Chantelle DuCroix had been turned."

"Turned?" Dean's brow creased. *What is this, Freaksville? We got friggin' vampires again too?*

"Zombies," The deputy hissed, his voice all but a whisper. "Bokors are known for it." He cast a sideways glance, watchful his boss didn't hear his theories. "And the other two? One was killed by a damn voodoo doll, an the second, a snake was found in his house. Damn tiny coffin on his doorstep too..."

"Snake?" Dean quickly looked to his brother, a vivid image of Hooper burning into his mind. While it was true anyone could own a snake, he'd spotted other voodoo items at their host's home.

Sam hadn't missed the connection, either. "Thank you, Franklin. You've given us some very interesting leads."

"Don't you go forgettin' where you heard 'em when you bust this case!" Franklin watched as the two state cops headed back to the road. He could tell they believed him. Maybe this would be his big break after so many wasted years on the force.

Maybe.

"Dean, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Sam took long strides across the velvet green carpet of the cemetery, his gait keeping in perfect sync with his brother's.

"I'm thinking we set up house with a friggin' poppet wieldin' momma bokor, is what I'm thinking. Jeez, and you ate her damn sandwich!"

"Just because she has voodoo charms and a snake doesn't have to make her the killer, Dean. Marie said DuCroix was her friend." Sam bobbed under the ticker tape and picked up the pace towards the hidden Impala.

Dean huffed, pulling the car's keys from his pocket as he rounded the corner. "What, you never heard of people killing their friends? Dude, most victims know their killer. It's a known fact!" He slowed, finally seeing his black charge waiting by the sidewalk. Placing his hands on the roof, he paused. "Sammy, Hooper isn't just a pet. Damballah-Wedo, one of the most powerful voodoo gods, is a friggin' snake..."

There was hurt in the hunter's voice as he climbed into the Chevy and uncharacteristically slammed the door far too hard. So hard, in fact, that Sam thought the side mirror might loosen with the impact.

Dean had liked Marie – had taken to her when he took to very few – now it was going to be twice as hard to confront her with the murders.

Sam felt his brother's pain.

Even though their father had never exactly betrayed them, he'd often lied or hidden things until it was hard to trust anyone anymore, even family. To think they had allowed this woman to gain that trust so easily and to have it let down was not something to be proud of.

"You actually know about Damballah-Wedo?" Sam asked, hoping to deflect the obvious discomfort Dean was feeling as he pulled onto the highway. "Since when did you actually *research* this stuff?"

"Since, ugh..." Dean spun the wheel in his hand, making the huge car tilt as he made a quick u-turn. "Since I saw *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, dude..."

* * * *

LaBauve's Bed & Breakfast Slidell, Louisiana

Sam couldn't remember the last time his brother had been so careless as to mount the sidewalk, not even when he'd been half-dead or half-drunk. Today, though, the big Chevy's front tire bounced off the asphalt and landed the car half in front of an ancient fire hydrant, half slewed across the road.

Dean didn't stop to look where he'd parked, or what a bad job he'd made of the maneuver. He was hurting, and not even his precious car could bring him solace.

Marie had seemed so damn *nice*.

But then, there was never any such thing as nice – not in the Winchester world – not since the death of their mom and Jess.

Dean strode purposefully to the Impala's trunk and popped it with an audible hiss as he jarred his still-healing shoulder. Tossing the fake lining out of the way, he began to rifle through various weapons, unsure just what to take into the bed and breakfast from hell.

"Dean, we can't just go in there guns blazing. This isn't our kind of gig," Sam reasoned, alarm spreading across his face as he saw the wounded look in his brother's eyes. "Dean, I know you liked Marie. I know she reminded you of..."

"Sammy, she's a murderer," Dean almost spat out the last word as he rammed a clip into his recently cleaned Desert Eagle and glanced back over to the house that looked more at home on a plantation.

"We don't know that." Sam held the trunk lid open, forcing Dean to look at him instead of slamming the aged metal closed. "If Marie killed those people, then why? What's her motive?"

"Dude, *people* don't need motives. You see whack jobs gunning people down in MacDonald's on the news every damn day. People aren't like spooks, they don't need a freakin' reason for the shit they do."

Sam let go of the trunk and Dean paused, finally giving in a little to his brother's pleas. Sam was always the voice of reason – especially when Dean needed to hear it, and right now he was so tired after the past two gigs he definitely needed to hear it.

"Look," Sam continued now he had the edge. "All I'm saying is maybe we should just check out, drive down the road and make a call to the cops. We need to keep a low profile after New Jersey, not go into a house with a bunch of guns like we're on drugs or something-"

Dean shook his head. "I can't leave this one, Sammy. I can't just walk away and not know why. Ya know?"

And Sam did know.

They'd seen so much in their lives, so many things that didn't seem to have a reason, but Marie was different. She was like them, or had been, otherwise Missouri would never have sent them here. Maybe this was like looking at what *they* could become, given time.

"Okay," Sam gave in. "We go in, we confront Marie and then we call the police. Shortest gig in our history."

"Sounds like a plan." Dean nodded towards the front porch, keeping his .45 hidden from view as he jogged across the sidewalk. "Just remember, this chick is the bad mojo queen of the bayou. Watch your ass in there. She might have that friggin' snake waiting on us ..."

Sam climbed the steps two at a time, pressing his back against the house as Dean peered into the darkness through the screen. "I kinda got the impression it was your ass Hooper had taken a liking to." He smirked and blobbed out his tongue in an impersonation of the snake's forked appendage.

Dean brushed off the jibe with a huff and yanked open the screen with his free hand. The door beyond was strangely already open, the corridor it joined enveloped in a blanket of darkness.

The hunter nodded to his sibling, letting Sam know he was taking point and needed his little brother to bring up the rear. Keeping the Desert Eagle stretched out before him, Dean launched himself into the passageway, ear tuned for any sound that may mean danger.

After three steps forwards, he paused, pointing with his forefinger to the first door on his left. From what the brothers already knew about the house's layout, it was a small lounge area Marie kept for herself. It was usually locked, which led to the allusion that something other than relaxing and watching reruns of *Dawson's Creek* took place beyond its threshold.

As Dean took position to launch his CAT boot at the wooden entrance, Sam strained to hear what his brother had noted as they'd entered. At first, it sounded like a low moaning or muttering – like the sound of an upset child rocking itself back and forth in distress.

The more he listened, though, the more the words became discernable. They sounded muffled, like someone was holding a cloth over the speaker's mouth, but it was definitely native Creole being spoken – native Creole articulating some kind of voodoo rant.

"Kote mo ale, li sivre mo..."

"Mo finn perdi mo simé..."

"Mo anmwe! *Mo anmwe!*"

Marie's chant suddenly stopped, leaving a deathly silence in the gloomy hallway that made both brothers feel like their old friend Laura was somehow back.

It was cold, so cold.

"Dean, I think this is a voodoo Hounfor," Sam whispered, keeping his Glock low but ready. "It's a kind of sacred temple where they practice magic..." *Marie must be the Bokor!*

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "And something tells me that ain't voodoo phone sex she's talkin'." he grimaced, finally pulling back and letting his boot impact with the door.

As the ancient wood yielded, both Winchesters were greeted with a view of the inner sanctum where Marie practiced her art.

Whatever they had once thought of her, they now saw Marie LaBauve in her true form, and it wasn't pretty.

"Dammit Sam, I knew it, I just knew it!" Dean shouted as he came to a dead stop at the edge of the doorway. "She's the freakin' cause of all this."

Sam drew up short behind his brother, quickly taking in the scene before him. Marie stood a few feet away, her back to the hunters, her large snake coiled around her neck, shoulders and upper body. In fact, other than her head, very little else of the voodoo priestess was actually showing from underneath the scaly creature.

Marie didn't immediately turn to face them, despite the racket Dean had made kicking in yet another door. Around her, dozens of candles were glowing, casting shadows around the small space and giving the room an eerie feel. Even with the intrusion, the woman remained ominously quiet and unmoving.

"Great choice of accommodations there, Sammy. How 'bout next time you just check us into that place in *Hostel?* Or better still, why not just see if the Benders have any extra room at the inn," Dean mouthed sarcastically, his silvered .45 appearing in his hand.

Sam knew that despite Dean's snide remarks and insistence on wanting to hunt something, deep down his brother would have appreciated a little R&R. As he watched Dean approach their dark-skinned hostess, a strange feeling swept over Sam. Something wasn't quite right here and he couldn't put his finger on it. He couldn't accept that Marie was the Bokor, he just wasn't that bad a judge of character, was he?

"Okay voodoo woman, the jig is up. Nice try acting like you were so concerned about all the others, you deserve the Academy Award for that role," Dean growled.

Still, Marie didn't move. Even when Dean reached out and poked at her shoulder with the muzzle of the handgun, she didn't acknowledge either of the Winchesters. The only discernible activity was the barely perceptible creep of the snake as it constricted about her.

"Dean, something's wrong here," Sam insisted, watching as the reptile coiled tighter. He moved up alongside his brother, tentatively reaching a hand out to grasp Marie's barely exposed right shoulder.

She didn't resist when he pulled her body around, but rather moved stiffly and then froze in place once again. In the flicker of the candles, Sam could finally see her face. Marie's eyes were wide, dark irises shrouded by the bright white of her conjunctivae.

In an instant, Sam realized why the older woman hadn't acknowledged them. The snake had coiled around her throat, wrapping its thick body up and around her face, covering her mouth. She was only able to suck in little gasps of air through her nose as the serpent constricted its body and began to crush her ribcage and windpipe.

"Dean! It's killing her. We got to get it off!" Sam shouted, his hands flying up to grab at the massive snake in an attempt to pull it from the suffocating woman.

"Yeah, well, that's what you get for not having a normal pet like a dog," Dean mouthed back, still not comprehending the situation.

"She's not the Bokor, Dean. The real Bokor is using the snake to kill her. Trust me! I just know it," Sam pleaded back, still frantically tearing at the unyielding creature.

Dean paused, unsure of his brother's assurances that Marie was an innocent victim. Still, Sam was rarely wrong about these things, and after all, part of him didn't really want to believe the dark woman could have been at the center of all the murders. As he quickly searched Marie's face, her eyes seemed to plead her guiltlessness and beg for assistance. It was always the eyes that got him, and this instance was no exception.

"I sure hope you're right, Sammy," he acquiesced, pocketing his automatic and reaching for the body of the snake as well.

Even with both muscular young men tugging on the coils, the serpent was simply too strong. For every inch that they unwound, the snake simply contracted and pulled even tighter. Marie groaned, air escaping her lungs under the pressure of the creature's squeeze. She tried to suck in another breath, but found her chest simply wouldn't expand. Panic filled Marie, her eyes rolling back in her head as she began to succumb to hypoxia.

"It's no use," Sam yelled. "We'll never get this thing off this way. We got to cut it apart or something."

Dean reached for the .45 once again, and then replaced it, not even knowing if shooting the damn thing would even make a difference. Instead, he reached down into his boot and pulled out the knife he always kept secreted there for emergencies.

"Emergencies?" he thought. *"Can't say I ever planned on needing the thing to cut an eight foot python off someone."*

"Can you see the head?" he asked, his hand searching for the best place to begin carving up the slithering thing.

"No, maybe, I'm not sure," Sam replied, still trying desperately to pull a coil from around Marie's mouth. "Just cut anywhere. Cut the damn thing in half!"

Dean looked at the snake and then down to the blade in his hand. He was tempted to run up to their room and grab the large Bowie, preferring the longer blade than the four inch one he currently held. But one look at Marie and he knew she didn't have time for that.

Reaching in toward one length that was wrapped tightly around her chest, he began to saw on the snake's body. Despite having actually hunted deer and other small game with his dad, gutting and field dressing the kills when they were done, this particular task was somehow more grisly than anything he'd ever done before. Even with the well-maintained, razor-sharp edge of the blade, he was still forced to pull it back and forth across the reptile's body, each time bits of scale, blood, and tissue pouring out onto his hand. The warmth of the snake's internal fluids was nearly more than he could stand and he stifled a gag, his left hand rushing to his mouth as his right continued to cut.

"This is just gross," he groaned as he continued to hack on the reptile.

"We're losing her!" Sam yelled frantically, seeing Marie's eyes slide shut, her body held upright due only to the rigid support of her former pet.

"I'm working on it, Sam. This isn't like cutting up a hotdog. The damn thing is tough," Dean snapped back.

Nearly through the thick skin, Dean yanked the blade with every ounce of energy he possessed, pulling the knife through the last millimeters of the creature's flesh. The weapon pulled free with a sickening tearing sound, nearly causing the elder brother to fall backwards at the sudden loss of resistance. Blood, flesh, and greenish goo splattered out onto his shirt as the knife came free.

"Oh that's just disgusting," Dean moaned, looking down at the snake entrails that painted the front of his T-shirt like it had been tie-dyed by Rob Zombie.

"Dean, it's still not loosening," Sam informed him, sweat dripping from a stray length of hair as he fought to remove the snake. "Cut it off somewhere else."

"Great! Dude, I got a pocket knife here, not a friggin' chainsaw," Dean complained, but stalwartly went back and repeated his previous dissection of the python.

It seemed to take an eternity, but when he hacked through the second section of the creature, there was an immediate release as the snake fell in one large chunk to the floor. Marie would have collapsed too had Sam not reached out at the last second and caught her weakened form in his arms. He gently eased her down to the floor and sat behind her, supporting her as she sucked in huge breaths of air.

"Marie? How're you doin'?" he asked, concern in his voice and reflected in his eyes.

The Creole woman didn't speak at first, simply recuperated in the strong support of the younger brother as the last remnants of the spell that had bound her in place ebbed away. She forced herself to hide the fear and panic that threatened to overwhelm her as the implications of what had just happened rushed through her mind.

"Marie?" Dean questioned, kneeling down to peer into the woman's eyes. "You okay?"

She blinked twice, forcing herself back to the here and now, seeing the unabashed concern in the faces of both young men. Marie nodded quietly, reaching out to gently pat Dean's arm.

"I'm fine, sugah. Just a little shocked about Hooper turnin' on me," she answered.

"Is that what happened?" Sam asked suspiciously. "You've had that snake how long, Marie? And today, it decided to have you for dinner?"

"Yeah, 'cause from where we were standing, it was looking a lot like voodoo gone wrong," Dean chimed in. "And of course, not like this room is gonna be featured on any home makeover shows anytime soon. So why don't you just tell us what's going on here, 'cause ten minutes ago, I was pretty sure you were responsible for all the other deaths. So why don't you tell me a story that explains how and why you're involved with what's happening around here."

Marie inhaled deeply, nudging Sam to help her to her feet. The younger Winchester quickly rose and then bent down to loop a forearm under their hostess' shoulder and gently eased her up, continuing to hold onto her until he was certain she was steady.

She glanced between the brothers, seeing worry in Sam and something that bordered on hardened suspicion in Dean. She'd never meant to drag these young men into what was happening, knowing that Missouri had told her just how bad Dean had needed to rest. But the deed was done now, and they were involved. She reluctantly admitted to herself that they deserved to know the truth.

"Well, first, let me begin by telling y'all that voodoo isn't some dark, secretive religion, no matter what people out there think. We aren't sitting around butcherin' chickens or creating zombies. Voodoo is about harmony, balance in all things both natural and supernatural. Between things in this life and the next," she began.

"Yeah, 'cause lately, there's been so much harmony for the folks that have gotten killed," Dean broke in.

Marie glared at him, annoyed at his interruption and for a moment, Dean thought he was going to get slapped, shying away as her hand flicked slightly in his direction. He smiled good-naturedly, flashing his best "charming" look. The older woman wasn't buying it and glared at him again before she continued on.

"I'm a priestess, have been most of my adult life, just like my momma before me and her momma before her. Voodoo isn't just a religion; it's a way of life. And for the most part, you'd never know that any of us practiced it, except for when a Bokor is involved, like now."

"Marie, why do you think there's a Bokor involved now?" Sam posed.

"Bokors can practice either good or dark magic, but in this case, with all the deaths being local priests or priestesses that I knew well, I'm pretty sure that this Bokor is up to no good," she speculated.

"So why would this Bokor kill the DuCroix? And now you apparently?" Dean asked. "Are you like the Voodoo Queen of the South?"

"Boy, how many times has your smart mouth gotten y'all in trouble? 'Cause I'm thinking that you must enjoy some of the ass-whuppings you must get for sassin' back to people all the time," Marie shot back.

Turning back to face Sam, the younger sibling quickly trying to hide his amusement at his older brother's sudden discomfort at being reduced to a chastised child, Marie continued, "I'm just a simple priestess. I live for balance; I promote only peace and prosperity. I don't know why anyone would want to kill me specifically, but I think I might guess why the Bokor is involved."

Dean opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again as he reconsidered the jibe when Marie turned to look at him. She cracked a slight grin when the young man remained quiet, taking a small victory that she had won this particular battle in the war of snide words. She really liked these two young men and even more so Dean, sensing that beneath the surface he was really little more than a circus juggler, trying frantically to keep the balls in the air at the same time while never once letting anyone see how close he was to dropping them all.

"I think that whoever's behind the murders wants to bring about Dezòd," she announced, her voice shaking at the mention of the word.

“Dezòd? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that,” Sam stated.

“Don’t they make car parts?” Dean joked, earning him a dark glance from Sam this time.

Marie shook her head. “Dezòd is basically chaos and confusion, a great imbalance in nature that is usually catastrophic. As I said, those that practice voodoo believe strongly in the equilibrium between all things in the universe. Good that counteracts evil, right that offsets wrong. Now, someone out there is trying to disrupt that balance by killing the good priests and priestesses, leaving only those that practice the dark arts. Someone is trying to bring on a storm, a great storm of evil.”

Dean became suddenly serious, the smirk gone from his face as Marie’s words sunk in. He looked over at Sam and could tell that his brother had made a similar connection to the woman’s words.

“Chaos huh?” he asked solemnly.

“The likes of which this world has not seen since the dawn of time. It’ll be a war between the forces of good and the forces of evil and it seems that evil is trying to take the upper hand early,” she summarized.

There was a long silence in the room as all three took in the gravity of what Marie was suggesting. Sam looked at Dean, apprehension starkly apparent in his eyes. He knew what Dean was thinking in light of the recent discovery of their life-long foe, Haris, now being free and apparently stalking them again.

“Well, I dunno about you two, but it’s been a hell of a day and I for one was supposed to be on vacation,” Dean broke the quiet.

“Dean, you never wanted to be on vacation,” Sam interjected.

“Yeah, well right now, I’m thinking that somewhere like Siberia might not be a bad place to be. But still, you’re right, vacation’s over. We’ll start fresh in the morning looking for this Bokor dude. After all, Marie should be able to help us figure out who the likely candidate with an overwhelming desire to bring about universal chaos and destruction might be. Right? So, let’s all get some rest and we can tackle this better at first light and after some seriously strong coffee.”

Sam nodded and Marie seemed to acquiesce by the slump in her shoulders.

“You boys go on up to your room. I need to make sure that Hooper is taken care of,” she quietly ordered.

“Marie, I’m real sorry about your pet,” Sam consoled, one hand touching her shoulder as she turned to look down on the hacked up remains of the python. “Can I help you?”

“No, dahlin’. Whoever set my Hooper against me might still have some control over the loa. I’ll need to make sure that he’s properly disposed of,” she answered, stooping down to carefully run a hand along one length of the dissected reptile. “My poor Hooper. Never did hurt a soul.”

Dean reached out and pulled Sam from the room as the dark woman quietly grieved over her lost pet. “I, for one, will sleep a lot better tonight knowing that thing ain’t slithering around the place,” he mumbled when they were out of earshot.

Sam slugged his callous brother in the arm. “Dean, she loved that snake. How would you feel if you lost a pet?”

“Never had one dude. Well, unless I count your ass, always tagging along behind me like friggin’ Lassie. Besides, it was a snake dude, so not gonna lose no sleep over something that can’t even fetch a ball.”

Sam shook his head in disbelief, trailing his brother as they made their way up the stairs and to their room. Pets had never been in the Winchesters’ vagabond existence, there being only so much room in the Impala and so little time to take care of one properly. Still, he was a little surprised that Dean could be that unsympathetic.

Yet while Sam soaked in the relaxing heat of a lengthy shower, he didn’t hear Dean sneak back out of the room and down the stairs, never knew that it was Dean that carried the hefty reptile outside for their hostess, helped her build the pyre and

stood with one arm around her shoulders until the flames died and Marie's silent tears quit falling.

* * * *

Dean came out of the shower hoping that he could fall into a dreamless slumber and not the tormented nightmares that had continued to plague him since the events at Harrisburg. He glanced over and was mildly relieved to see that Sam was already deeply asleep. He sighed audibly, a little amused at the role-reversal. Usually, it was his brother that moved restlessly during the night, oftentimes subsisting off of three or four hours before memories of Jess's horrific death tore him awake. Still, it had been a while since Sam had woken screaming her name and inwardly Dean hoped that meant that his brother was slowly moving on.

Dean didn't expect that Sam would ever forget the beautiful blonde, it was more the after-effect of the brutal loss that tore through his brother and therefore bothered Dean the most. Protecting his baby brother from spirits and ghosts was one thing, they were tangible, but protecting him from nightmares and memories was something that even Dean had yet to be able to combat, especially now, when his own mind chose to bombard and betray him on a nightly basis.

He tossed on a pair of boxers before collapsing onto the bed, relishing the way that the soft mattress seemed to hug his semi-naked body. Normally, he could sleep anywhere, on anything, at any time, but was thankful that at least for tonight, he wasn't subjecting his still stiff and sore body to the hard slab of a cheap motel bed.

Dean listened as Sam's soft breathing broke the otherwise silence of the room. He could feel the pull of sleep tugging at his eyes, but struggled to keep them open, focusing on the bright light cast off of the full moon that beamed through the window. A gentle breeze caused the lace curtain to drift back and forth away from the open window as it glided blissfully cool across his body.

All together, the salty air, the gentle moonlight, the exquisite softness of the down mattress and rhythmic hum of Sam's respirations lulled Dean away. Before he could consciously fight it, his eyes fell closed and he was out, one hand still reflexively under his pillow and grasping the blade that perpetually found its nightly home beneath his head. He twitched now and again throughout the night, his body moving as he fought the demons that had become uncaged from the recesses of his mind.

Fortunately for Sam, his dreams were not nearly as viscous as his older brother's. Like Dean, his exhausted body was no match for the incredible softness of the bed and he was fast asleep long before Dean had even emerged from the bathroom. In his mind, the same gentle breeze that was drifting through the room was also tousling the shaggy strands of his hair as he stood alone on the bank of Lake Pontchartrain.

It was a pleasant night, the moon climbing into the sky and reflecting brightly off the glassy water. Night sounds greeted his ears, but nothing that made him cautious or fearful. The water lapped lightly at his bare feet, teasing his soles with its liquid coolness.

"Now this is what a vacation is all about," he spoke aloud to the night sky, inhaling deeply and filling his lungs with the aroma of magnolias from behind him beyond the bank.

Dropping down onto the damp sand, Sam continued to let his feet bathe in the lake while he lay backward to stare up at the clear, night sky. Thousands of stars twinkled overhead, far too many to count although he knew several of the constellations by name. Sam closed his eyes again, once more taking in a cleansing breath.

"Peaceful, just sooo damn peaceful," he muttered contentedly to himself. "If only Dean could appreciate this."

Sam could feel himself drifting, succumbing to the gentle breeze and the soothing sound of the waves breaking on the shore. He briefly felt something brush against his leg, but ignored it, lost in the quiet of the southern night.

Suddenly, a heavier weight pressed against his lower right leg. Irritated, he kicked out, hoping to dislodge whatever was on him. But as he tried to lift the extremity to shake it again, a mild panic took over when he found that he couldn't. Worried now, he opened his eyes to look down at whatever was lying heavily across his lower half.

Sam's eyes widened in fear as he saw the huge python begin to curl its massive body around both of his legs. He struggled to rise back up, knowing that he was easy prey if he continued to remain on the ground. Pushing up from the hard-packed sand, he found that the more he fought, the more the huge snake simply wound itself around him.

Cold and lifeless, Sam could only stare in shock as he recognized Marie's beloved Hooper as it continued to coil around his torso. He could feel the pressure being exerted against his stomach and lower intestines as the snake began to constrict as it climbed.

Panicked, Sam reached for the Glock that was in the inside pocket of his jacket. But even as his hand wrapped around the grip of the gun, the python slithered higher, tightening as it moved and forcing Sam to drop the weapon onto the sand.

He fought and thrashed, pushing with all his strength to pry the reptile from his body, knowing that if it wrapped around his chest, he was a goner. Despite his valiant efforts, the serpent curled higher, one length wrapping snugly around the young hunter's ribcage and trapping his left arm tightly to his side.

It wasted no time in trying to destroy its prey, constricting again as it crushed Sam's ribcage and drove the air from his lungs. He managed only the tiniest breath, before the snake coiled again, moving closer to his throat.

Desperate, knowing he was soon to die, Sam screamed out the only word he had enough breath to utter.

"DEAN!"

Miraculously, Dean appeared by his side, except as Sam's eyes flew open, the starry sky, the gentle breakwater of the lake, the sweet smell of magnolias were all strangely missing. Instead, he was back in his bed at Marie's. The one constant was the snake, its clammy body still wrapped tightly around the terrified young man.

Sam's hands flew to his throat as the python encircled his neck, cutting off his air and beginning to suffocate him. He clawed frantically but to no avail, his eyes wide and seeking out Dean's hazel for help.

Dean had awoken to Sam's scream and was at his side instantly, Bowie in hand and ready to fight off whatever had caused his younger brother to cry out. Instead, he found Sam awake, but thrashing about, pulling and pushing at some unseen attacker.

Sam was gasping for air, his lips already tingeing blue as Dean watched helplessly. "Sammy, what is it? Talk to me man!" he shouted out, trying to figure out what was happening to his brother.

He reached out a hand to Sam's shoulder, pulling his brother to a sitting position on the bed. Still, Sam continued to thrash about, gasping as only partial choked words came from his mouth.

"Sna... can't bre..."

Dean began to panic as well as Sam slumped limply in his arms. He recognized that this was no simple nightmare, it was black magic; something he was ill-prepared to combat.

"Sammy, hang in there. I'm gonna help you," he promised.

And then Marie was in the room and pushing him out of the way. Dean began to protest, but one look at the strong woman and he backed a step away. She wasted no time, dropping a small pouch on the bed beside the unconscious Sam.

Whispering softly, Dean strained to make out the strange Creole words that fell fluidly

from her mouth. He watched in stunned silence as she pulled out the skeletal head of a snake, moving it across Sam's face before she opened the small pouch and withdrew a handful of the contents.

Beneath her, Sam was deathly still and not breathing. Dean rushed forward, grabbing for his brother and prepared to begin CPR, but Marie quickly reached out and held him at bay with the side of her arm.

"NO!" she commanded. "It is the work of the Bokor. You cannot help your brother that way."

Dean relinquished his position, strangely trusting the dark woman although his heart was screaming at him to take action. He bit his bottom lip as he forced himself to remain still and let the voodoo priestess take control.

Marie whispered a few more words and then with the powder retrieved from the pouch, she blew the white residue directly into Sam's face. Almost instantly, Sam's eyes flew open and he sucked in a huge gasp of air.

Dean breathed in unison, not realizing that he had been holding his breath as well. He dashed over to his brother's side, his hands quickly skimming over Sam's upper body, looking for injuries and assuring himself that his baby brother was tangibly among the living.

"Sammy?" he asked tentatively.

"The snake? Where's the snake, Dean?" Sam asked, his voice raspy.

"There wasn't any snake dude. It was all some sort of spell work," Dean replied, his hand still on his brother's shoulder.

"It was the Bokor. He made you believe that you were being attacked. It is a very powerful spell and even though it isn't completely real, it can kill you just the same," Marie explained sullenly.

She sighed deeply, her face downcast, unable to look either of the young men in the face. "I am so sorry. You should have never been brought into all of this. I have put you in great danger."

Dean looked away from Sam, but retained the contact with his shoulder. He let out a short laugh as he studied the woman's sad face.

"Lady, we're always in great danger. Hell, it wouldn't be natural if something wasn't trying to kick our ass on a daily basis. This is what we do. Now, you need to come clean and tell us everything so we can help you. Besides, I think it's gotten a bit personal now, so consider us *involved*," Dean stressed.

Marie nodded, holding up one finger as she darted out of the room. She returned just as quickly, holding out a cobalt blue bottle filled with liquid. She pulled the cork from the top and passed it over to Dean. He took the proffered beverage, suspiciously sniffing at the opening.

"It's trempe." Marie informed, clarifying when she saw that the word held no meaning for the young hunter. "Raw corn whiskey. It's sort of a specialty around these parts."

Dean grinned, tipping back the bottle and pulling in a healthy swig. He felt his eyes begin to water almost immediately and it took him a brief second to find his voice before he passed the bottle on to Sam. His brother wasted no time taking a pull of the liquor as well, hissing as the harshness of the alcohol burned his raw throat.

Sam in turn handed the bottle back to Marie, who in turn tipped the container back and swallowed a large gulp, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth to catch a stray drop that threatened to fall from her lip. She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes to gather herself before speaking again.

"The Bokor used a poppet on Sam. It's what you might think of as a voodoo doll. You see, this Bokor is very powerful and his ability to make someone see or feel something through the power of suggestion is also very potent."

"Yeah, but why Sam?" Dean asked, reaching out to take the bottle of trempe from the woman.

"The Bokor must know that you and your brother helped to stop him from killing me earlier. He was looking to pay you back for interfering with his plans," Marie suggested. "He has definitely marked you both by now. You must both be very careful."

"But Marie, how would he have gotten to me? I never left the house after we rescued you?" Sam asked.

"As I've said, this Bokor must be very powerful. In a way, that does help."

"Help?" both Sam and Dean nearly shouted simultaneously. "How does having an extremely powerful and generally pissed-off at us Bokor help?" Dean added.

"Because, there are only two priests I know in these parts whose magic is strong enough to be able to do something like this. It will be much easier for you to find him," Marie replied, smiling generously.

"Just great!" Dean moaned, taking a final pull of the corn mash. "Now all we gotta do is figure out which one of them has been sticking pins into a GI Joe doll with girly hair."

Cabin somewhere near North Shore Beach Slidell, Louisiana

Sam looked down at the thick glop that covered his shoes and wondered why *Miami Vice* never quite showed the swamps or bayous this way. He was trudging through a quagmire that almost came up to his knees and he was *not* enjoying it.

The only consolation was that Dean appeared to be just as pissed at the state of his CAT boots.

"Man, I'm glad we left the Impala back there. She'd have sunk right into this crap like the freakin' Titanic."

"Yeah," Sam smirked. "Well, the thing is nearly as old..."

Dean chose not to reply and instead hunkered down in the sludge as they finally approached what could loosely be called someone's home. The place was more of a shack than anything. A tumbledown wooden porch giving way to an even more decrepit abode whose wooden laths hadn't seen a lick of paint or preservative since they'd been hammered together.

The roof didn't appear to be in much better repair. In fact, how anyone managed to live in such a place bewildered the elder hunter. "And I thought we'd stayed in some dives in our time, Sammy, but that place takes the cake."

"Yeah, well, it's not the house I'm worried about, it's the owner." Sam joined his brother, stealthily hiding behind some marshland shrubbery as they peered at the collapsing structure. "Just remember, this *has* to be our guy..."

Dean nodded, not taking his eyes from the grimy hut as his hand slid unconsciously to his .45.

This place was just plain creepy, even by Winchester standards, but then, if what Marie LaBauve had told them was true, it had every right to be. There were only two voodoo priests in Slidell that Marie knew of who could conjure as powerful a magic as that which was at work - Francois Dupres and Antoine Morel.

The fact that they had found the former stone dead in his home, a look of complete terror on his face, left little to the imagination as to who was their man.

According to Marie, Morel was in his late forties with long, tied back hair that had been gray as far back as anyone could remember. He was a little man, whose stature in the voodoo world was often misjudged based on his looks alone. Many a follower had learned the hard way just how powerful Morel could be – and just how far he was willing to take his art beyond the usual boundaries of his chosen religion. So far, in fact, that he had long since been considered an outsider by his fellow voodoo advocates.

"Okay, little brother, you ready to kick some priestly ass?" Dean waited until Sam had his Glock drawn and then nodded towards the front porch. "Just make sure those

long girly legs of yours don't fall through the wood. That thing looks like its seen better days."

Sam grimaced, for once acknowledging that Dean was probably right. They would have to be careful the rotting wood actually held their weight – but then, maybe that was all part of Morel's defenses against outside interlopers.

"Maybe we should have let the police handle this." The younger Winchester tramped forward, glad at last that his feet appeared to have found solid ground. "I mean, he's human, Dean..."

"Yeah, human, but with some pretty freaky spell work going on." Dean carefully placed his weight on the wooden steps at the front of the shack, wincing as the termite-infested timbers creaked under the strain. It was hard to keep a defensive position with his weapon and keep his balance. "Just remember, dude, Morel is Louisiana's answer to a bad-assed Harry Potter...the cops so wouldn't know how to deal with that."

"Jeez, he has a wand?" Sam cocked his head and grinned when Dean scowled back at him.

"Ha friggin' ha. You won't be so funny when this freak full-on zaps you into a fat freakin' toad..." Something moved beneath his feet and Dean paused, waiting for the imminent collapse of the porch. When it didn't come, he let a hand slip around the door knob and flashed his eyes, signaling he was about to go full frontal assault mode.

Sam nodded he understood, adding at the last minute, "Frog Prince more like-"
"In your freaky dreams, geekboy..."

Dean pushed the door inwards and immediately dived into the room, gun outstretched. Fanning the interior of the shack, finger poised on the trigger, he paused only when his eyes met the beady, evil orbs of another.

Behind him, Dean could hear Sam enter but the younger hunter remained out of view.

"I knew you would come." Morel's voice was soft with no hint of any kind of accent. It seemed almost too innocent for a murderer. "I knew you would seek me out, and I knew I must destroy you."

The Bokor pulled two items from beneath a time-worn desk and it was all Dean could do not to ease back on the trigger and let a shot off. Instead, his eyes widened at what the little man held out in front of him.

"Friggin' G.I.Joes..."

The dolls weren't perfect, but it was easy to see that the hand-crafted effigies were meant to be both brothers. The shorter poppet even wore a short chain complete with a bauble that represented Dean's amulet.

"What ya gonna do with that, pops? Stick pins in my ass? 'Cause I tell you, there was this one gal who already tried that and it so didn't float my boat..." Dean felt the sweat begin to pool in his palm and he flexed his fingers, reasserting his grip on the Desert Eagle. "Just put the dollies down before I ventilate their puppet master."

Morel tossed both the dolls out onto his desk with a shrug. "You think you're so smart, Winchester, but you have no clue who or what you're dealing with." He ran a hand over a pen that sat idly by his fingertips. When Dean's gun jolted slightly at his move, the priest laughed. "Scared of a pen?" His fingers grabbed the biro and before the hunter could react, Morel had stabbed the pointed nib into both dolls so viciously it pierced their rag bodies and exited the other side, gouging into the desk's wooden top.

Behind him, Dean heard his brother yelp in both surprise and pain, and as he whirled around, the hunter could already hear the clatter of metal on wood as Sam dropped his Glock.

"Sammy!"

Sam's knees crashed into the floor bonelessly and he grabbed helplessly at his stomach as if he'd been run through with a sword. No blood appeared on his fingers

or on his shirt, but he gasped down air as if every lungful was his last, his features paling even though no human hand or weapon had touched him.

"You bastard!" Dean spun back around in time to see Morel's eyes widen.

The rogue Bokor had quickly forgotten the shaggy-haired doll and was now concentrating on the shorter effigy, stabbing it with the pen over and over until the inner stuffing began to push through the material in ever-increasing balls of white fluff.

"What's the matter, pops? Mini-Me giving you a hard time there?" Dean strode forward until the barrel of the .45 was pressing against the enraged priest's temple and he finally ceased his efforts to down the elder hunter. "I'd be dropping the pen right about now if I were you, before I decide to stick you with it so you know how it feels."

Morel twitched, the muscles in his jaw ticking as he fought every last urge to continue his torture. "No one is immune to *my* magic." His pupils narrowed and he scrutinized his captor. "How did you escape the power of the poppet, hunter?"

Dean's face twisted into a smug grin as he plucked a looped section of rope from the wall. "Dude, dolls are so not my thing - not unless they're the blow up kind-" Using Morel's own line he began to tie the Bokor to his chair.

"Yeah, he kinda has a thing for vibrating beds too," Sam groaned out the sentence and began to pull his stinging body up using the chair he'd fallen next to for support. When his fingers literally sank into grunge he cringed and flopped down on a somewhat cleaner dining chair. "Just how the hell *did* you manage not to get zapped?" he asked, running a shaky hand through his tousled mop.

Dean plucked the doll from the table that had obviously been meant as his twin. It was supposed to embody everything about him to the point that, any harm inflicted upon it, he would feel too. And yet, while Sam had been downed, he'd remained untouched.

Normally, Sammy was the gifted one, the one who was immune to things normal people weren't.

The hunter took down a breath and looked at the necklace on the poppet. *It couldn't be, could it?*

Tossing the doll back down, Dean's eyes unconsciously locked on the amulet that dangled loosely on his shirt. It was shining like some mini-supernova, and yet he'd never cleaned it.

Could it be protecting him, like it had when he'd been possessed?

The thing was an enigma. A puzzle that demons and hunters alike knew of, but had no answers to.

"I guess I'm charmed." Dean tucked his weapon in the back of his jeans and looked his brother over for signs of any permanent damage. "You okay, Sasquatch?"

Sam nodded, looking warily at the dolls and then to Morel. "I've had worse," he admitted. "First time I ever got stabbed by a pen, though..."

Dean huffed. "Yeah, I thought only Sarah Connor was adept at that particular form of weaponry." He swept a hand across the table, wafting the innocent-looking biro onto the floor with the flat of his hand. "So, Mr. Poppet King, why the hell do you suddenly want your fellow voodoo priests out of the equation? Taking a little too much of your business selling fake mojo to the tourists?"

Morel shook his head, and then spat on the floor, the thin film of spittle narrowly missing Dean's already marred boots. "You think I will tell you anything, hunter?"

Dean turned his back to the bokor, allowing the image of Marie suffocating to flood his mind. He wanted to be angry. He needed Morel to know that the white-hot temper in his eyes was real, and that at any moment he could snap.

When he whirled back around, Dean's face had changed into a mask that only Sam had seen before - at Bobby's, when they'd questioned Meg about their father.

Dean's right hand shot forward and he grabbed Morel below the chin, forcing his neck back until the elder man thought it would snap. The bokor's eyes locked on Dean's, but his expression never changed.

"You really don't want to see him when he's pissed," Sam advised. "Turning us into pin cushions won't be anything compared to what you're going to get if you don't talk."

"You know, you might have an idea there, Sammy." Dean let go of Morel and leaned, retrieving the pen from the bare floor boards. "Where you like it first, pops? Eyeball maybe? Can't make freakin' poppets if you can't see the dolls, right?"

Morel swallowed, his gaze focusing on the already damaged nib of the pen. Should the hunter carry out his threat, there would be little left of his eyes once the jagged plastic had ravaged them.

The Bokor let out a breath of defeat. It didn't really matter if these underlings knew the truth, did it? Not when his master was so close to his goals. "What do you want from me?" he snapped, white hair flicking as he jarred his neck away from the pen Dean was still wielding.

"We want to know why you killed the other priests and priestesses." Sam did the talking, finally shrugging off the after effects of Morel's spell to stand at the side of his brother.

"Because my master decreed it so."

"Yeah?" Dean raised a brow, scared to even dare think who the "master" might be. *Haris?* "So just who is calling the shots out here, pops?"

"Baron Samedi, master of the dead..."

"*Samedi?*" Dean asked, obviously confused. "You mean I got two Sammys to deal with now?" He smirked at his brother, getting a hurt look back for his trouble.

"He said Samedi, Dean. Baron Samedi is a ghede loa. He's supposed to stand at the crossroads of the afterlife," Sam retorted. "He's often depicted as having a skull for a face, and wears a top hat."

"Hey, wait, I think I saw that freak in a Bond movie!" Dean pondered for a moment, then realized he had more to worry about than that Ian Fleming's creation. "So," he focused back on Morel. "You're controlling 'Sammy the skull,' making him go against who and what he normally is?"

Morel shook his whitening mane and grinned, revealing stained, rotting teeth. "You still have no clue, do you? I don't control Samedi, he commands me!"

Sam's expression darkened, tiny worry lines appearing instead of his usual jovial dimples. "Dean, this means someone has turned a normally neutral spirit into a killing machine that is definitely batting for the opposite team here—"

"Samedi couldn't have just gone dark side for the hell of it?"

Sam shook his head, looking at Morel for some sign that would confirm his deductions. "I don't think so...he would have to be coerced somehow. The question is, why would anyone want to control a ghede to kill voodoo priests, and just who has the sheer raw power to command something as important as Samedi?"

Morel watched as his two captors visibly squirmed. They were so clueless it amused him just to see their pathetic assumptions – especially the elder hunter. Morel had taken a dislike to that one the minute they'd locked eyes. Of course, seeing the look of complete foreboding on said hunter's face right now was worth more than any lottery win or promise of eternal life.

Morel was enjoying his moment.

"*Haris...*" The pen once again dropped from Dean's fingers, this time in utter defeat. Could they really fight the yellow-eyed freak one more time? Dean wasn't even sure he had it in him anymore – not after what they'd already been through. "It has to be that freaky bastard, Sammy. He's trying to mess with nature's balance, just like he did before with the special kids. He's back, and he's making sure we know it."

Sam opened his mouth but found he had no words, no comment that would make their situation sound any better.

Dean was right.

If Haris was back and this was his doing, it didn't take much to realize that the war with mankind Bobby had once spoken of was edging ever closer...

Maybe, just maybe it had already begun, in this quiet little Louisiana town where no one would realize the End of Days was upon them, not until it was far too late.

"You think this is it?" Sam finally blurted, unable to contain the foreboding tearing through him any longer. "This is *the* war?"

Dean let out a breath, his usual banter replaced by raw dread. "If this is the biggie, Sammy, we're so not freakin' ready..."

Morel smiled and Dean noticed the bokor's pleasure. He wanted to backhand the man, to knock out those rotting teeth and ram them down the murderer's throat, but that would make him no better.

"Something funny old man? 'Cause from where I'm standing your future ain't looking so hot either. Sammy the Skull ain't gonna be too happy when he knows you screwed up his plans."

Morel hunched his shoulders, shrugging as he began to chuckle insanely. "Maybe you should ask Marie what I find so funny. But then, she'll be dead by the time you boys get back to her, won't she?"

Dean jumped to grab the priest again, but somehow the little man had conjured a blade from some hidden orifice and had cut himself free from the rope binding him without the brothers realizing.

As the hunter saw the flash of the weapon, he braced himself, raising his left forearm in defense should the bokor try to plunge the knife forwards.

Morel didn't react how Dean had expected, however, and instead turned the grimy weapon on himself. Before either brother could stop him, Morel had thrust the knife into his own chest so hard the metal buried itself up to the hilt.

The priest's hands suddenly became lax around the ivory handle and they slid away, falling to his sides as he gurgled out one last bubbling, bloody breath.

Dean looked at Sam. "Well, that went well. Who'd have guessed he liked sticking himself as much as he did friggin' G.I. Joe?"

"Dean!" Sam pleaded, already forgetting their dead bokor in favor of more urgent matters. "We have to get back to Marie. Remember what Morel said! "

"I hear ya," Dean responded, eyeing the dead man warily as he jogged for the door, the Impala's keys already halfway out of his pocket.

LaBauve's Bed & Breakfast Slidell, Louisiana

The big Chevy's stereo seemed even louder than normal to Sam as his brother steered the car onto Marie's street, only braking as they neared the slightly imposing house that was their temporary abode.

Stormbringer coming

Time to die

Got to keep running

Stormbringer coming

Maybe the lyrics to Deep Purple's *Stormbringer* were fitting in some perverse way, but the younger Winchester barely noticed. All Sam could think about was their host. Twice now, Morel had threatened Marie's life. What was the old adage about three times?

Sam shuddered, unsure whether the bodily spasm was brought on by his imagination or an actual drop in the temperature outside the car.

As the lumbering mass of Detroit steel finally obeyed its master and ceased rolling, Sam swung open the door and stepped out, feeling a sudden splash of rain

on his cheeks from the heavens. He looked up, only to see the sky darkening as black clouds began to mass and open up their bowels.

"I'll take point," Sam insisted, pulling out his Glock and encircling the house until he was approaching the kitchen from the rear.

Dean didn't argue. There was no time to think about positions, only what might be transpiring inside. He nodded his agreement, sliding his own weapon from his waistband as Sam took a dive for the rear door.

THWACK!

Dean gaped, not because his brother had just burst into the house with such force he'd broken off two of the door's hinges, but because Marie was now standing, hands on hips, looking pretty pissed at them both.

"I take it ya'll never heard of the phrase 'damages must be paid for?'" The mambo shook her head, but a small smile crept across her features as she surveyed the shattered hinges and the shocked faces of her two guests.

"Marie...we err..." Dean swallowed hard. *Jeez, it's Missouri all over again.*

Sam ignored his brother's apologies and instead began a careful sweep of the room, opening cupboards, searching shelves, and under tables and work surfaces until he was certain they were alone. "Dean, Morel could control anything..." he warned.

Marie snorted, but allowed the younger man to continue his scavenger hunt, a look of total bemusement on her face as he rifled through the cookie jar. "Ya'll won't find anything in there," she eventually teased, pushing a pitcher of fresh orange juice across the table towards them both.

Sam shook his head and carried on with his digging, but Dean took up a glass and began to pour the inviting iced beverage. It had been a long day, and he needed a drink after being used as a pin cushion – even if it hadn't worked.

As he placed the tumbler to his lips, Marie let a soft hand fall across his and tugged the glass away. "Honey, 'tis what ya'll are lookin' for, not what you'd wanna be drinkin'."

The color drained from Dean's face, but to his credit he didn't let the glass fall, even though his fingers suddenly no longer wanted to hold it. "Poisoned?" He asked, placing the tumbler down quickly.

"Something like that." Marie took a seat and patted the one next to her, gesturing that both Winchesters sit at the table. "'Tis probably one of Antoine's 'zombie' potions."

"But, he can't really make zombies, right?" Sam bounced onto a padded chair and raised a brow curiously. "I mean, you can't just make a revenant that way..."

"More of a drug than a potion," Marie elaborated. "Antoine used a wil' mix of drugs, including a poison he had imported especially from a certain species of frog."

Sam nodded absently then looked at his brother. "Tetrodotoxin," he clarified.

"Tetro... *what?*" Dean didn't even finish trying to say the word, but as his brow creased his expression abruptly changed to recognition. "Hey, isn't that the juice they used in Fresh Bones?"

"Yeah, pretty freaky stuff," Sam agreed, then glanced at Marie when it was her turn to look at him quizzically. "*X Files* episode," He rolled his eyes. "Dean and Dad kinda used to get a kick outta watching."

Marie mouth some Creole expletive and shot Dean a scolding stare that made him move uncomfortably in his chair. She didn't, however, chide him for his taste in viewing. "I think Chantelle DuCroix was probably given the potion and was buried alive. That would explain the claw marks on her coffin-

"She ate or drank this crap and appeared to die? Not even the docs could tell?" Dean's face looked whiter than a recently fallen drift of snow and he rubbed his hands together nervously.

This wasn't exactly the thing he wanted to hear after the coffin incident back in Maryland. Ever since that night, he still flinched at the idea of going into any dark,

confined space. It was like he could feel the air slowly draining away around him – even though his mind tried to convince him he was in the wide open space of Marie’s kitchen.

Dean forced himself to drag down a slow, calming breath, but his voice cracked when he spoke. “That’s it, I refuse to eat or drink another single thing while I’m in this freakin’ mojo capital!”

“Even beer, Dean?” Sam’s eyes sparkled with mirth, even though he sensed his brother’s pain.

Dean would never want to show his weakness – not even to Sam – not even though it plagued him after all this time.

Dean scowled. “Yeah, even beer. I don’t wanna become a Romero extra anytime soon, dude.”

“So,” Marie’s brow’s dipped upwards. “Ya’ll wanna tell how you knew to come scootin’ back here in such a darn hurry? Did you find Antoine?”

“Yeah, we found Pops and his friggin’ dollies. When we tried twenty questions he took a knife to himself, though. Stuck that sucker right in his own chest like he was a doll himself.” Dean shook his head, already wishing he hadn’t vowed not to drink. A double Scotch might be good right about now. *This town is unbelievable.*

“Antoine’s dead? Then it’s over?” Marie wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. It was so wrong for a voodoo priest to do what Morel had, but no one deserved to go out by his own hand that way. On the other hand, if his death meant the end of Dezòd then everyone could breathe a sigh of relief again.

“He’s dead, but we don’t think it’s over.” Sam leaned forward, balancing his elbows on the table and cupping his hands together. “Morel was being controlled by a ghede – Baron Samedi. We thing the Baron is being manipulated by an even higher being – essentially being forced against his true nature.”

“No, Samedi would never hurt my people, not for *anything!*” Marie shook her head, the whites of her eyes widening at the news. “But still, something is happening...” Without further explanation she pushed up from her seat and padded across to a small TV perched on the nearest worktop. Flicking the set on she fumbled to get a signal.

Through the snow-filled screen it was hard to make out any true image, but apart from the occasional hiss of static, the sound was clearly audible.

Forecasters say the freak storm has literally come from nowhere and will be hitting our coast within the next few hours. What the public is now asking, is how this could happen with today’s technology? Have local weather centers let us down, or is this truly nature run amuck..?

The report continued, making it all too clear that whatever was happening, it hadn’t been seen on any radar or satellite screens until it was far too late to evacuate.

Marie tapped the TV, switching channels several times, but with each new station came the exact same tale.

“It was getting pretty dark out there when we came in,” Dean observed, thinking of the blackening clouds and splashes of rain on his windshield. “I’m guessing whoever is controlling Samedi has already upset nature’s balance to start a pretty freakin’ unnatural disaster.”

“We have to regain control of Samedi.” Marie spun around, addressing both brothers with a stoic look and a timbre almost low enough to be Lord Vader. “We have to stop him killing anymore of the good priests and mambos.”

“Yeah, well, how the hell do we stop something like the guardian of the dead? ‘Cause I ain’t planning on visiting his crossroads anytime soon.” Dean twisted away from the table. He’d seen his share of reapers and the afterlife, but Samedi was a different kind of entity – something akin to Haris – except he was normally a neutral spirit in the supernatural soup.

Marie faltered. It was easy to be bold when there was only your own life at stake, but as the storm gathered outside she became acutely aware that the lives of many more rested with her knowledge and the Winchesters' tenacity.

"I...I think I can use one of my rituals to summon Samedi." The mambo looked less than certain, but she continued. "Ya'll must understand, though, because he is the guardian of the dead, it has to be performed in a cemetery. I is thinking the one where DuCroix died would be most appropriate, as it forms a link – a bond, if you will with the Baron and the crossroads."

"Once we've summoned Samedi, what do we do next?" Sam tried to sound soft, tried to sound confident, but his usual air did little to calm the situation. It was if the pressure building in the heavens outside was building inside too – a crescendo that could only end in death. "If a ghede is some kind of spirit, rock salt may or may not stop him, but it definitely won't make him see reason."

"Everything has a weakness, sonny." Marie moved to the window and picked up a book of matches. Striking one until the kitchen filled with the smell of burning sulfur, she held the tiny flame high. "The Baron dreads fire, we should use this against him."

"Dreads fire, huh?" Dean glanced warily at his brother. "Ten to one it's Haris that's put the frighteners on ol' Samedi. I mean, hell, Haris freakin' loves to play with flames. How easy would it be to do a little pyrotechnic show and control this ghede?"

"Maybe..." Sam shrugged.

It was too easy.

Too *right*.

"The only way to know is to pin Samedi down and find the truth from him." Marie gathered her jacket from a hook on the back of the limply hanging door. "It won't be easy with the storm coming, but we got to go back to Forest Lawn and finish this." Without saying more, she picked up a purse Dean suspected held way more than makeup and money.

"You should show me the ritual, Marie. It's too dangerous for you to go out there." Sam barred the doorway with his towering frame. "Whoever is behind this has tried to kill you twice already, remember?"

Marie huffed and made to push him out of the way. "Child, you better move your ass outta my door before I do a lil' Creole Fu on ya'll!"

Sam's mouth crept into a smile, underestimating the smaller woman's doggedness. "You're going to kick me out of the way like a voodoo Van Damme?" He asked, shooting a look to Dean who was already grinning.

"Sonny, if you don't move your butt, a kick in the *jewels* is the only thing ya'll is gonna get anytime soon. Now will both you boys move, or do I gotta take on this walking skeleton by myself?"

Dean pushed up from his slouched position on the chair, raising a brow as he crossed the kitchen to join his brother and the tough little mambo. It was obvious Marie wasn't going to give in, so there was no point fighting it. They needed her, and they needed the summoning ritual.

"You heard her, Sasquatch, better haul ass to that cemetery before you get a toe in your tackle..."

Marie nodded helpfully.

Sam cringed and sidestepped quickly, his gaze never straying from Marie's little black boots until she'd passed him by in favor of the pelting rain and awaiting Impala.

Impala

En route to Forest Lawn Cemetery

The sky was an ominous shade of grey and black as dark storm clouds began to swirl in from the southeast. Large raindrops plopped onto the Chevy's windshield, hitting and splattering across the tempered glass so quickly that the wipers were

barely able to keep the deluge cleared. Within the Impala, Dean grumbled, both hands tightly gripping the steering wheel as he strained to see the road before him.

"What the hell?" he groaned as the old car's tires hydroplaned across the wet roads and he fought to keep it under control.

"I can't believe how bad the weather got and so fast," Sam commented. "Don't they normally give more warning for hurricanes? You'd think the satellite radar would have picked this up sooner."

From the back seat, Marie spoke. "You forget dahlin', this ain't no normal storm. This is the by-product of Dezod. The imbalance affects everything, but especially nature. There's a storm comin' boys, a big one!"

Dean twitched at the mention of the storm, Bobby's words of so long ago echoing in his head. "*There's a storm comin', and you boys, you're smack in the middle of it!*" With Haris on the loose and usually the culprit behind "all things bad" for the Winchesters, Dean was feeling more and more uneasy about the current situation.

"So, if we can stop Samedi, then will things get back to normal?" Sam asked, twisting around in the seat to face Marie.

"I don't know, *cher'*. I certainly hope so, otherwise, I'm afraid we're in for some pretty dark days ahead," she answered, trepidation in her voice. "But, you need to know that Baron Samedi isn't going to be easy to stop. He's very powerful."

"We fought against worse odds before," Dean countered. "What's one more psycho voodoo god to deal with compared to everything else?"

"Samedi is nothing to be toyed with, boy! You can mock what you don't understand, but if you aren't careful, you might find Samedi escorting you to the afterlife," Marie cautioned him.

"Yeah, well, been there, done that, courtesy of some ugly-ass reaper," Dean threw back, glancing over his shoulder.

He quickly turned his attention back to the road, the high winds pummeling the trees on either side of the shoulder threatened to snap one of the Southern Pines in half and toss it into the pathway of the car. When a sudden gust did exactly that, the lengthy trunk falling across a single lane of highway just ahead of the Impala, it was only Dean's fast reaction that steered the car around the obstacle.

While the occupants of the car gathered themselves from being flung side to side in the hasty maneuver, Dean squinted to make out a shadow ahead in the center of the road. The rain fell in a torrential onslaught, the gale force winds driving it nearly horizontally. As the clouds continued to roll in, the sun occluded from the sky, it was becoming more and more difficult to see anything even with the bright headlights of the car shining ahead of them.

"WHAT THE HELL..." he abruptly shouted, jerking the steering while slamming on the brakes and tossing Sam towards the dash while Marie braced herself against the back of the front seat.

Barely illuminated in the high beams, the tempest obscuring nearly everything, Antoine Morel stood defiantly in the middle of the road. As the car finally came to a stop, hydroplaning mere inches from yet another uprooted tree, Dean slowly fell back against the seat, trying to hide the shaking in his hands as he let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Is everybody okay?" he asked shakily. While Sam and Marie reported in, Dean leaned forward again, staring through the windshield, straining to see the voodoo priest in the deluge.

It didn't seem possible that the slightly built old man could be standing before him; after all, Dean had seen him plunge the knife into his chest all the way to the hilt. Yet, here he was, for all appearances, alive and standing amid the howling wind and driving rain of a hurricane. Still, he was a Bokor and a powerful one at that! Dean wasn't really that surprised at all.

“Sonofabitch! I’m gonna put that bastard down once and for all,” Dean grumbled as he reached for the Desert Eagle within his jacket. Beside him, Sam had already pulled the shotgun from the floorboards and was pumping a round into the chamber.

As the brothers prepared to challenge the priest, the back door of the Impala creaked loudly as it was opened. They watched as Marie clambered from the car and strode purposefully toward the Bokor. Even in the torrential downpour, they could see her reach into the same pouch she had used the evening before when breaking the Bokor’s spell on Sam.

Withdrawing more of the powdery contents, and despite the rain, she blew the dust at Morel, and followed it with a string of strange-sounding words as her voice rose above the gale.

Morel’s face glared just before his spirit blinked out, wispy traces of his form swirling away on the cyclonic wind. Marie paused for a moment, looking about her as the downpour plastered her hair to her face. She startled when Dean drew up behind her, one hand reaching out to touch her shoulder.

“Where’d he go?” he shouted above the storm.

“I called on Bade, the loa of the wind to take Morel away. It’s only temporary since I think Bade and the other elemental loas are obviously a little busy right now,” the priestess answered.

Sam joined them, still alertly looking around, the shotgun at ready. “I guess we should have salted and burned his body. We should’ve never left him with a way to come back.”

“Yeah, but we were sorta in a hurry, dude,” Dean answered, reflecting that they had hastily responded to Morel’s last threat directed toward Marie. “Look, nothing says we can’t take care of that little oversight now. Sammy, you head back to his cabin and take care of Morel’s remains. I’ll go with Marie and see if we can invite the Baron to a good ole’ southern bar-b-cue.”

Sam shook his head sending water flying off in several directions as it flew from his long strands. “No way, dude. You get corpse duty,” he insisted.

“What, Sammy? Afraid that he might come after your little doll with a butter knife this time?” Dean teased. “Seriously dude, you can take some old, shaggy-assed Bokor can’t you?”

“Not the point, Dean. This isn’t open for negotiation,” Sam demanded. In his mind, already made up, the younger Winchester wasn’t going to let his older brother take the lead on this one. Despite the smile, the arrogant confidence, the swagger, Sam knew that Dean wasn’t one-hundred percent, not physically and certainly not mentally. He knew that Dean was simply trying to send him on the less-dangerous of the two tasks, always putting himself in harm’s way if it kept Sam out of it. But not this time, Sam determined. “We’ll head on to the cemetery. If Morel is Samedi’s right-hand voodoo man, then you need to take care of him and keep him off our ass.”

“Sammy...” Dean’s voice warned.

“Boys! Enough! Can we focus more on the problem at hand and at the very least, maybe argue about this out of the rain?” Marie interrupted, scowling at both young men.

Dean groaned, wanting to argue further, determined that he should be the one to face the powerful Voodoo Loa instead of his brother. In the back of his mind, he felt certain that Haris was behind the Baron’s recent turn to the dark-side and if there was any chance that the yellow-eyed bastard might show up, then there was no way he wanted his younger brother within a hundred miles of the cemetery. Still, one look at Marie’s irritated countenance and Dean relented. He stood a chance arguing with Sam, but no way he stood a snowball’s chance in hell against the older woman too.

Growling under his breath, he snatched the shotgun from out of Sam’s hands and stalked off to the Impala’s trunk. After retrieving a couple more items, he reluctantly tossed his brother the keys.

"You watch your ass, Sammy," Dean reminded, bending down to speak through the rolled-down driver's side window. "And keep hers in one piece too, okay?" He turned and dropped into a jog, his form quickly swallowed up in the wind and harsh rain of the advancing storm as he headed out for the Bokor's cabin.

Sam watched him go, silently relieved that Dean had given in and hoping that his older brother hadn't realized his reasoning.

"Your brother will be fine, sugah'," Marie announced quietly as Sam put the Chevy in drive and pulled away from his brother.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I know he can take care of himself. He should be able to finish Morel."

"Yes, that, but I was speaking more about the deeper wounds that he refuses to deal with. He carries a burden, but he also has great strength. You should talk to him," she advised.

Sam grunted. "Yeah, talk to Dean about what bothers him. Marie, if I had a nickel for every time I've tried to get my brother to let me in and help him, hell, I'd buy a small island and retire there."

"You must not give up, Sam. You two, as brothers, have a bond. More than that, you both have a special purpose in this life and I'm not talking about the many evil creatures that you hunt. Just always remember, that you both are much stronger together than you ever are apart. Your brother tries very hard to protect you, you just need to remind him that he cannot do it alone," the dark woman said sincerely.

The young hunter sat quietly for a moment, absorbing what Marie had said. It wasn't anything that he hadn't thought himself many times over, but something about the way the voodoo priestess had emphasized the importance of their being stronger together, struck a chord. How many times had things gone south for them, simply because they had split up on a hunt? Worse still, how many times had Dean nearly gotten killed simply because he stalwartly refused to let Sam take any risk?

"Marie, I know. I just wish that Dean would listen. But he has this idea that his main purpose in life is watching out for me. I understand where it comes from. Our dad wasn't around much when we were growing up and when he was, well, he kinda raised us, Dean especially, pretty tough. He meant well, but he sorta made Dean responsible for me. Dean just never had the chance to be a kid. In his mind, it's unacceptable to show pain or fear. God knows I've tried to get him to open up, but well, it's pretty hard to undo twenty-some years of conditioning."

Marie smiled easily, reaching out to gently touch Sam's right forearm. "He's your brother. You will never give up on him, nor he you. He has his strength and you have yours. Different, but together you have a synergy. Just always remember that, Sam."

The younger hunter nodded but didn't reply. Still absorbing her words, but concentrating on the road ahead of him, he drove in silence toward the cemetery. Water splashed up and over the road as they crossed the causeway towards the graveyard, and in conjunction with the driving wind, was beginning to flood the delta, making driving nearly impossible. Already, the Impala's tires were covered halfway by the rushing tide.

Several hundred yards further and Sam stopped the car, throwing it into park and killing the engine. Ahead, the road was nearly washed out completely, mud cascading across the asphalt. He wasn't sure how deep it was or even if the old muscle car had the "muscle" to pull them through it. He just knew he didn't want to face Dean's wrath should he get the Impala stuck or worse yet, washed away in some tidal surge.

"Marie, is there another way to get to the cemetery? I don't think we can drive any further this way," he told her.

"No, cher'. 'Tis just a little bit ahead now. We can walk from here," she answered.

"But the storm..." Sam began.

"Honey, my papa always said only two things melt in the rain, sugah and shit, and I don't think you're neither," she teased. "Come on, sitting here ain't fixin' nothing."

Marie opened the door, bracing herself against the onslaught a split second before stepping out into the rain. Sam followed quickly behind her, grabbing the backpack with the flares and all the other items that he and Dean had stuffed in there, not knowing how they would battle Samedi. His long strides helped him catch up to the voodoo priestess as she began to wade through shin-high water.

At the tempest swirled around them, Sam worried that the supposed fire they were to use to battle and control the Baron might not even be possible in the strange and sudden storm. Before he had the chance to worry further, he lifted his head against the buffeting wind, sensing more than seeing that Marie had stopped.

She stood at the entrance to the cemetery, the huge elaborate gates nearly swaying in the gale force winds. Around them, the ground was giving up its dead as caskets burst up from the mud, water from the nearby canal tossing them about like elongated ice cubes in a cup of muddy-looking coffee.

Other crypts, above ground and made of concrete, withstood the barrage and it was by one of the solid tombs that a dark figure now rose up. Marie paled and even in the darkening afternoon, the sun now completely blotted out by the storm clouds, Sam could tell she was frightened.

He wiped at his eyes, desperate to see what had startled the woman so. In a flash of lightning, he saw the figure; tall and imposing, it stood with its arms held open as if in welcome to the inopportune visitors.

Suddenly, Forest Lawn Cemetery seemed all too eager to make itself the final resting place for Sam Winchester.

Cabin somewhere near North Shore Beach Slidell, Louisiana

Dean trudged through the shin-deep water, mud pulling at his boots as they sunk into the swampy mire with each step. The wind and rain pelted his face despite his best effort to keep his head down. He was soaked through every layer of clothing and notwithstanding the southern warmth, he was chilled.

He glanced back over his shoulder, seeing the shape of the blue Toyota Tundra he'd hot-wired fade into the darkening distance. He considered driving in closer, hoping the four-wheel drive of the truck would work to save him a few extra minutes out in the rain, but then figured he'd likely just get the truck stuck or even flooded. Not that he cared about the stolen vehicle per se, but he knew he'd need a way to get back to Sammy once he was done with this piss-ass kindergarten mission.

"You don't fool me, Sam!" he shouted out at the blackened sky. "I know what you think you were doing here, sending me on the salt and burn while your ass goes after Samedi. You might think you know something about watching out for me, but dude, I wrote the book on protecting brothers."

Dean trudged forward, the tide seeming to get deeper as he approached the Bokor's cabin. Up ahead, he could see that the water from Lake Pontchartrain had swelled past anything the banks could contain and was up to the top step leading to the rickety porch of the shack.

"Friggin' rain," Dean groaned as he pulled his foot up once again from the muck that tried to entrap him. "Friggin' swamps, friggin' voodoo, friggin' Bokors," he muttered, continuing his tirade.

A flash of lightning followed by the resulting boom of thunder startled him with its nearness. Even the wind chose that moment to gust and nearly pushed him down into the rising flood.

"Yeah, and a friggin' supernatural hurricane, 'cause like we don't have enough problems without Mother-friggin-Nature turning against us too," he shouted to the heavens. "Next time I steal a truck, it's gonna have a trailer with a damn boat attached to it."

Dean pushed forward, shifting the pack on his back and praying that the contents inside were staying drier than the rest of him.

"Just my luck, I'll get there and the salt will be soaked. Wonder if Bokors keep salt handy in their crappy homes? Never know who you might invite for dinner and a little ritualistic zombie action."

Nearly wading now as he closed on the ramshackle abode, Dean raised the shotgun above his head to keep it out of the water just as his dad had drilled into him years back. He wondered absently if his father had ever seen action in anything that resembled the murky swamps of Mississippi. Funny, but their dad had never really shared much about boot camp, or for that matter, anything else he'd ever done in the Corps. But as was the case with John Winchester, information was "need to know," oftentimes only shared if it held relevance to the current hunt.

Dean wondered absently where his dad was now. He knew Sam had said that he'd called him when he was frantically looking for Dean in York. But just like back in Lawrence and again when Dean had been electrocuted and was dying, their dad remained ominously absent and unresponsive.

"Just once, I wish he'd act like he gave a damn," Dean grumbled to himself. "Maybe he really doesn't care about me like he does Sam? Maybe there was some truth to what the demon had said? Maybe Sammy really is his favorite, maybe all I am is an over-glorified guard dog?"

Dean continued his forward progress unmindful of the torrent of water that was climbing higher on his waist. He was lost in memories; visions of a dark cabin on another stormy night; of nightmares, warped but still vivid, courtesy of an Alp; of a demon-possessed John spewing insults and taunts at him over and over.

"You know, you fight and you fight for this family, but the truth is, they don't need you. Not like you need them," his dad spat out at him, yellow eyes giving way to his characteristic brown. "Sam, he's clearly John's favorite. Even when they fight, that's more concern than he's ever shown you."

You're worthless Dean. John knows it, Sammy knows it. Why do you think they keep leaving you?

Dean wiped angrily at the rain that clung to his lashes and blurred his vision. At least he was gonna blame it on the rain, especially since there was no one around to challenge him on that little bit. He shook his head, hoping the motion would help evaporate the pictures that were rambling around in his head.

Deep down, he told himself that those memories, the nightmares, his own nagging internal voice, were all wrong, all distorted. But ever since the demon's hateful diatribe in the cabin, it was harder and harder to convince himself. He didn't really think that his dad hated him and he knew in his heart that Sam didn't. But there was always that doubt, always biting at him, sucking the life out of his soul like a leech; slowly, agonizingly.

Still, what else did he have? Dad, Sammy, they were everything. Who else gave a damn about him? He'd spent his entire life keeping people at arm's length, avoiding the hurt of loss until he realized that all he had were these two people left in his life. And yet, they always seemed to want to get away from him.

"Goddammit! Stop this shit, Winchester!" he reprimanded himself. "Get your head back in the game."

But even though Dean forced himself to consider the job at hand, that voice of self-doubt still whispered in the back of his head, always ready to sneak up on him, jumping over the walls and opening up with rapid-fire reproach.

"Okay, Morel. I know you're just sitting back waiting to pounce on me. Why not just show your ass and let me introduce you to *my little friend*," Dean snarked, his voice mimicking Pacino's as he hefted the shotgun.

Nearly to the porch, he knew the Bokor's spirit had to be waiting on him, ready to attack him and prevent him from putting the evil bastard down for good. Dean scanned the exterior cabin warily, expecting Morel to materialize at any moment.

"Hmm, maybe spirits don't like to get wet either," he muttered as another gust of wind-driven rain pelted him.

Since the water was rising rapidly, Dean couldn't see where the original steps to the cabin began. He shuffled his feet forward, slowly and carefully moving ahead, hoping to "feel" the riser before he actually ended up tripping on it.

Around him, the hurricane grew in intensity, wind driving the water from the lake higher and higher as it swirled. Dean took another step, fighting the current, when something bumped against his leg.

He froze, tentatively extending his foot out to see if he had just smacked into the step or not. When something solid brushed past his left hip creating a large ripple in the surface of the murky water, Dean's heart began to pound.

He estimated the remaining distance to the steps, considered the heavy backpack on his shoulder and the current that seemed intent on dragging him out to sea. As if having the spirit of a powerful voodoo priest trying to kill him wasn't bad enough, Dean grimly realized that now it seemed that even Lake Pontchartrain was offering up her gators to help finish the job.

Dean scrambled up the first riser, relieved that his foot fell on something that resembled a way out of the water. He quickly looked over his shoulder, spotting the gray-green head of the gator pop above the surface. It stared at him with blank, uncaring eyes, the lack of blinking making the creature seem even more malevolent, more intent on having Dean for a meal.

"You just keep your distance, Godzilla," Dean warned.

The gator responded by swimming closer, its armored body cruising through the choppy lake like a submarine. It thrashed its tail just as Dean bounded up the next step, spraying water across the already drenched hunter. He was nearly out of the rising tide when his boot slipped on the last step and he fell forward onto the edge of the porch.

Dean clawed frantically to get his body up and out of the water, fearing the hungry gator had likely reacted to his splashing. He tried to stand, but as he planted his foot down on the boards, the rotten wood snapped under his weight and the recent abuse from the weather, throwing him off balance and fully backwards into the waiting grasp of the lake.

He swallowed a mouthful of silt-laden water, surfacing quickly and sucking in a breath of air before he spun around seeking the huge reptile. Sure enough, the gator had been attracted to the noise and splashing and was swiftly moving back in the hunter's direction.

Dean was treading water now, trying to keep afloat despite the heavy pack on his shoulder. He'd lost the shotgun during his less-than-graceful fall into the lake, angry now because he knew he didn't have anything else handy to use against the approaching predator.

"Sonofabitch!" he shouted, slapping his free hand down in the water, angry at himself for losing the weapon. "Of all the stupid damn things to do. Dad would have my ass."

He cast a glance, spotted the gator and decided that his best offence was a quick retreat. Flattening out in the water, he kicked for the cabin, his usually proficient breast-stroke impaired by the heavy backpack.

Almost back to the deck, he pulled up abruptly, coming nearly face to face with the toothy maw of the creature. He flipped around, kicking backwards as the gator's growl sounded, its jaws snapping shut with an audible thwack.

"How the hell did you get there?" Dean shouted back at the beast as he pushed away from the wooden island. It wasn't possible, the thing had just been behind him and now it was suddenly blocking his way to the safety of the cabin.

"And blocking my way to finish off that bastard Morel," he abruptly realized. "No way that gator could have swam around me that fast, not naturally at least."

“Oh, so that’s it?” he shouted at the cabin. “Not good enough that it’s a friggin’ hurricane, not good enough that I’ve nearly drowned, hell, not even good enough that there’s a gator after my ass, you gotta go and use some voodoo on the freakin’ thing!”

He looked back to the gator and then the cabin. “Well bring it on. I always wanted a pair of alligator boots,” he added.

The Bokor-controlled reptile moved toward him as though it had comprehended his taunt. Dean considered the pack on his back. It was going to weigh him down and if he was going to have to get through the gator to get to Morel, on its own turf no less, then he knew he needed to ditch the thing fast. Still, he was reluctant to part with it since it held nearly everything he needed to get rid of the Bokor once and hopefully for all.

Pushing up out of the water, he slid the bag from his shoulder and tossed it towards the porch. It landed with a splash, teetering precariously on the edge, but not falling back into the waves. Dean held his breath, fearing the pack would drop and be lost to the muddy depths of the storm-swelled lake, but when it remained on the decking, he sighed in relief.

To his right, the gator swung back around, its snout breaking the surface as it aimed toward the young hunter. Dean reached for the knife in his boot, glad that he’d chosen to clean, sharpen and replace the blade following his little slice and dice experience with Marie’s python.

He glanced back at the on-coming alligator, then down at the knife in his hand.

“I gotta start carrying a bigger blade,” he griped to himself. Deep down, he knew it was insane to even consider pulling a Tarzan routine on a hungry, voodoo-controlled, armored car with teeth, but as he watched the thing approach, somehow he knew that even if he managed to get out of the water, the gator wasn’t going to relent.

He back-pedaled first, twisting sideways just as the beast came upon him. It snapped its powerful jaws in frustration, flicking its tail as it turned around to come at him again. Dean kept his body compact, kicking his legs only enough to keep him afloat, trying not to give the gator any loose limbs on which to chomp down.

The reptile approached again, but this time, just as it was within arm’s reach it submerged, diving under the choppy waves and becoming lost in the black sediment of Pontchartrain. Dean twisted in fear, not expecting the maneuver, sensing that the huge thing was going to come up from underneath him.

He wasn’t far off when all of a sudden he felt something large and heavy slam into his lower legs. There wasn’t any pain and the water around him didn’t immediately blossom red, so he assumed that the creature had done nothing more than “nudge” him. Still, he reached down with his left hand and felt for both feet, just to make sure.

With the knife held before him, Dean headed for the cabin once again, but the current and crashing waves dragged at his body making each inch he gained in that direction hard-won. The gator didn’t have to deal with the same encumbrances, gliding through the surf easily as it raced toward its prey.

Dean barely stopped in time, just before huge jaws snapped catching little more than air but coming close enough to his left arm that he could feel the fabric of his shirt tugged slightly. “What would the Crocodile Hunter do here?” he asked aloud as he took up swimming again.

The gator immediately turned back on him, its speed frightening as it hit Dean full-force, plowing over him and driving him beneath the surface. He felt himself pushed down into the muck, the cloying sludge of the lake bottom grabbing him at him with ghostlike hands. He struggled to get to the surface, pushing off as best he could, but the mud held his booted feet firmly. Desperate for air and trying to contain his panic, he tugged at his entrapped feet to no avail.

In the darkness of the water, he knew the gator was lingering, waiting to grab hold of him and stuff him down under some dead chunk of wood until he was decomposed enough to be eaten.

“Damn, gotta stop watching Animal Planet, cause that knowledge is so not comforting,” he thought.

Dean pushed off once again, nearly pulling his foot completely out of his laced-on boot but finally breaking free of the mire. He surged toward the surface, lungs bursting, vision blurred, popping up just as a large wave crashed down on top of him and pushed him under once more. His body tumbled, slamming into the bottom again, but fortunately not becoming stuck.

He fought to stay calm, allowing the current to carry him until he could float back to the top. This time when he broke the water the churning surf didn't immediately drive him back down. Instead, he saw that he had gotten dragged several more yards away from the relative safety of the cabin. Worse still, two steely eyes peeked just above the surface between Dean and the structure.

“Alright Godzilla, bring your ass on over here if you got the ... Hmm, do you have any... wait, never mind, what the hell am I thinking anyway? Come on you sonofabitch. I got places to be and bodies to burn.”

The gator held for a second, then with a whip of its tail, sped forward like a torpedo. It dove underneath at the last minute, but Dean was ready and he twisted aside, diving under the water at the same time. He didn't know if it was the smartest thing he'd ever done when he felt the massive body of the reptile slam into his side and push him toward the bottom. Dean rolled with the force, feeling his shoulder strike something hard. He would have cried out from the impact, the shoulder not nearly as healed as he had lead Sammy to believe, but another mouthful of swamp water wasn't high on his beverage list.

Waiting till it seemed that the gator had moved past, he floated back to the surface. As he broke, the creature was on him almost instantly, its snout driving into his chest, jaws snapping as it tried to take a bite out of his flesh. Dean responded out of instinct, driving the knife with everything he had into the underneath of the thing's mouth.

His shoulder screamed out in protest, recently recuperating muscles, tendons and ligaments angry at the amount of jarring force he employed. Dean bit back the pain, forcing his hand to push harder against the hilt, eager to inflict as much damage as he could before his hand went numb.

The gator rolled over in response, its body spinning in the water like a propeller. The knife pulled free of the beast's flesh as it spun, opening a long cut. The water surrounding both hunter and carnivore turned red, but quickly dispersed with the turbulent waves.

Dean wasted no time in heading for the cabin, hoping he had hurt the thing enough to keep it off his back for the next few minutes. Between the storm and his aching arm, not to mention that his left hand now held the knife, his ability to swim was less than impressive.

Just yards from the relative safety of the deck, it struck him again, this time, its snout driving into the middle of his back and knocking the air from his lungs. The gator grappled him under water, its claws raking through the flesh on Dean's thigh as it tried to take the hunter down to the bottom. He couldn't see the thing in the blackness, but knew it was trying to drown him.

He reached out, feeling the belly of the creature so close to his own. Driving his left arm upward, he plunged the knife into the gator's unprotected belly. It wasn't as easy as gutting a deer, but the effect wasn't dissimilar. The reptile rolled again, spinning even faster than the first time and taking the impaled blade, along with Dean, to join it in its crazy dance.

Disoriented and dizzy from the underwater acrobatics, Dean felt the hilt ripped from his hand and silently prayed that he had been able to inflict enough damage to put the creature down.

Unencumbered, he kicked for the cabin again, relieved when his hand struck the wood support of the railing. Exhausted, he pulled himself up, the rising tide actually

helping more since he was able to nearly float onto the flooring of the porch. He lay there for a moment, the firmness of the wood underneath him suddenly comforting.

He rolled over, spotted his discarded backpack and immediately stretched out to grab it. Rising to stand, Dean took a couple of unsteady steps, his right thigh burning from the cuts the gator had inflicted. There was blood trickling down past his wrist and he realized that the thing hadn't really *missed* his arm when it had snapped at him the first time. Still, all in all, he still had both hands and feet, and now he was out of the water and in the relative safety of the cabin.

"*Relative* being the operative word here," he snarked, considering that the Bokor was still likely to attack him at any second.

As he took a step forward, a deep growl behind him spun Dean around. The same rising water that had allowed Dean to reach the sanctuary of the deck had also allowed the gator to crawl up from the lake. It stood across from Dean now, jaws agape, a low hiss escaping from its maw.

"Now Godzilla, can't we just let bygones be bygones? I'll apologize for trying to filet you if you just swim off the other way and promise not to rip me to shreds."

The gator responded by snapping its tail around, throwing a wall of water at the hunter. Dean reacted, jumping up and clearing the appendage before it had the chance to break his leg. He came back down with a splash, panicking as he felt the softened wood give slightly beneath his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean saw the gator lash out again, its tail coming at him from the opposite direction so fast that he barely had the chance to react. He tried to dive out of the way to his left but the tail caught his right ankle and the force of the strike threw him back against the exterior wall of the cabin.

"Damn, my luck, even a friggin' gator gets to toss my ass into a wall," he groaned, struggling to rise.

The gator moved quickly through the water, while Dean fought to regain his footing. The wind had picked up even more and was pushing at his body while it churned up the water around him. Dean waited till the thing was nearly on him before he launched himself toward the door to the house. The gator swung about, its body nearly folding in half as its tail caught the young man just as he broke for the entrance. His body slammed into the doorframe and landed in a heap as he felt something jam into his ribcage.

He rolled over slowly, not caring about the attacking reptile so much as trying to remember how to breathe. He put his hands underneath him, hoping to push himself up from the slats if for no other reason than to avoid face-planting and drowning.

His hand struck something long, solid and cool as he reached out. At first he thought it was a pipe, but as clarity set in, he knew it couldn't be, not right in front of the door. When the "pipe" moved easily in his grasp, Dean suddenly felt a ray of hope.

Standing up and bringing the metal pole along with him, Dean looked down at the object in his hands. Resembling a short trident, the pole was about four feet in length with three barbed points at the end. Not schooled in the ways of frogging or any other form of food gathering except those that could be accomplished with a bullet or buckshot, Dean had no idea what the strange looking device was used for, but he knew what he was going to use it for now.

He turned back toward where the gator remained, the creature's jaw opened in a wide yawn, the low rumble still sounding.

"What? Am I boring you there Godzilla? Well, how 'bout I help you go to sleep, *permanently*?" he quipped.

The gator seemed to understand the taunt as it charged toward him. Dean never flinched, waiting for the precise moment that the predator had committed itself to its motion. The gator was nearly a foot away, its tooth-filled mouth snapping closed loudly enough to be heard over the wind and thunder.

Dean raised the frog gig above his head and drove it down into the back of the reptile's skull with every ounce of force he could muster. He'd always thought that a gator's hide was much thicker, much more difficult to penetrate on the top side. They certainly as hell looked that way, but the spear went through easier than he expected, actually striking the wood plank beneath the creature.

The gator thrashed as far as the spear allowed it, its tail whipping side to side in an effort to free itself or perhaps to take Dean with it when it died. For his part, Dean stood transfixed by the scene, knowing he should get away from the dying creature, but strangely mesmerized by it. Contrary to what others might think, he really took no joy in killing innocent animals, including the gator. Despite being controlled by the Bokor, the thing was only doing what was in its nature. Maybe it had something to protect. Dean could understand that.

Thankfully, the gator finally stilled, laying so quiet and rigid it almost looked fake had it not been for the blood and meat that flowed from the wound. Dean turned away from it, knowing that he still had bigger fish to fry and although Morel didn't have the sheer muscle and teeth of the big reptile, Dean knew he was going to be twice as hard to put down.

Wiping rain and a trickle of blood from the corner of his eye, Dean picked up the backpack and moved toward the door of the cabin. It squeaked loudly, announcing his entry to the near-darkness of the interior.

He sensed rather than saw the other "presence" in the room. In the far corner, he could barely make out the slumped form of the dead Bokor propped against the wall. The body was where it had dropped from their battle during the visit the day before and appeared to be just as dead now as it had been then. Dean stood in the doorway, scanning the large main room.

He spotted Morel's ghostly shape just off to the left, the voodoo priest shimmered ethereally as lightning flashed through the clouded windows. The spirit stood silently, arms crossed across his chest as though he'd been waiting on the young hunter to get there.

Dean sighed out loud, fatigue pulling at his body, but determination to see this through foremost in his mind. He knew when he got here it wasn't going to be an easy salt and burn, there wasn't such a thing in the Winchester vocabulary. Still, no matter if he was exhausted, bleeding or dying, he knew that Marie and Sam were counting on him.

He took a step forward, wading through the rushing water that was threatening to flood the Bokor's abode. It was like moving through wet concrete, but Dean forced himself to pick up his weary legs and trudge toward his target.

Morel's spirit moved toward Dean, floating effortlessly across the surface of the water, unencumbered by the rising water. Dean watched warily, his attention to the dead body distracted by the moving specter.

"You shouldn't have come back here!" Morel shouted at him. "You cannot stop what has been put in motion."

"Yeah, yeah, big evil, coming storm, heard it all before you crazy bastard. You might be right about it all, but let me tell you this, you won't be around to find out, 'cause I'm sending your ass straight down into hell. If you see good ole' Haris, be sure to give him my best," Dean retorted.

Morel laughed, long gray hair whipping back and forth as he shook his head.

"No, I won't be going to hell, but your brother is going to meet the gatekeeper to the other side when the Baron comes for his soul. And you, when I finish with you, your dead body will rise up and walk the world of the undead forever. You will be Zombi, under my control, subject to my will," the Bokor promised.

"Dude, the only thing rising around here is the tide and my serious lack of patience with your threats. Marie said voodoo, true voodoo, is about balance. Let's see if I can even the scales a bit."

The Bokor laughed once more, still hovering slightly above the cascading lake water. It might have been a sudden gust of wind, it could have even been the rush of the storm surge, but Dean knew better, as his body was lifted off the floor and tossed effortlessly out the wide-open door and into Lake Pontchartrain yet again.

He gulped in a mouthful of the disgusting swamp water, surfacing and coughing as he tried to clear his airway. Through the torrential rain he saw Morel's form appear in the doorway, still laughing like the madman he was.

Dean tried not to panic but as unseen hands pressed down onto his head, pushing him under and allowing water to fill his mouth and nose, he suddenly wished that he knew a few voodoo spells himself.

As the blackness of the lake threatened to suck him down the last thought to go through Dean's mind was how he was so gonna smack his brother for sending him on the "easy job."

Forest Lawn Cemetery

It would have almost seemed like something out of a B Horror movie had Sam not known how very real the whole situation had become. The towering figure that rose in front of the huge crypt glared at them, red eyes staring out of a glistening skull. Samedi reached up and tipped his black top hat, a mocking smile daring Sam and Marie to cross the flood water and face him.

Sam shifted the backpack on his shoulder with his free hand, the other maintaining a slippery grip on the shotgun. Rain plastered his long brown hair to his face, the wind buffeted him, threatening to push him down into the rising water. Beside him, Marie took a step forward into the flood, her determination reminding Sam of Dean. He reached an arm out to block her way and even in the raging storm he could see the look of defiance she flashed at him.

Sam raised the shotgun and took aim on the loa. He really had no idea what he was doing, considering there wasn't anything in his father's journal about battling, much less defeating, an angry voodoo deity. Still, he knew enough not to just go charging in, especially when the damn thing was being so cocky. Really though, could Samedi be any worse, any tougher to battle than Haris had been thus far? They'd survived Haris' tactics, well maybe just barely, but he and Dean were still alive and kicking despite the yellow-eyed demon's best efforts to alter that. How much more difficult could a cigar chomping, black top hat wearing voodoo loa be?

Marie continued to protest at his side, pushing his restraining arm out of her way. Distracted by her movement, Sam startled when a large coffin burst up from beneath the water. He swung the shotgun to meet it, barely releasing tension on the trigger and accidentally firing at the coffin as it moved up and down like a bobber in the flooding cemetery.

Spinning back around, he faced Marie again, suddenly aware that the priestess was shouting at him.

"Sam, let me go. I need to talk to him," she implored.

"Marie, you can't be serious. Talk to Samedi? He's being controlled, he's likely to kill you the minute you take a step toward him," Sam replied, shouting above the storm's din.

The dark woman ducked underneath Sam's arm as he lost his grip on her wet forearm. She charged forward, her legs churning through the water and creating waves of her own. Sam stared after her, feeling like he was watching an older, darker, female version of Dean, stubbornness and all. Or maybe it was just that he was the only one around that had enough sense not to go charging into a situation without thinking it through first.

For once, Sam's long legs didn't offer him much advantage as she struggled to push through the tide to reach Marie. Ahead of him, she was nearly within reach of the Baron. Sam could hear her talking, a strange French-sounding language yet not

as smooth or romantic-sounding. Of course, it didn't help that the hurricane force winds currently swirling around them wouldn't have made any language sound beautiful at the moment.

"Kisa ki rive ou? Ki moun fosere ou touye?"

The Baron merely smiled at the woman, sinister even in the impending darkness.

"Kisa ou bezouen, petit?" he replied back. "Eske ou konprann kisa mwen?"

"Wi!" Marie answered. "Baron Samedi, Papa Guede, Keeper of the Gateway. But you have changed. You are not benevolent any longer, something has twisted you away from your true nature."

"NON!" Samedi shouted back, his eyes flashing brighter red. "No one controls me!"

"But you bring about dezod with your actions. Is that what you desire? To harm your faithful children? To destroy this world?" Marie asked.

Samedi paused as though he was contemplating the priestess' words but his passiveness was short-lived. Punctuated by a flash of lightning and a nearby crack of thunder, the loa quickly erupted in anger as he began yelling in Creole. From the distance, Sam watched, suddenly feeling fear creep up his spine as the storm around them seemed to intensify proportionally as the Baron shouted back to Marie.

He wasn't necessarily worried about himself, not even Marie at the moment, but rather Sam was fearful for all of humanity. What if this was what Bobby had warned them about? What if this was the coming war with the entire supernatural world rising up and taking on the human race? He had thought everything was going to be better when Dean had banished Haris to the depths of the Atlantic, but now, here and in the middle of this freakish hurricane, Sam Winchester suddenly felt as though the odds were stacked against them. What hope could they, even all of the other hunters out there, have when even nature was turned against them? If Haris had stepped up his game, was now going to involve entities other than his horde of demons, then how in the world could he and Dean ever stand a chance?

Sam tightened his grip on the shotgun. "NO!" he shouted to himself, forcing the thoughts of gloom and doom from his mind. *"We can't give up. I can't give up. Not after everything we've been through. Not after all the sacrifices we've made, after all we've lost. It can't all be for nothing."*

He shook his head forcefully, turning his face into the wind to allow it to push his soaked hair back out of his eyes. When he could see again, he spotted Marie still moving closer to Samedi, still pleading her case.

"Marie, please come back here. Come away from him," he begged her as the wind switched directions and a sudden whiff of rum, tobacco and death filled his nostrils.

"Sam, I must try. We must restore the balance, we must convince Samedi to return to his true state," she replied stalwartly, turning back to face the spirit and beginning to chant as she had that night when Morel's dream-snake had been trying to kill Sam.

"Your simple mojo will not stop me. You should go now, before I take your souls to the other side," Samedi warned, but Marie continued on unfazed.

"Ale! Kounye-a!" the Baron warned again. "You will die here."

"Non! Souple, Papa, ka ede nou!" Marie beseeched.

Samedi laughed, deep and throaty, and definitely not human. Sam could only stare as the loa's face morphed into a frown and the Baron's red eyes met his own.

"You should already have journeyed to my crossroads once," he began, pointing a bony finger at Sam. "And yet, it was not my magic that resurrected you. How can that be?"

Marie suddenly stopped her incantation, looking over to Sam, a shocked expression crossing her face. Sam simply shrugged. Now was not the time for a recap of his life. He glared back at the voodoo deity, a smirk crossing his face.

"I lead a charmed life. Heaven doesn't want me and Hell's afraid of my brother," Sam snarked back, surprising even himself at how Dean-like the quip sounded.

Samedi fumed, coming forward and walking past Marie as though she were insignificant. He moved within arm's reach of the younger hunter, stopping only when Sam leveled the shotgun at his chest.

"Heaven and Hell, you know nothing of those places you stupid ass. You think because you dispatch some wayward spirits that you know anything of what lies beyond? You are a foolish damn child! No more than a gnat for me to swat," Samedi returned.

Sam held his ground. The taunts were nothing new; he'd heard better ones from lesser demons. But when Samedi reached into the pocket of his vest, withdrawing a small pouch with a large claw attached to the top, Sam felt a sudden foreboding fill him.

The Baron muttered something indistinct and tossed the pouch at Sam. Before the younger man could react, the loa vanished in a cloud of thick smoke, the smell of rum and tobacco lingering behind.

Sam froze in place, unsure of what had just happened and looking frantically for the ghede. He spotted Marie just a few feet away, the voodoo priestess still looking as worried as she had seconds before, except now she was shouting something at him. He strained to hear her, struggled to figure out why he couldn't until the buzzing in his ears began to drown out even the howling wind.

"Sam!" Marie called out his name, her hands clasping around his arm, but he couldn't feel them.

Sam's entire body became cold. Not the soaked to the bone from the weather type of cold, but rather the slow, icy feel of every cell in his body becoming numb, dying one at a time.

He dropped the shotgun, distantly aware as it splashed into the water that swirled around his knees. The overwhelming feeling of bile rising up in his throat made him gag, but he was powerless to even bring his hands to his mouth. It was like the poison from the bullet all over again, his body becoming paralyzed, unresponsive to his commands.

Sam looked down into Marie's brown eyes, begging her for help with his own, unable to make his voice eek out the barest syllable. Marie returned his look, incapable of masking the fear in her face. She tried to comfort him, her hands rubbing up and down his biceps as tears began to fill her eyes.

"Marie..." Sam choked out. "Whas... hap...ning?"

The voodoo priestess paused before answering, her voice quivering with emotion when she spoke. "It was a death wanga. If it had been a normal priest, I... I could counteract it with a *pouin*, a counter spell, but this was of Baron Samedi himself. Sam, there's nothing I can do..."

Morel's cabin, somewhere near North Shore Beach Slidell, Louisiana

Dean flailed under the surface of the storm-tossed lake, Morel's invisible hands pushing down on him, keeping him submerged. He thrashed more, his own arms struggling to push him up towards precious air, towards life.

He could feel his lungs burning, begging him to take a breath, not cognizant of the fact that any gulp he tried to take would be filled with swamp water. *Selfish lungs! Only thinking about themselves! I'll teach them a lesson.*

But the rational part of his mind pushed that craziness away. Dean knew he was running out of time, the edges of his consciousness blurring from hypoxia. He'd drowned, well sort of, a couple of times before on hunts, waking up to Sam beating the crap out of his chest and trying to lip-lock with him as his brother forced air into his unresponsive body. It wasn't the most fun way to die, suffocation or aspiration, and Dean was determined not to repeat the process again. Besides, Sammy wasn't

anywhere near to bail his sorry ass out of this one, there'd be no CPR to revive him if he didn't make it out and soon.

Dean relaxed slightly and let his body be pushed down to the bottom, hoping that maybe Morel's spirit would think him dead. The pressure on his head and shoulders relented slightly as his body burrowed into the soft mud of the formerly dry shoreline. His hands sunk into the muck, so squishy and soft that despite his fight for survival, his brain took the moment to be repulsed.

As the mud sucked him down once more, Dean's hands came in contact with something cold and hard. Thankful that it wasn't also scaly, Dean closed his hands around the object.

Meta! That was good!

Dean couldn't see the object in the murky water, but he clung to the hope that it might be a tire iron or fire poker, anything made of iron. He pulled the thing from the muddy bottom, swinging it up and through the water, silently praying to land a blow on the Bokor's spirit. Dean knew it was a long shot, but as his brain began to shut down, his lungs forcing him to open his mouth and inhale the brackish water, it was the only thing left to try.

The long rod tore through the water and out of it, striking something solid and reverberating down both of Dean's arms. The force holding him under immediately dissipated and Dean surged to the surface. He sucked in lungful after lungful of fresh air, panting heavily. He shook the water from his face and began to climb back up onto the sinking porch.

"Okay, I'm pissed now, I'm really pissed," he fumed as he clambered out of the lake. He stormed back inside, anger fuelling his exhausted body.

"Hellooo, any psychotic voodoo priests bent on the destruction of the world in here?"

Dean glanced down as something smacked into his leg. It was the backpack, lost earlier but thanks to the wind and rushing water, now popping up inside the cabin. He grabbed up the bag, slinging it over one arm, regretting it when he realized it was his right shoulder.

He was about to move it to the other side when Morel appeared out of thin air. The Bokor snarled at Dean, rushing towards the young hunter, his body suddenly very solid as he smashed the young man into a nearby shelf. Jars of canned food and bottles of liquid fell around him splashing into the water that filled the cabin. One of the bottles broke open as it struck a shelf on its way down, spraying Dean with a coating of strong smelling alcohol.

"Moonshine? Why you sneaky bastard, holding out on me?" Dean laughed, reaching out and grabbing another similar looking jar.

He spun off the lid, tilting the bottle back and taking a healthy swig. The raw alcohol burned the entire length of his throat, but also served to dull the persistent ache in his shoulder while almost instantly clearing the cobwebs from his head.

Dean looked carefully at the remainder of the moonshine, a sudden idea going off in his head. He rose quickly, anticipating another attack by the bokor's spirit, but launching the bottle at the corpse still propped up in the corner. The bottle smashed against the wall, sending the bootleg alcohol all over the dead body. In a fluid motion, Dean was reaching into the backpack, his hand blindly seeking the one weapon he'd stubbornly kept in the trunk of the Impala since their encounter with the wendigo so long ago.

As he was pulling the flare gun from the pack, Morel appeared in front of him. Emaciated hands reach out for Dean, grabbing hold of his shirt and pulling him up and tossing him roughly across the room. Dean felt his body crash into a table, his hand coming open even as he tried to spin and catch the flare gun shell before it slipped into the water.

Dean rolled off the table, landing on his knees in the water as he searched for the shell. Morel grabbed him by the collar, dragging him backwards and away from the ammunition. Dean clawed at the flooring beneath him trying to slow his movement.

"You cannot stop me. Neither you or your brother or that priestess will be able to stop the Baron," Morel snarled as he roughly pulled Dean to his feet, spinning him around to face the voodoo priest. Morel lifted the hunter off his feet, water dripped from his boots.

"Really, thanks, I was getting tired of being wet," Dean grumbled back although the Bokor's knuckles were digging into the side of his throat as he held him up.

"The Baron is being controlled by something very powerful. More powerful than anything you've ever faced. You, the whole world, will fall. This is just the beginning!"

"Yeah, he's real powerful alright, that's why he hasn't been able to get rid of me or my brother. We're not afraid of Haris or any of his pathetic henchmen. Samedi or you included," Dean snapped back.

"Haris? I don't know any Haris. What controls the Baron is a great evil. The world will know true pain and suffering when the Baron's master appears," Morel retorted.

"Dude, I'm *knowing* true pain and suffering right now. Are you done with the whole 'big bad evil gonna end the world' crap?" Dean groaned.

The Bokor's reaction was instantaneous as he effortlessly threw Dean back across the room and into the deepening water. As he rose back to his knees, his face hanging as he grabbed a deep breath, Dean spotted something red and cylindrical floating in front of him.

The flare gun shell!

Suddenly, Dean's entire day made a turn for the better. He scrambled forward, his hand closing around the shell and clinging to it with a death-grip. He spun around looking for the spirit while simultaneously reaching for the flare gun that he'd tucked into the back of his jeans.

Dean snapped the gun open, hastily jamming the shell inside the barrel. He felt the rough pull of the Bokor as the ghost grabbed him from behind. Dean felt himself being dragged backwards, anticipated the upcoming loss of gravity as he was thrown against the threadbare couch. Just as his body was lifted again, he pulled the trigger on the flare gun, firing the shell at Morel's corpse.

Despite the water, the wind and the rain, the flare ignited the moonshine lighting the body up in a flash of brilliant flames. Dean dropped to the floor as the Bokor's spirit screamed out in protest. He watched as the specter shimmered, going in and out of focus like a bad home movie before it evaporated completely in a rush of air.

"And that concludes the voodoo portion of our show. We hope you enjoyed the stunning wildlife, the beautiful weather, and of course, the demented Bokor. Please come again soon!"

The hunter dropped back onto the floor, sitting on his rump as the water swirled around him nearly chest high. He watched the priest's body as it was consumed by the flames, realizing briefly that he hadn't salted it first, but deciding at this point it was too late to split hairs over procedure.

In the distance, Dean heard the wail of sirens, long echoing blasts that signaled the storm surge that the forecasters had feared. He hurried to his feet, his thoughts now turned back to Sam and Marie. He'd done his part by dispatching Morel and could only hope that just maybe his brother had been equally as successful. Still, the hurricane was raging and that could only mean that Samedi was still out of control.

Retrieving the backpack, Dean headed toward the door. To the left, his eye caught the glint of a metal barrel.

"Ha! Apparently the all-powerful voodoo priest didn't just rely on just his spells and dolls when it came to home protection," Dean muttered as he retrieved the Mossberg 500 from the rack mounted high on the wall. Pumping the forend, he inspected the chamber, finding the shotgun fairly well oiled and cared for. "Hmm, guess you won't be needing this anymore," he tossed over his shoulder at the still-burning corpse.

Outside, the water had risen even higher around the cabin and Dean knew the lake was well beyond flood-stage. He groaned aloud, thinking of the inevitable swim that was ahead of him when a small johnboat floated by on the whitecaps, the rope that had held it tethered to some mooring trailing in the water behind it like a dropped leash.

From Dean's perspective, it was a godsend, or at least the closest he was willing to credit any higher power for saving his ass from another long, cold swim. He snagged the line and pulled the small boat closer, tossing in his backpack and the shotgun before climbing in himself and pushing away from the porch.

The motor fired up on the first pull and the exhausted young man loosed the breath he'd been holding. As he pulled away from the cabin, the fire from the Bokor's body had apparently flashed over to other contents in the cabin as flames blew out one of the windows.

"Haris? I don't know any Haris. What controls the Baron is a great evil. The world will know true pain and suffering when the Baron's master appears,"

Morel's final words flitted across Dean's mind as he cruised away from the burning shack. He twisted the gearshift slightly, coaxing more speed out of the worn engine, feeling the need to get to his brother as soon as possible.

"I sure hope you're watching your ass, Sammy, 'cause if Morel is telling the truth and it isn't our buddy Haris pulling the Baron's strings, we're in a world of trouble!"

Forest Lawn Cemetery

Sam sagged to his knees in the rising tide. It hurt to breathe; actually it was nearly impossible to breathe. He felt as though his chest had been filled with wet concrete, his lungs becoming heavy and full leaving no room even for the slightest bit of air. He could dimly hear Marie's voice of concern above the din of the storm, but his brain was too focused on survival to hear what the woman was saying. Sam felt the energy seeping out of his body, every muscle fiber going slack.

This is it? This is how it ends?

Sam's hands fell from where they had been wrapped around his midsection, splashing down into the water as he dropped face-down. He felt the water rush into his mouth and nose, but he didn't inhale it, the muscles in his chest unable to expand and draw in the offensive liquid. As his eyes drooped closed, Sam could only think of Dean, of how his brother would carry on without him, *if* his brother could carry on without him.

The wind silenced, the piercing rain stopped falling and even the lightning and thunder ceased, as Sam drifted away and stopped breathing. Yet, as he lay there, feeling his heart pound in his chest, he suddenly realized that he could feel Marie's soft hands tugging at his shoulders.

"Sam! Sam, please. You have to stand up before you drown," she begged him.

Huh? What? Drown? I can't drown, I'm already dead!

"Sam! Dammit boy! GET UP NOW!" Marie shouted, her smaller form yanking on the young man's arm. "You're not dead. I know you aren't. I don't know why you aren't, but you're not!" she rambled.

"Marie?" Sam gasped, surprised more that he had drawn the air to form the word than the fact that he wasn't dead. "I'm alive?" he asked, turning to look up at her face.

Marie smiled, relief in her eyes. She let go of Sam's arm and held out her hand to help the hunter to stand.

"I don't understand it. The wanga, you survived it. It's impossible, 'specially since it was the Baron who cast it, but you did somehow," she stated incredulously, her hands skimming frantically over Sam's still-swaying body.

He gently brushed off her hands, offering his own smile as reassurance even though he still felt as though he had been turned inside-out. "Marie, I'm okay. Where's Samedi?" he asked, looking about as the storm exploded around them.

"Gone!" Marie replied. "Sam, what are we going to do? He wouldn't listen to me at all. He's changed, dangerous. The Baron that I know would never have acted that way."

Yes, and that's because the Samedi you know wasn't being controlled by a demon bent on destroying the world and killing anyone that bore the Winchester name.

"Marie, we gotta get him back here. We need to summon Samedi again," Sam insisted.

"Sam... I don't know," Marie began, fear filling her. But as the wind howled and the storm escalated she knew that they had to try again. If they walked away, who then could keep things from spiraling even further out of control? She sighed deeply, then closed her eyes and began the chant.

Before a dozen words were out of her mouth, the ghede appeared. Samedi stood before them, glaring at both the hunter and the voodoo priestess before recognition focused his attention on Sam.

"You!" he hissed. "Quatre yeux! Is that how you defeated my wanga?"

Sam didn't understand the ghede's foreign words but he judged by Marie's reaction that the Baron had said something suspicious about him. He disregarded the voodoo deity, more concerned with the situation than whatever the taunt had meant.

"Baron Samedi," Sam started, "we've come to help you fight whatever is controlling you. We want you to return to your natural state. I know that you're not a bad spirit, that you care about your followers."

Samedi laughed, deep and derisively. "You know nothing about me!"

"That's not true. I know Marie. I know that Marie would never serve a harsh religion. She's told me that voodoo is about balance, but your actions now are destroying that balance. The demon that's controlling you is using you to do his will, not your own," Sam stressed.

"I do as I please," Samedi refuted. He raised his cane skyward, the tip pointed at swirling clouds. There was a bright flash as a lightning bolt struck one of the trees lining the edge of the graveyard. Before the accompanying thunder could sound, another flash of lightning struck the next closest tree, then another, and another in quick succession.

Sam and Marie both flinched, ducking down as bits of bark and branches shot towards them as the trees were disintegrated. Sam pushed Marie behind him as he backed them both away from the ghede and the lightning. When the next bolt struck a tombstone just beyond Sam's left, the young hunter knew that the next one was coming straight for him.

He stumbled over something submerged, landing hard against a headstone. The impact dazed him and Sam wondered absently if Samedi's wanga was still having some sort of effect over him. He tried to scramble back to his feet, hearing Marie scream out his name in warning as the Baron approached, but his knees didn't want to cooperate in his need for survival.

Sam closed his eyes, bracing himself as he felt the hair on his arms stand on end from the electricity that was in the air. He could hear the distant rumble of thunder, could even hear Dean's voice in his mind shouting in defiance, telling him to hang on. Vaguely, he wondered what had become of Dean. He had thought he'd sent his older brother on the easier of the two jobs, but what if the Bokor's spirit had just been too much for his exhausted brother?

"Samedi!" Sam blinked his eyes open, not sure if he'd heard the Baron's name called or imagined Dean calling out his own.

"Sammmmmmyyy!"

Sam wiped the rain from his face, his eyes going wide as he watched Dean trudge through the high water towards him, shotgun in hand. His brother was soaked, his clothes clinging to his body, his usually spiked hair plastered against his head. Despite the deluge, Sam could see the bloodstained sleeve and jagged tears on the leg of his brother's jeans.

"What the hell, Dean?"

Dean fired the shotgun at the Baron as he continued forward. He'd seen Samedi launching lightning bolts at his baby brother from the moment he'd arrived at the cemetery. Despite the weariness in his body, the steady ache in his shoulder and the dull burn in his arm and leg, the anger he felt at seeing Sam under attack gave him a surge of energy.

When the Baron barely twitched, Dean pumped the shotgun and fired again. Unlike a normal spirit, the ghede didn't dematerialize when the salt rounds struck him. The force of the slugs did knock the loa backwards slightly, but as he regrouped, a sinister smile spread across his skull-like face.

"Do you think that pathetic weapon will stop me? You are a greater fool than either of them," Samedi growled, pointing his bony finger at Sam and Marie.

"Yeah, well I've been called worse," Dean replied, firing another round. Samedi staggered slightly, but quickly righted himself, taking a determined step toward Dean, his cane pointed directly at the elder Winchester's chest. Dean tensed, waiting to feel the surge of electricity strike him for the second time in his life. The air crackled around him as the skin on his arms began to tingle.

It was the lack of excruciating pain that first caused Dean to realize that he was still alive. Looking back up to the Baron, he saw the look of frustration mixed with disbelief on the ghede's strange face. Amazingly, nothing more happened. No lightning, no agony, and better still in Dean's mind, no waking up in a hospital with a damaged heart and a death sentence.

Dean looked down at the amulet hanging around his neck, rolling the strange face between his fingers and feeling the curious prickling emitted against his hand. Could it be? Had the talisman somehow protected him from the voodoo again? It was almost as if the greater the evil that was launched against him, the more powerful the amulet's protection became.

Moving forward with more confidence, Dean tossed the shotgun over to Sam and then reached into the backpack slung over his shoulder. He withdrew the flare gun and aimed it at the Baron's chest. Behind him, he was dimly aware that Marie had begun chanting again, the Creole incantation rolling fluidly off her lips.

Samedi fumed as he backed away, unable to escape as the priestess's spell held him bound to the cemetery. He spat at Dean, tobacco spraying a nearby casket with a dark stain, but the hunter continued on unrelenting.

Seeing that his brother was intent on burning the ghede, Sam rushed to his feet struggling through the rain and wind to reach the Baron. Despite Samedi's attempt to kill him, he knew that the voodoo loa was not ultimately responsible for his actions.

"Baron, please, fight it and help us!" he pleaded again.

The ghede's frightening red eyes dimmed slightly, his expression softening even though his face still held the form of a skull. The Baron reached up and took off the black top hat from his head.

"You do not understand, I have no choice, I cannot defy my master," Samedi explained.

"Tell us who's controlling you. We'll help somehow," Dean insisted.

Samedi shook his head. "I cannot go against what is happening in the universe any longer. The lesser deities will all have to choose sides, align with the greater powers or be destroyed when the war comes."

"We know the war is coming, but don't you care about your followers? Don't you care enough about them to try to protect them, to fight to restore and maintain the balance?" Sam asked.

"I do, but I cannot change what is happening or what will happen."

"What about the war?" Dean interjected. "At least tell us who is controlling you. I know it's not Haris, so then who or what is it?"

Sam's attention went to his brother. Not Haris? How could that be? What did Dean know?

Samedi laughed again, looking at Sam and then over to Dean. "You should know, Guardian. You and your[i] quatre yeux[i], you are both not only keys, but targets as well."

The Baron suddenly twisted to look over his shoulder. He mumbled something at the empty air behind him, turning back to face the hunters, fear and panic appearing on his face. He backed away from whatever invisible form was present in the storm-tossed cemetery, seemingly less reluctant to move toward the brothers than to face the unseen presence.

Dean reacted warily, bringing up the flare gun to aim at the retreating loa. Samedi turned to face the young man, his hands held before him, the cane dropped from his grasp.

"Do as you must! Please! I do not wish to be a pawn. It is the only way I can protect my children," Samedi begged.

Both brothers looked to each other and even Marie was wide-eyed with disbelief.

"Papa, non!" she cried out as the Baron stepped closer to Dean.

He pulled the trigger on the flare gun reluctantly. He wanted more answers, he needed to know who had been controlling the ghede if it wasn't Haris. Most of all, Dean wanted to understand who or what was so terrifying that the voodoo lord feared facing it more than death.

The shell struck the Baron igniting instantly despite the wind and rain. Samedi merely smiled as he was engulfed in flames. As his corporeal form disintegrated, the storm around them suddenly weakened, the rain trailing off to a meager drizzle and the wind lifting to a gentle breeze.

Sam slogged through the water to Dean's side, the weight of the wanga just as quickly gone as the hurricane. He glanced over to Marie who was also drawing closer to the guys.

"Dean, you okay?" he asked reaching a hand to his brother's arm.

Dean nodded silently, considered telling Sam about the Bokor-controlled gator but figuring that story could wait till later.

"How 'bout you?" he asked Sam in return. "You weren't looking so hot when I got here."

Sam returned the nod. "I had it all under control. He never laid a hand on me."

Marie huffed air, watching as the brothers went through the motions of expressing concern followed by denying injury. If ever there was balance represented in human flesh, it was in these two siblings.

"Marie, are you alright?" Dean asked reaching out to take her arm.

She jerked away from his grasp visibly annoyed. "Heave off, I'm not some little ol' granny needing ya'll to play Boy Scout and help me across the cemetery," she teased, unable to hide the bright smile when she noticed the shocked expression on the young man's face. Marie laughed out loud, reaching back to pat Dean on the back.

"Cher you're just so easy to fool with. No wonder Missouri likes you so," she stated.

Dean stared back at her in mild shock, her revelation about the psychic from Lawrence surprising him. He shot her a weak grin, shrugging the saturated backpack from his right shoulder with a grimace. She caught the flash of pain even as Sam moved to react. Marie subtly restrained him with a hand sensing that the older sibling was in no mood for either further teasing or any form of brotherly concern.

"Well, I might not be a granny, but I am fairly tired of standing out here in the rain. And seeing as how we've just destroyed one of the most powerful of voodoo deities

and quite possibly pissed off whatever was controlling him, maybe we should get out of here?" Marie suggested looking from brother to brother.

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "I've had enough of Mother Nature for the day. Sammy, you better as hell left the Impala somewhere high and dry or you're gonna spend the rest of this vacation detailing my baby."

Sam groaned at the threat, but quickly flashed a smile, following his brother and Marie out of the flooded cemetery as the dark clouds began to diminish in the western sky.

LaBauve's Bed & Breakfast Slidell, Louisiana

Dean woke as the bright sunlight burned through his closed lids, a stark contrast to the violent weather of the day before. He rolled over, away from the offensive light, and groaned. He knew it was later in the day than he'd really wanted to wake up, preferring to have gotten up early, packed and headed out. But considering how soft the bed was and how worn his body felt, each time he came close to stirring awake, Dean had simply let himself succumb to sleep once again.

Now, he knew, his body knew, that it was well on its way to being noon. He rubbed his eyes, seeking out his brother still asleep in the second bed. Sam looked remarkably peaceful when he slept and it suddenly struck Dean that both of them had apparently gotten the first good night's rest that they'd had in a very long time. In fact, it was the first night in a couple weeks that Dean wasn't tormented by the recurring nightmares.

He sat up, running his hand through his hair and across his face. The coating on his tongue made him curious if the stiff drink Marie had offered when they returned to her home had contained more than just the moonshine. He smiled broadly, he was gonna miss Marie.

Throwing back the light covers, he stood and stretched, quieting when his activity caused Sam to stir. He pulled on the jeans that had been discarded beside the bed late last night, thankful that they were now dry even if they did reek of swamp and were covered in dried mud.

Dean carefully pulled open the door to the room and quietly snuck out. He walked down the back stairs toward the kitchen, letting his nose lead him in the direction of the strong smelling coffee. He found Marie seated at the large oak table, her hand wrapped around a steaming cup.

"G'mornin', Dean," she said without even looking at him.

"How'd you...never mind," he stammered, truly not surprised that the woman had recognized him before she saw him.

"Have a seat sugah. I've got a cup all ready for ya'll," she offered, patting the back of an empty chair.

Dean took the seat, sliding down and scooting the chair closer to the table. He watched as Marie filled the cup in front of him, inhaling deeply at the aroma. He picked up the cup and slowly sipped, closing his eyes and relishing the flavor. Sighing contentedly, he reopened his eyes to Marie's broad smile.

"What?" he asked, when she remained silent.

"You should have been an actor," she answered. "You do a pretty damn good job of acting like everything's okay."

Dean stared at her blankly. "What are you talking about? Everything is fine. We stopped Samedi, I got the best sleep I've had in ... well months, and I have one of the best cups of coffee in front of me that I've had in a long time. I mean Sammy tries, but the kid just thinks that the coffee is an addition to his sugar and cream."

Marie chuckled. "Nice change of subject, but you know what I'm talking about. You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, boy. Way too much of a load for such a young man."

Dean let out a quick laugh, then quieted as his gaze wandered out the window, focusing on a boat that was headed out to go shrimping. He hadn't wanted to be reminded about all the responsibilities that plagued his mind every minute, not especially after such a great night's sleep and the promise of a beautiful day.

"Dean," she continued softer, "You can't save the world. It isn't your responsibility you know?"

"I don't want to save the world, Marie. I want to save my family, my brother. The world just seems to come along for the ride," he replied, looking down into the blackness of his coffee.

She reached out a dark-skinned and worn hand, gently patting Dean's arm. "Dean, look at me. Your brother cares about you as much as you care about him. I understand that you both have a long, painful road behind you as well as in front of you. But, you are each other's strength and you, most of all, need to rely on Sam more often."

"Thanks, Dr. Phyllis," Dean snarked back, but when he saw the seriousness in the woman's eyes he relented. "Marie, I get it, I really do. But everyday, I wake up and think, let today just be one day, just one friggin' day, that I don't have to worry about some creature or spirit trying to kill us. One day, that I don't have to wonder if that bastard Haris is gonna try to kill my brother. And yet nearly EVERY. SINGLE. DAMN. DAY... something happens or there's some reminder of why I can't rest, why I gotta stay on top of protecting Sam."

Marie went silent, her heart heavy as the pain and desperation poured off the young man seated across from her. He was like a giant open wound, blood free-flowing and not easily staunching. She knew he was recovering when the brothers had arrived, Missouri had alerted her to that, but what she hadn't realized was that the injury was not so much physical as emotional.

"You've a good soul, Dean. Trust it, trust Sam. I know, just know, that everything is going to be okay for you both," she encouraged. "Now, are you so dead-set on leaving that you won't reconsider staying a bit longer? You never had the chance to try some of my homemade gumbo and cornbread. It's the best you'll find in the whole south."

Dean looked back up, smiling. "Gumbo? Does it have cheese or onions in it? Oh wait, gumbo, that's short for 'pot of whatever didn't crawl away fast enough' isn't it?" he teased.

The voodoo priestess had risen from her chair and was headed toward the stove when she reached out and playfully smacked the short-haired hunter on the back of the head. He feigned injury but continued laughing.

"Hey, what's goin' on?" Sam's voice interrupted as he stood in the doorway watching the tail-end of the exchange. When neither Marie nor Dean offered any explanation, he shrugged, walking in and sitting in Marie's vacated seat.

"Hmmm, coffee. Marie, you got any cream and sugar please?" Sam asked.

Dean smiled as he and their hostess' eyes met. "See what I mean?"

Sam ignored the jibe as he poured and took a long draw. "So Dean, I got my bag packed and although it's almost afternoon, we could make it to Tallahassee by night."

Dean looked back at Sam, then up to Marie. "Nah, I'm in no hurry to leave. How 'bout we finish that vacation you promised me, Sammy? Besides, I'm kinda looking forward to a good home cooked meal instead of some greasy burger."

Sam stared at his brother, his mouth open wide in shock. "Marie, are you sure that there isn't another evil Bokor that might be controlling my brother right now?" he asked, laughing.

He then looked to Marie who stood smiling behind his brother, not missing the hand that rested gently on Dean's shoulder. "Okay big brother, if it's a vacation you want, it's a vacation you get," Sam added, inwardly pleased with this turn of events. "Hey, I better go find that thong for ya. I hear the local senior center is sponsoring a

male hot body contest tomorrow,” he teased, ducking as the small sugar bowl came flying at his head.

“BOYS!” Marie’s voice boomed out, chastising them both as they all three broke into easy laughter and Sam bolted from the kitchen with Dean chasing right behind.

Marie watched them leave, heard them laughing as they tore through the lower level of the house. She listened a bit longer as the brothers bounded up the stairs after each other. Her smile faded a moment later as her brows creased with the memory of Samedi’s final words.

“Guardian and Quatre Yeux!” she muttered to herself shaking her head. “You have a long road ahead of you both.”

Creole Translations (and please forgive us for any inaccuracies)

Kisa ki rive ou? Ki moun fosere ou touye? - What happened to you? Who is forcing you to kill?

Kisa ou bezouen, petit - What do you want, child?

Eske ou konprann kisa mwen? - Do you understand what I am?

Ale! Kounye-a! – Go! Now!

Non! Souple, Papa, ka ede nou! - No! Please, Papa, help us!

Quatre Yeux - “four eyes” something in voodoo used to describe clairvoyant priest/priestesses

The End