

Episode Nine: Enemy Territory
By Kittsbud

Vietnam, Unnamed Province
1969

Ryan Grayson moved through the thick underbrush, his ears pricking at every slight sound that permeated the darkness. His mind filtered out the ominous and frequent cricket chirps and other intermingling jungle noises, only focusing on anything that could be the unseen enemy.

This was Grayson's second tour in Nam, and out of the current group he was the most seasoned. Almost every other man in the platoon was a raw recruit, and that included the lieutenant that seemed to be glued to his side.

Grayson paused, signaling with a hand movement for his men to stop. He hunkered down in the gloom, eyes darting from bush to bush for signs of the Viet Cong.

Something was wrong here. Ever since he'd jumped from the Huey at their LZ Grayson had known it. The co-ordinates he'd been given didn't match the mission he'd been briefed for earlier in the day.

The friggin' chopper pilot been smokin' too much damn weed again...

But Grayson knew the pilot well. He knew Larry Emerson would never put men's lives at risk that way. No, this was something else. Something that was far more personal.

Grayson leaned his M16 carefully on his knee as he squatted, keeping a finger poised on the trigger. "Something's wrong here, LT," he addressed the terrified officer at his side. "I don't know where the hell we are, but this isn't what we were briefed for..."

Lt. Grant felt his hands begin to shake. Officer school hadn't prepared him for the horrors of this war – nothing had. This was his first real patrol, but it didn't mean he hadn't already witnessed some of the ghastly injuries men returned from the field with – if they returned at all.

Grant took a breath and fumbled in his breast pocket, tugging out a map of the area in a plastic protective covering. He looked at it, squinting to see the area he'd marked in red when their C.O. had briefed them. "There's no ridge here..."

Grayson huffed. "Tell me something I don't freakin' know..." When Grant scowled back he locked eyes with the officer. Grant wanted to play soldier. Hell, maybe he was some relative of the famous civil war General, but one thing he was not, was in control. "Sir," Grayson feigned respect. "We're way out of our depth here. We should head back to our LZ and call the choppers back in. Pop some smoke before our asses get fried..."

Grant pushed the map into the strap that had been tucked over the brow of his helmet and shook his head. He would prove who was in command, no matter how scared he was, no matter how much his hands shook. "Captain Mitchum made it quite clear how important this mission is, and I fully intend to finish the reconnaissance before we head back. What's the matter, *Sergeant?* Getting jittery?"

Grayson ignored the jibe. He'd seen enough rookie officers fry to know that Grant wouldn't last long in the field, and besides, right now there was much more on his mind.

This patrol was wrong, all wrong, and it wasn't the idiot in charge that was going to screw it up – it was Grayson's conscience. *I should never have opened my mouth; at least, not until it was all out in the open...*

"Riggs, take point, double time it!" Grant gestured for one of the new men to head up the patrol, ignoring any caution that Grayson may have used, or suggested.

The young soldier nodded and began scurrying ahead of the group, his eyes and mind focused on proving himself to his C.O.

“Riggs! DOWN!” Grayson decided to push aside his lieutenant’s orders, knowing they would get men killed – his men killed. “Down, dammit!” His last cry was loud and guttural, ignoring the usual code of silence he hammered into all rookies.

Riggs’ boots skidded in the soft loam as he faltered, unsure just who to listen to. His right foot edged sideways just a thousandth of an inch as he turned, and the movement was enough. The army issue boot caught on a heavily camouflaged section of wire that had been spread across the dirt path.

BOOM!

Riggs’ body erupted outwards in a shower of meat and blood that had once been a naive nineteen year old. Red ooze splattered the remaining troops, tiny strips of flesh and tissue raining down on the men like a bloody version of the Fourth of July.

“Shit!” Grayson pushed his lieutenant to the ground with a harsh shove and rolled until a nearby bush gave him refuge. “Take cover!” *The friggin’ Gooks will have heard the explosion. They’ll be on us any second...*

Young men who should have been home with their parents or studying in some high class college began to dive for the underbrush that might save their lives.

Gunfire blasted from the tree line, short staccato bursts illuminating the darkness as each round was discharged.

The enemy had found them; but then tonight, for Grayson, there were two kinds of enemy.

The soldier brought his rifle to his shoulder, carefully aiming for the bright bursts of light that showed him where the Vietnamese were hiding. He tugged back on the trigger letting his M16 empty all thirty rounds before ramming in another clip. *We shouldn’t even be here...*

As youngsters fell around him, their bodies torn to shreds by enemy fire, all that Grayson could think of was revenge. He wasn’t a violent man by nature, and yet when he’d been dragged into this Godforsaken war he had embraced it. He had made it his mission in life to save as many kids’ souls out here as he possibly could. Most of the teens in his unit came from his home town or the surrounding area, he felt like he knew them, owed them his allegiance. *And for what? To be betrayed by a monster who never gave a damn...*

An explosion rocked the ground to Grayson’s right, and as he turned he realized Grant had taken a direct hit from a mortar shell. Only a charred crater remained where the officer had been hunkered behind a fallen tree trunk. *Coward was hiding...but then, he’s not the only coward out here...*

The Sergeant grabbed his last clip from the belt that hung loose across his chest, jamming it into the M16. With his free hand, he yanked a grenade from the same belt, pulling the pin with his front teeth so roughly he chipped two.

He was one, and the enemy was legion, but Grayson wasn’t going down without a fight. There was no question that he would die here along with the rest of his men. No question that the platoon would be annihilated. But still, the soldier clung on to one gnawing thought as he made a wild full frontal assault at the Vietnamese.

The Viet Cong weren’t responsible for the extermination of the platoon; they hadn’t sent almost fifty grunts, a fairly useless lieutenant, and three sergeants to their doom: someone else ultimately had.

And if there was a way back, just like his Momma had insisted since he was a kid, then Ryan Grayson would find it. *Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*

And someone, some day, would pay.

* * * *

Oxford, Nebraska Present Day

Katherine McBride waited patiently for the overhead traffic lights to turn green. She was tired - eager to get home for the night after a late shift, and if she had been sure the local Sheriff wasn't around, she may just have run the light.

The thing was, Burt Caldwell always seemed to be around when you least expected it, and the forty-something-year-old cop had a crush on Kat the size of the local golf course – which considering Oxford's tiny proportions was pretty big.

"Just gotta wait a little longer to crash into bed..." Kat tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, suddenly feeling vulnerable in the dark on her own. She was a nurse at the local medical center, and normally driving home in the early hours didn't bother her. Hell, she was used to the dark, to the long hours, to the gore she was sometimes presented with during her shifts.

Tonight, though, she shivered involuntarily and inhaled with relief when the lights finally changed. *Getting spooked by a traffic light from hell, now there's a first!*

Kat took a left and accelerated harder than usual, her foot almost slipping to the floor in her haste to find sanctuary from the ominous darkness of the Nebraska night. She wanted to get home to the safety of her bedroom, where her trusty Beretta was waiting in a bedside drawer.

The nurse took another deep breath and let her eyes stray to her car's clock. The Beetle's dashboard glared back at her, the luminous fascia showing it was 2.25 a.m. *Just five more minutes and I'll be parking down the driveway laughing at my own paranoia...*

Kat glanced back up and her lips instantly shaped to form a wide "O" as shock and surprise took a hold of her senses.

Someone, or something was in the road in front of her little VW, and there was no room to brake or veer - no time to look into the eyes of the thing she was about to hit. Still, Kat rammed both feet down on her car's brake pedal, all her weight, her strength willing the Beetle to stop in an impossible distance. She saw a flash of green and the bright glint of something metallic. Then, whatever had been in front of her car was gone.

Kat closed her eyes, trying to calm her own panicked breathing before climbing from her vehicle. *I hit someone! I must have, and yet...I didn't feel anything.*

Living in the country had taught Katherine a lesson early on. You hit an animal, even a rabbit, and you'd feel the impact through the whole car. *But I had to have hit them!*

Kat forced her eyes open and yanked at the VW's door handle, knowing if someone lay injured she was their lifeline until an ambulance arrived. As the door creaked open and she stepped out on to the blacktop, her knees almost buckled beneath her.

Whatever, whoever her car had encountered now stood a few feet away, staring towards the center of town as if Kat didn't exist. He wore a dated Rangers uniform that had seen better days, and a relatively clean M16 hung from a shoulder strap.

Maybe he's going to a fancy dress party?

But before the soldier even turned, Kat knew different. He had walked right through her car, and unless he was the next Houdini that made him something Kat didn't even believe in. *No such thing as ghosts. No such thing as ghosts.* Kat mentally repeated the mantra until she thought her brain would burst from the effort, but the raggedly dressed soldier remained in front of her like a stone sentinel.

Kat wanted her legs to back up so that she could retreat into her car and drive home. Maybe if her muscles had actually followed her brain's orders she could have pretended the little roadside reverie had never happened. The thing was, as much as she wanted to leave, the bedraggled soldier was mesmerizing.

"Who are you..?" The nurse cocked her head a little, her voice cracking with pent up tension and fear. She needed to understand what she was seeing, needed answers. Was he here for her? Hell, was he even really here? *Too many shifts, too many hours...I must be losing it...*

Finally, the soldier turned and Kat caught a glimpse of his uniform more clearly in the moonlight. There were stripes on his arms that signified he was a sergeant, and along the right side of his brow an old, but very visible scar ran a good two inches in length.

Blues eyes locked with Kat's but didn't linger on her dainty frame. Instead, Grayson looked beyond her to something behind the Beetle she drove. He made a gesture with his hand and then caught his M16's strap, tugging it up and slipping his finger into the trigger guard.

Kat's heart missed a beat and she tasted the rank flavor of bile rising from her throat. *He's going to kill me...*

Grayson ignored the terrified woman's blank stare and wide pupils, his attention still focused on something beyond the nurse.

Kat blinked and finally dragged enough inner courage from somewhere to turn and see what the phantom was watching so intently. She didn't want to look, didn't want to see for fear the sight may be worse than something from her clinic's E.R. but still, the compulsion took over her.

Beyond Kat's car was an intersection, and beyond that a vast expanse of corn that stretched as far as the eye could see. At least two feet above ground, a fine mist had appeared, hovering, lurking; hiding the undead.

As she watched, the strange glowing fog began to form into shapes, each one kitted out in a uniform and carrying some form of weaponry. The long dead Rangers moved as they formed from the vapor, coalescing into one group, one platoon, one ethereal presence.

Kat's lips quivered, but this time, try as she may, she couldn't make her throat form any words, not even a scream to let the world know she was alive and very terrified.

Eventually, the rogue platoon joined their leader, ignoring the nurse as if it was she who was the fleshless spirit. The men formed either side Grayson as if they were creating a skirmish line, and with one gesture from the sergeant they pushed forward, the bizarre mist still following them like an aircraft's jet trails.

Kat let out a breath, *No such thing as ghosts, no such thing*, but Grayson knew otherwise.

The lead spirit paused mid-step as if hearing Kat's inner chant. He spun expertly around, keeping his rifle pointed to the ground, and then smiled – a wide, toothless, fleshless grin as his face reverted to that of a rotting cadaver.

Finally, Kat's nerves gave way and she screamed, continuing her pitiful, hoarse yelps until Sheriff Caldwell found her cowering in the roadway almost thirty minutes later.

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Casper, Wyoming
Downtown Bar

Dean took a look at the empty shot glass and then let it slide from his fingers onto the bar. The glass clattered onto the pitted wooden surface and joined a multitude of its empty brethren.

Empty.

Dean huffed. The drained, innocent looking receptacles were a reflection of him. The demon was gone, eradicated by its bastard father, but at what price? What good was it that he was free if it meant losing his brother?

The question made a burning sensation well in his throat and he glanced up, smiling wickedly at the pretty young barmaid. "Hit me again, sweetheart..." He pushed one of the glasses forward with his forefinger, noticing the way his hand swayed as he made the gesture. *Hmmn...maybe I should grab a stool...*

"Dean, don't you think you've had enough already?" The voice was Sam's, questioning, worrying – knowing the cause of his sibling's melancholy behavior. "We should head back to the motel. I've found something interesting..."

Dean failed to turn, instead running a shaky hand through the front of his hair. Sam knew he was drunk, hell, *Dean* knew he was drunk, but that didn't change anything. The thoughts running through his head were there *every* waking hour, nagging, biting, and churning far more than Haris' spawn even had. The whiskey wasn't going to change that, either. In fact, he wondered why he was even pouring it down his throat like water, because all it was going to give him was a four alarm headache later.

Sam was going to *die*. Hell, Sam was going to die *for Dean*, just like Melissa had. And, as usual, he was helpless.

The hunter's eyes locked with the girl behind the bar. It was obvious she didn't want to serve him anymore. Was that fear he saw on her face? He blinked, realizing for the first time that the girl actually looked a lot like Melissa. Or maybe it was just his inebriated mind playing tricks?

"Dean..." Sam pushed again, and this time his staggering brother turned to face him.

"You don't get it, do you? Everyone around me dies, Sammy. I'm like some friggin' pariah or something. I couldn't save Melissa...I can't save you..."

Sam's eyes darted to the grimy bar floor. Maybe he didn't need saving. Maybe this was his destiny. Either way, he'd been through this very same conversation so many times over the last few weeks that he didn't want to continue it again – especially not in front of a bar full of strangers.

Dean had been through a lot, endured a lot. Sam's deal with Haris and then Melissa dying at the hands of the Wampus Cat had been the last straw that had finally broken his brother, but there was no changing the past. What had happened was already set in stone, including the deal he would soon have to pay up on.

"Melissa wasn't your fault. If she hadn't summoned that thing...killed those kids..." It was a weak response, but there was simply nothing more to give.

"And I suppose the deal you made wasn't my fault either?" Dean's face was blotched with red as he struggled to keep down his temper. It was bad enough Sam had kept the deal from him for so long, but for his little brother to keep brushing it off, wanting to hunt, wanting to act like it had never happened – that, Dean couldn't take.

"It was tearing you apart, killing you from the inside like some demonic cancer. Would you have stood by and watched if it had been me? *Would you?*" Sam's voice raised an octave and he abruptly realized some of the bar customers were staring at them.

At least Dean in his drunken state had an excuse to shout and be rowdy, but all Sam had sipped all night was an iced Coke that had soon become warm in the heat of the inn.

Dean swallowed hard and looked away, caught in his own trap. Dean would die for Sam, of that there was no doubt. It was just impossible to accept that his brother would

soon be giving up body and soul because he'd gotten careless. "My sorry ass isn't worth saving. You should have taken the necklace off and let Haris' kid take me. Anything rather than make a deal with that yellow-eyed bastard..." He wobbled a little, the room around him suddenly deciding to take a quick spin. "Demons lie, Sammy..."

A tiny smile crept across Sam's features, just for a second. "So do hunters," he murmured, thinking of how he had removed the necklace only long enough for Haris to extricate his child instead of handing it over to the yellow-eyed monster.

Dean's brow furrowed and he slumped onto the bench seat next to Sam, eyes gradually trying to focus on the file in front of his brother. "Sammy, forget this hunting crap. We gotta find a way outta that deal. Maybe we should call dad..." The hunter hiccupped, putting the back of his hand to his mouth as he brought up a mouthful of an earlier meal. "I knew I shouldn't have had that second burrito..."

"No." Sam ignored the sickly complexion that was creeping over his brother and tapped the manila file on the table. "No dad," he concluded. "But I do think we should look into this. I don't know...I just have this *feeling*."

"Feeling as in 'let's make a deal with a demon?' Huh, Sammy? Cos, I ain't liking where your feelings take you lately..." The elder hunter eased back until he was leaning heavily against the rear of the torn seat he'd perched on and his eyes fluttered with sudden fatigue. "You gonna spill or do I gotta try and figure out which of the three folders I'm looking at is the real one?" Dean belched and grinned, his earlier anger dissipating as the liquor took hold and his vision blurred.

"Oxford, Nebraska," Sam offered up, relief creeping into his expression as he realized his very drunken brother was relenting on his anger. "Locals have seen a ghost platoon walking the streets at night. *Multiple* hauntings are rare, Dean..."

"Platoon?" Dean's brow creased and he eased forward with a grunt to look at the now open folder. "Says here the sightings are since some dudes' bodies were found in Vietnam and brought home for burial?" He squinted, realizing that no matter how hard he tried to focus, the printed words were not going to stop swimming like sharks before his eyes. The more Sammy filled him in, the better, or he may just get sea sick, or more likely whiskey sick.

"From what I've found, most of the guys in the unit were from around Oxford. It's a tiny town - pretty amazing they all ended up together..." Sam's gaze drifted as if he had suddenly gone back in time. Had the men been drafted, or had they joined up? He could almost see them in his mind in uniform as they were shipped overseas to a war that could never be won. *Just like mine and Dean's war...*

"Pretty amazing they all came back together too, Sammy." Dean leaned back again, unsure how long he could make coherent conversation without diving for the nearby bathroom. "You sure this isn't some prank or local scare because someone read in the paper the bodies had been found?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't think so. None of the people who've seen the platoon are the type to get flustered quickly. The last one, Katherine McBride, was a nurse from the local clinic. Definitely not the type to panic. I think we have a real mystery here..."

Or you're clutching at straws – anything to keep your mind of the stupid deal you made, Dean thought, a sudden burst of annoyance pushing through his alcoholic stupor. "So, why do you think a bunch of guys who died in Vietnam would haunt there own town, Mr. Know It All?"

"I...I don't know," Sam admitted, his gaze moving back to the folder. "Like I said, I just feel something...drawn there somehow..."

"Jeez, I knew using the name Beckett back in Raleigh was a mistake. Now you think you gotta leap into every gig as if you're there for a reason, save the day and leap out

again.” Dean rolled his eyes and felt his stomach churn. *Whoa, definitely shouldn't have had the burrito...*

He stumbled to his feet and tottered momentarily before gaining his balance by holding out both arms to steady his swaying body. “Gotta pee, dude,” he muttered uncertainly, unwilling to admit he was probably going to be sick. *Tough guys don't puke...*

Sam watched as Dean floundered across the room and vanished quickly into the bathroom. It didn't take much to guess that he probably wouldn't make it out again under his own steam. While he was sleeping off the excesses, Sam could head the car towards Oxford and hope his brother accepted the gig without further question when he awoke.

I can't just sit around and wait for Haris...I can't...

While Sam was on the road, working, killing evil, he could at least push aside the stark truth of his future – the reality that soon he would have no future.

“Maybe this will just be a quick salt and burn,” he said to no one in particular as he picked up the Impala's keys from where Dean had dropped them. But then, for the Winchesters, when was anything that simple?

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Cold air blew in from the open window, blasting Dean in the face until he felt almost awake – almost. Even as he slouched in the Impala's passenger seat, he had to wonder just how much whiskey it had taken to knock him out this way. He could normally drink the best hunters under the table - apart from his father and Joe Bearwalker, and walk away without so much as a headache.

The four-alarm hangover that had been plaguing him for the past hundred miles was telling him he had drunk a hell of a lot more than usual. *Or maybe Sammy slipped me something. Wouldn't be the first damn time...*

Except, Dean knew there was no reason for Sam to drug him again. No, the hangover, the guilt was all his own. He'd downed the whiskey to mask his problems, to hide the inevitable of what was going to happen to his brother, sooner rather than later, *because of me!*

“Dean?” Sam looked over and was relieved to see the elder hunter finally awake. He hated to see his brother this way – hated knowing that maybe he had only a few shorts weeks of seeing his brother at all. *Can't think like that...*

“Yeah, I'm awake, Sasquatch.” Dean stretched, feeling a kink in his neck where he'd lain at an angle against the door. “How long did I sleep?”

“Long enough...” Sam slowed, pulling the Impala onto a small verge at the side of the road. There were no street lights, only corn fields as far as the eye could see. “We're just outside Oxford. I tried to find us a motel, but the place is tiny and it's late. Maybe we should head for the next town and find somewhere there?”

Dean shook his head. He'd had enough sleep, enough nightmares for one day. “Not worth the trip.” He yawned, finally becoming fully alert. “May as well check out where our nurse chick saw *The A Team*. When we're done we can sleep in the car till morning.”

Sam nodded, letting his eyes fall on the corn wafting in the evening breeze. “Dean, back at the bar...” He shifted uneasily on the Chevy's bench seat, unsure how to approach the downward spiral in his brother's behavior without causing yet another argument.

“Dude, forget about it. I just needed to down a few after Melissa, okay?” *Lies*. He needed the drink, needed to hide behind the thin veil of refuge it gave. *Except I didn't hide. I went to the john and made a call you're not gonna like, Sammy.*

In retrospect, maybe he wasn't going to like what he'd done back in Casper, either. Whiskey could make a man do a lot, but running for help, hell, that wasn't something Dean Winchester did very often.

Sam looked at his brother, but the mirthful glint had gone from Dean's eyes just as surely as it had when the demon had been on board. It was hard to tell what he was thinking anymore, hard to know if he would make it if Haris carried on with the deal and took Sam as payment. *And he will...*

"Will you quit looking at me like that? I'm starting to get worried here..." Dean's mouth edged into a smirk, but the snark that usually flowed in torrents had merely been a thin trickle of late.

It was the first time Sam had ever known his brother this way, and it scared him. *He's likely to do something stupid if anything happens to me...*

"Sammy, I don't think we need to go looking for our mystery platoon..." Dean sat up straighter in his seat and stared almost vacantly from the Impala's side window. "Dude, *Children of the Corn* has nothing on this picture..."

Sam's brows rose and his pupils widened as he looked across to the still-blowing sheaves that danced under the moonlight's all-encompassing glow. From their center, something was stirring, something that walked – no hovered – over a thin stratum of fog.

"It's the ghost platoon..."

Dean bobbed his head, lowering his window to get a better view. "Yeah, not exactly *Rambo* material if it takes a whole bunch to come back and get a few scares..."

"I still don't get the why. Why haunt their hometown? Nobody here could have caused their deaths all those thousands of miles away. It was a war, Dean." Sam's gaze followed the ghostly troop as they moved closer, weaving in and out of the corn as if they still had physical form. "Maybe they don't know they're dead?"

"Ya think? Cos, dude, they gotta have noticed there are no freakin' gooks around here." The hunter paused, realizing he wasn't even funny. "There's something we're missing. Something big. You sure your freaky vision thing isn't telling you anything. I mean, you said you were drawn here, right?"

"Nothing, Dean, but I think we're about to get a chance to find out." Sam nodded and he winced, nodding towards the outside of the car. The platoon had changed direction and the full width of their patrol had begun to encircle the Impala.

A figure wearing sergeant's stripes stood at their head, his bright red-flecked eyes fixated on Sam, as if he knew the hunter from a past life.

Dean's expression changed and his brow knitted in concern. "Dude, is there something I'm missing here? 'Cause that freak is looking at you as if he wants to make you his bitch."

Sam shook his head, but couldn't find any words to explain the dead soldier's fascination with him. "Maybe he senses my gift?"

"Maybe," Dean agreed, pushing open the creaking Chevy's door with a grunt. "Or maybe he's one of Haris' legions of dead minions come to collect your sorry ass..." The hunter headed for the trunk, ignoring the fact that the ghostly sergeant was moving closer.

"It's not my birthday." Sam joined his brother and accepted the pump action shot gun he was given without question.

"Yeah, well how long is it gonna take to seep into that thick Stanford skull of yours that *demons friggin' lie*? Sammy, he could collect anytime...maybe he lured you here for just that. Maybe this whole friggin platoon's mission is a little soul collection for that bastard."

No, he can't take me yet. It's all part of the master plan. I just don't know what that plan is. Sam inhaled. "This isn't about Haris, trust me."

Dean cracked the barrel of his own weapon and slid in two rock salt-filled shells. The slight clicking sound as they slipped into place was comforting, even though he was surrounded by almost fifty dead men. "Might wanna tell that to the red-eyed dude with the barrel of his M16 pointed at your head..."

Sam's eyes flicked upwards in time to see the sergeant's face transform from human to some maggot-filled husk. But even then, the eyes glowed a fiery red that seemed to spark and flare in the stark light from the moon.

"...the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations..."

The sound appeared to emanate from the soldier, but there were no lips to form the words, only a bony-white jaw that struggled to open and close without any muscle tissue to move it.

Sam couldn't take his eyes from the sight, couldn't dive behind the relative safety of the Impala, even though the spirit had singled him out and had an M16 aimed at his skull.

"Sammy, DOWN!" Dean heaved his shotgun up ready to fire, but Sam didn't move. He had been brought here for a reason, and if that reason was death, then it was time he embraced it. No more running, no more back alley deals.

The young hunter outstretched his arms. "If you've come for me, then take me..."

Dean's eyes widened but he didn't waste time focusing further on his obviously deluded brother. Tucking the shotgun into his shoulder, he tugged back on the trigger, feeling the kick as two shells exploded from the barrel dispelling a shower of rock salt over his enemy.

The white powdery cloud bit into Grayson's presence, diffusing his ethereal form in an implosion of light and sound. The sergeant screamed out as his message, his reason for being here was yanked away before he could complete it.

As Grayson vanished into the ether, his troop dissipated along with him, their bodies seemingly swallowed by the blackness of the night.

Dean heaved out a breath and rubbed at the thin sheen of perspiration that had formed on his brow. "You're discharged, *Sarge*," he snarked, warily eyeing the spot where Grayson had stood.

Sam cringed, suspecting the remark was from some instantly forgettable movie. It was a "Dean thing" he'd become used to over the years, but he just couldn't place the quote right now. Then again, that was hardly surprising, the look his brother was giving him.

"Dude, have you gotten some kinda death wish here? Cos I'm working my butt off trying to find some solution to your whole Haris deal, and you go giving yourself up to the bastard!" The elder hunter returned to the Impala's trunk and tossed in his weapon, not bothering to even slide it into the niche that normally housed it. He was mad, no furious, and he didn't give a damn if Sam knew it.

Sam slid his hands into his jacket pockets but glanced away. It was hard to look Dean in the eyes when he was this pissed. Sometimes it was even easier to walk away, just like he had that night on the road that seemed so long ago now. *Yeah, and that time I walked straight into the clutches of Meg, Haris's kid. Seems like I'm going in circles here...*

Sam inhaled, calming his rattled nerves. "This isn't about Haris, Dean, but maybe it *is* about me." He watched his brother's features, waiting for more sarcasm, waiting to be shot down before he'd even finished his explanation. Instead, Dean simply shook his head and remained at the rear of the Chevy. "The soldier, the one who singled me out? I think he was trying to tell me something..."

"Yeah?" Dean huffed. "What are we dealing with here, friggin' *Lassie*?"

"Dean!" Sam shot his brother the opposite of his normal puppy dog smile, the expression Dean had affectionately labeled "Sad Sam" but that was actually closer to "Pissy Sam" than the fluffy toy it described. "Man, you're so not listening. *You* were the one with a shotgun, yet the thing was fixated on me...spoke to *me*..." Sam fidgeted. "It cited something from the Bible, Dean. I'm not sure but either Exodus or maybe Numbers..."

"The Bible?" Dean's face contorted at the very word. Bibles, churches, they just weren't his thing. "Dude, you been hanging around Moses, *way* too long. You're starting to sound like him. Next thing you know I'm gonna have to buy you a dog collar." The hunter thought about it, striding for the driver's door of the Chevy. Eventually, he turned back and grinned. "Course, then you could bless your own holy water, save us a bunch of time..."

"Dean, we have to figure out where that quote is from. It means something." Sam tugged at the passenger door, climbing inside the classic and ignoring his brother's jibes.

"Yeah, I figured," Dean admitted, deftly twisting the ignition key. "But first we go eat, and then we find out if anyone remembers *Sgt Bilko* back in the sixties when he was still alive."

Sam glowered. "Eat? Dean, it's the middle of the night. Don't you think of anything but food?"

Dean patted his stomach with a grin. "Dude, nothing better than some All-American grease burgers after a hangover..."

"Ugh..." Sam looked away and decided not to push the conversation. Who knew what other hidden, gross foodstuff Dean might decide to talk about to make him feel nauseous.

Sometimes, the things his brother ate defied description – sometimes, he often wondered if the word "supernatural" was too accurate for the items Dean piled on his plate.

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Oxford, Nebraska The Next Day

Dean watched as the pendulum swung back and forth on the ancient grandfather clock, almost mesmerizing him with its metronomic motion.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Time's running out, for me, for Sammy...

"Mrs. Grayson, thank you so much for seeing us at such short notice. We really appreciate it." Sam's velvety voice filtered across the room and Dean finally managed to pry his gaze from the antique timepiece in the corner.

"Who did you say you were with again, young man?" A short, spry woman who reminded the elder Winchester of Aunt May from *Spiderman* looked over her wire glasses at both brothers.

"We're doing a freelance piece for the Oxford Standard here in town." Dean smiled, hating to lie to the old woman. "We were wondering if you could tell us about your son?"

Margaret Grayson's eyes flicked to a framed photograph sitting atop her TV. The young man in the picture wore dress uniform and stood proudly with several other men from his platoon, but it was obviously the sergeant from the previous night's encounter.

The image was slightly faded, but his smile, his passion for his job shone through whatever the passage of time had done to the colors.

"This is about the rumors, isn't it?" Margaret's face grew solemn, her bottom lip quivering slightly and her hands wringing as she brought back memories long since pushed away into some dark corner of her mind. "It's all rumors. My Ryan wouldn't hurt anyone, not even if he could come back. He was a good boy. Everyone liked him."

"Do you know what happened to him all those years ago?" Sam sat forward, teasing the information from the graying mother.

"No one knew," she shrugged, her voice catching slightly as she swallowed back a tear. "All the parents were told was that the whole platoon simply vanished one night while on patrol. Everyone assumed they were all killed by the Vietnamese, but there was never any proof one way or another. Like the Marie Celeste on land..."

Both brothers looked at one another and frowned. The Marie Celeste was definitely their kind of gig.

"But there's proof now?" Dean pushed.

Margaret shrugged and her eyes saddened. Without a body she had held out hope for so long that Ryan might one day be found alive. "Ryan's whole platoon was found by a pair of backpackers. Their remains were brought home for burial, but its all still a mystery..."

"Mystery?" Sam scribbled on a small pad, feigning taking notes.

"Yes," the distressed mother nodded. "You see, Ryan and the others? Their bodies were thirty miles from their proposed landing zone. No one knows how it could have happened..."

An awkward silence filled the room, the ominous ticking of the grandfather clock the only noise that dare to invade.

Tick. Tock. Tick.

Dean cleared his throat. "Mrs. Grayson, we hate to ask, but can you tell us where your son and the others were buried?"

Margaret frowned, a clear line of wrinkles forming across her aging brow. "Ryan is in Spring Grove cemetery. I don't know about the other boys, but I think some are in Kellner cemetery, about half a mile from town. So many families had left Oxford after all this time..." She looked back at her son's photo, his cheerful face drawing a small smile from her. "If you want to know more about Ryan, you should go visit his old friend Paul Mitchum. Paul was Ryan's best friend and C.O. Poor boy was devastated when that whole patrol vanished."

Dean nodded, and rose from his seat simultaneously with Sam. "Thank you, ma'am. We'll do that..."

Margaret bobbed her head and bit unconsciously into her bottom lip. "The stories I've heard, they can't be true, can they? My Ryan...I mean...coming back?"

Sam looked to his brother, but couldn't answer. From the crucifix on the wall unit it was clear Mrs. Grayson had faith. Maybe finding out her son had returned as something less than Godly would be more than she could take. *Maybe Dad finding out about my deal will be too. Thank God he doesn't know...*

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Paul Mitchum's Home Outskirts of Oxford, Nebraska

Dean whistled as he trudged down a long, rough hewn path that cut through a mass of blowing corn sheaves. "Man, this guy takes living in the boonies to a new level. What kind of weirdo has a house in the middle of a cornfield?" He scrunched his face after thinking about it for a long, hard second. "Except maybe Mel Gibson in *Signs...*"

"Or a retired army officer that wants to stay out of the limelight?" Sam offered, finally reaching the large wooden building that Paul Mitchum called home. "I mean, did you read this guy's bio? Highly decorated war hero, dude..." He climbed the wooden decking and rapped on the front screen door, raising a brow.

Dean scratched his head dismissively. "Yeah, well, heroes are usually over-rated."

Sam opened his mouth to argue that Dean considered their father a hero, but quickly snapped his jaw shut again when a young man about his age appeared from behind the screen door.

"Hi, can I help you?"

"We're doing an article for the Oxford Standard. We wondered if Mr. Paul Mitchum is home?" Dean flashed a fake press badge, but the young, dark haired man ignored him, his youthful eyes wandering to Sam and then widening.

"My, um...my dad is on the phone. Would you like to come in and wait?" The kid gestured into the house, and Sam couldn't help but notice that he'd paled slightly and his outstretched hand trembled just a fraction.

"Thanks, um - ?" Dean shot his brother a glance and then focused his attention on the kid, pressuring for a name.

"David, I'm David Mitchum..." He stepped back, allowing the two brothers entrance into the huge wooden structure.

Inside was just as neatly kept as the outside. Picture frames perfectly aligned along the corridor as if on regimental parade. Flowers arranged in vases strategically placed to give the best effect without being too overpowering.

Jeez, he's one of those guys who has that freaky anal condition about neatness, Dean cringed inside as he entered another flawlessly kept side room, knowing he was the total opposite and appreciating the fact. Sometimes being a partial slob had its advantages.

Along the top of a Baby Grand piano the hunter noticed a collection of photographs – all identically mounted. They were all of one man at various stages in his military career. Dean assumed correctly they were of Mitchum.

The first picture was faded, just like the one at Margaret Grayson's home, and alongside Mitchum, M16 in hand, was the now infamous sergeant. To match the compilation was another frame, this time full of immaculately cleaned medals that shone in the morning light through the window.

Dean nodded to Sam, indicating the plethora of decorations Mitchum had received.

"Your dad was quite a war hero, David?" Sam let a hand run over the glass in the medal collection's frame and was startled when a short static shock tracked up his fingers and into his hand, making him pull away.

"I...I guess..." David's already pallid complexion seemed to sallow even further. "I'm proud of what he did..."

"Really, kid? 'Cause from where I'm sitting you don't sound too sure." Dean cracked into a smirk and only bit back any further comments when Sam shot him the hundredth dirty look of the day.

"Is something wrong?" Sam crossed the room so that he was facing Mitchum's son. "Is it something we said?" *Hell, is it me? I saw the scared rabbit look the minute he set eyes on me...*

"It's nothing. Something stupid, that I should know better than let bother me." David shrugged. "I mean, I'm twenty-two not four. Nightmares are for kids, right?"

Dean picked up the medal frame, knowing his moving it even a fraction would probably irk its owner. He didn't know Mitchum yet, but he knew the type. "Dude, you'd be surprised how many nightmares are real..."

Sam nodded in agreement, thinking of the endless torment he suffered because of his visions. *Been there, done that...don't want the damn t-shirt.* "Do you mind me asking why the dream bothered you so much?" He asked, perching on the edge of a rather huge, plush velour chair.

"It's about my dad." David watched Dean place the medals down, then his eyes shifted back to Sam. "Something bad happens to him in it...and the worse part is I keep seeing it over and over. Last night was the third night in a row..." He shuddered, suddenly wishing he hadn't opened his heart, his soul, to two strangers, but then, were they strangers? He looked back up to Sam, fear abruptly making him want to leave the room.

"David? Why didn't you tell me we had guests?" A short, gray haired man with a well-trimmed moustache sauntered into the room and scrutinized both brothers. His eyes were sharp, beady – the kind of eyes that missed nothing, not even the slightest scuffed boot on a parade ground.

"You were busy on the phone, I...I thought it best to wait..." David scrambled to his feet. "I'll go finish in the kitchen," he finished, scurrying from the room before his father or the Winchesters could say more.

"Seems like a good kid," Dean offered. *Pity I think his dad might be an ass.*

"He is a good boy. Reminds me of my younger days. You know, my wife and I didn't think we'd be blessed with any children. Then David came along out of the blue late in our lives." Mitchum took a seat at a mahogany desk in the corner, resting his elbows on it and steepling his fingers. "But you didn't come here to talk family. So, what can I do for you two? Did I hear mention of some newspaper report?"

"We were wondering if you could tell us about the night Ryan Grayson's patrol went missing. You were his commanding officer at the time. Care to offer any speculations as to why they were so far from their mission LZ?"

Mitchum nodded, a wry smile forming under his moustache. "This is about the ghost sightings since the men's bodies were brought home. The press will write anything these days to get a buck..." He leaned back in his leather swivel chair, a slightly accusatory tone edging his voice. "Ryan was my friend. I was devastated when the whole platoon was lost like that. The simple truth is, though, we may never know what went wrong. Vietnam was a bloody war. Unexplainable things happened in the confusion of battle."

"Do you think someone could have made a mistake? Maybe someone could have messed up the mission's coordinates somehow?" Sam faked writing on his notepad again, but all he could think about was the recognition in Mitchum's son's eyes back on the porch. Something bizarre was going on in the tiny town of Oxford. Something more than just a phantom Ranger patrol come back from the dead. *He knew me somehow...the kid knew me. And what's with the nightmare?*

"...well, thank you for your time, Mr. Mitchum. Oh, and...nice set of medals..."

Sam could hear the tick of sarcasm in Dean's voice and suddenly became conscious that his brother was excusing them. He'd been so wrapped up in his thoughts about David he hadn't even noticed the interview had all but come to a close.

Standing from his seat, he stuffed the notepad into his top pocket and just managed to see Paul Mitchum fiddling with something on top of the piano from the corner of his eye as he exited the room. A grin appeared on the younger Winchester's face as he realized Mitchum was re-arranging his medals after Dean had touched them.

Sam leaned from his lofty heights and whispered just loud enough for his brother to hear, "Hey man, I think you tainted his collection for life ..."

Dean scowled and pushed open the house's screen door just a little too hard, making it clatter on the carefully painted woodwork. "The guy is a dick," he complained. "And

they gave *him* medals! Man. I almost feel bad we gotta go torch his buddies instead of him..."

Sam paused at the Impala's door, looking back across to the house as if it called to him. "Dean...I'm not so sure we should burn the bodies yet..."

Dean slipped in a piece of gum to satiate his grumbling stomach and then cocked his head. "Dude, they haunt, we salt and burn their asses. It's a pretty simple equation."

Sam grabbed the handle and tugged open the creaking metal door, slipping his towering frame inside. When his brother joined him, chewing heartily, he continued their conversation. "I sensed something in the Mitchum house," he confessed. "Something strong, powerful, but I can't put my finger on it. And what about the kid's dreams? Dean, you might think I'm nuts, but I really don't think those ghosts are here to hurt people – at least, not random people."

Dean cranked the ignition. "You're right," he agreed with a smirk. "I do think you're nuts..." *Who else would sell their soul for my sorry butt?* The elder hunter spun around the steering wheel with one hand and pointed the Chevy towards Kellner cemetery. According to what they'd discovered, it was going to be a long day, travelling between three separate burial grounds to find the entire platoon's remains and burn them. A long day Dean could do without when he had his brother's fate on his conscience.

"Dean...we can't just burn these soldier's bodies and walk away. What if this were dad?"

Dad.

Dean flinched at the word. "Sammy, if they're not back to cause trouble, then what? How many spooks you know that go around pointing guns at people but really wanna win the friggin' zombie peace prize?" *Why did he have to mention Dad..?*

Sam inhaled and fixed his gaze on the corn that stretched as far as he could see. There would be no talking to Dean. No asking to find the truth behind the haunting. And in a way, maybe his brother was right. The dead needed sending to a peaceful resting place. What good would it do to drag up how they'd died after all this time? *But what if it was murder? What if...?*

The random idea popped into the hunter's head and refused to budge, no matter how hard he tried to focus on other things. On his deal with Haris, on how Dean would deal with things if Haris collected, on what his father would do. But still, the same question clawed at his mind like a hungry maggot in a feeding frenzy.

What if it was murder...?

Sam heard the radio flick on, and some part of his mind recognized The Doors' "*The Unknown Soldier*" begin to harmonize through the speakers. Trust Dean to pick a song that epitomized a war whose aftermath they were still dealing with even now.

What if it was murder...?

The words began to scream at him, not in his voice, but in the rasping tones he had heard the previous evening. It was as if Grayson was somehow taunting him, begging him to listen, to hear the sergeant's full story.

Sam let his head drop into his palms as it began to throb in the usual painful rhythm that indicated a vision. Somewhere inside it felt like his brain was actually pulsating, writhing, trying to break free from the constraints of his skull. And then, in a rapid blast of clarity, he was elsewhere, watching through a cloudy skewed haze as if seeing through a camera lens that wasn't being held steady.

It was night, and all around the hunter could hear noises, strange chirps and insect calls. To his left a familiar, but slightly clearer voice broke the jungle sounds.

"We're way out of our depth here. We should head back to our LZ and call the choppers back in. Pop some smoke before our asses get fried..."

Sam blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the vision, to the picture he was being shown that could never be changed. *I'm seeing the past, not the future, just like in St. Michaels Bay...*

Except Sam was more than *seeing*, he was *feeling* every thought, every last pain-filled idea that ran through Ryan Grayson's head before his death, and it wasn't pretty.

Grayson had known the whole patrol had been set up because of an action he had taken. In his last moments as he'd run full-throttle at the Viet-Cong, he had felt the weight of fifty men's deaths on his shoulders.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

And yet, those deaths hadn't really been Grayson's fault. They had been the fault of another – a friend, a soldier – a coward.

"...Sammy...dude I've seen Casper with more color..."

Sam shook his head, trying to clear the miasma that had momentarily enveloped it. Dean was talking to him, was shaking his arm in a frantic attempt to pull him free from his reverie.

"I'm alright...I..." Sam tugged his tingling eyelids open, vaguely aware that they were stinging almost as much as the time they'd been burned during the recent Riverside gig. "Dean...we have to go back. I know why the platoon is here!"

Dean slowed the Impala but didn't instantly turn. He looked across to the passenger seat, steering with just one hand. "You saw something that's gonna happen?" he questioned.

Sam shook his head, finding the motion still painful. "No...I saw what happened. It was like for a split second I was back in 'Nam with Grayson. Hell, it was like I was inside the sergeant's head. I sensed his every thought right up until..." He paused, thinking how needlessly the soldiers had died. "Dean, it was Paul Mitchum! Mitchum was mistreating women prisoners and Grayson found out. Confronted his old friend about it..."

Dean screwed his face up in disgust. "Man, you're telling me that creep Mitchum went *Casualties of War* on some prisoners, and when Grayson confronted him he altered his best buddy's next mission so his dirty deeds wouldn't get found out? Son of a *bitch!*" The hunter slapped the steering wheel with his palm. "I knew that guy was a dick!"

"Yeah, well all Grayson and his men wanted was to try and make someone understand. They want justice, Dean."

"Yeah, and if I have to drag Mitchum down to the local Sheriff's office to do it, they're gonna get that justice." Dean hit the brake pedal, spinning the Impala in a one-eighty so fast the aging car groaned audibly in protest. He scowled, reapplying gas after the turn. "I knew I was gonna hate this friggin' gig..."

* * * *

Mitchum's House

Dean parked the Impala as close to the edge of the cornfield as possible and climbed out. Dragging his Desert Eagle from his belt, he ejected the clip, checked its contents, and then slid it back home with a harsh slam of his palm.

He sighed at the sound of the metal "click" as the clip found its place, and then he re-situated the weapon in its "home."

"Dean, we can't go in there all guns blazing. The guy has a son that has no clue what a monster his father really was..." Sam watched as the look of anger on his brother's features subsided only slightly.

"Sammy, Mitchum is an ex-Ranger. No way I'm going up there with no protection. Trust me, no guns unless he pulls one first, okay?" Dean began to swagger through the corn toward the house without waiting for any agreement. He wanted this hunt over. He wanted to be back on the trail of Haris and a way out of Sam's deal. *Nobody else is gonna die for me...*

Sam took down a long breath and began to follow. There was no reason to believe Mitchum would be expecting them back so soon, and no reason to think he'd be aware of what they'd found out. How could he, when it had come from one of Sam's bizarre, yet insightful visions?

"Hey, looks like David can't stand his dad's company either..." Dean cocked a brow and stepped sideways just enough for Sam to see the young man bound through the house's front door and storm down the steps.

Even at this distance it was easy to tell that he was flustered. The cheeks of his face were reddened, and as he climbed onto a small dirt bike he seemed almost disorientated.

David booted at the kick start in a frenzy, and when the bike finally struggled to life he yanked at the handle bars and gunned the gas until the rear wheel spun in the loose earth for several seconds before gaining traction.

"Whoa, stand clear, Evel Knievel's on the war path!" Dean moved out of the bike's route as it sped towards him. "Think he's gonna try and jump the Impala?" He queried, raising a brow as he noted the Chevy was quite clearly blocking David's path.

Sam's voice softened as if he was only vaguely aware of what his brother was saying. Something else was on his mind, nagging, needing to know. "Shouldn't we be asking ourselves why he's in such a hurry?" The hunter moved until he was in the center of the rough pathway, directly in front of the oncoming bike.

"Sam!" Dean moved instinctively to push his brother out of the way, but the oncoming bike's brakes squealed as its rider skidded sideways in an attempt to stop. David brought the Yamaha to a halt a few feet from both Winchesters, his eyes wide with the sudden realization he'd almost plowed into them.

"Dude, Haris not collecting fast enough for you?" Dean glared at his sibling's apparent kamikaze attempt. "You give the words 'death wish' a whole new meaning and I ain't liking it, li'l brother..."

Sam ignored the remark, instead addressing the young man who had now clambered from his dirt bike. "Where were you going in such a hurry?"

David ran his forearm across his brow and grimaced. He wanted to be somewhere else almost as much as Dean did. He wanted to save someone – almost as much as Dean did. "I need to go. I have to find my dad..." He moved to pass the two brothers, but Dean blocked his path.

"Your dad's not home?" Dean shot Sam a glance that said maybe they had been expected after all.

"I was sleeping...I've had so many rough nights lately I must have dozed." David squirmed, thinking about the dream his slumber had brought on. "I had another nightmare...it was so real...so...frightening..."

"About your dad?" Sam's brow knitted in concentration. Things were coming together in his head now. Things he should have realized earlier.

"...the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations..."

David shook his head, his sweat-drenched hair dropping into his eyes. "It was about one of Dad's friends. I've seen the guy in the photos, heard Dad talk about him even..." His eyes fell to the earth his bike had churned moments earlier. "I saw how he died..."

"You saw *why* he died too, didn't you?" Sam pushed, knowing now that David was no ordinary kid. *We shared the same vision. That's why I was drawn here, why Grayson's ghost singled me out...David is one of the special kids...just like me...*

"Dad set him up...he set them all up." David finally looked up, daring to stare his two companions in the eye. "But that doesn't mean he deserves to die. He's different now. He changed when he married Mom."

Dean huffed, but bit back a scathing remark. "Where is he now? What got you so all fired up you nearly turned us into dog chow?"

"When I woke up he was going through the garage like crazy. He took a spade and a can of gas. Said something about knowing what he had to do." David winced and bit into his lower lip. "I don't know where he's gone, but I have another bad feeling about this."

"Spade? Can of gas?" Dean cocked his head towards his brother. "Sammy, I think Mr. Medals found out how to kill spook ass and he's gone to burn his ex-buddies before they let loose his skeleton in the closet."

Sam nodded. "The nearest cemetery is Kellner, where we were headed. He'll probably go there first." The younger Winchester looked to his fellow visionary. "David, go inside and wait for us. We'll bring your dad back."

"Back to what?" David's eyes watered, but he struggled to hold back the tears. Deep down he'd been somehow expecting this. The dreams, the nightmares – somehow he'd always known they were some kind of insight into the truth.

"I don't know," Sam admitted truthfully. "The police, justice...but believe me, that's better than what he's headed for right now."

David nodded. Somehow, he already knew that.

* * *

Kellner Cemetery

Sam crept between the tombs, shafts of twilight sun catching him occasionally as he moved stealthily from monument to monument. It had taken longer to find the burial ground than either brother had expected – Mitchum having the advantage of knowing the Nebraska back roads far better than the Winchesters did.

Now they were here, it was late, and the ancient cemetery looked more like some civil war graveyard than a place where ten men had recently been interred.

"You sure we're at the right place? I mean, c'mon, I swear no one's been buried here since Abe Lincoln was in office..." Dean pressed his back against the stone of a crypt and warily looked across the expanse of headstones. For such a small, out of city place, a lot of people had died in or near Oxford.

"It's the right place," Sam affirmed. "We just have to find Mitchum before Grayson does."

Dean pushed forward; keeping his rock salt-filled weapon poised in front of him should the ghostly platoon appear. "What I don't get," he asked as he strode carefully between graves. "Is what's going on with Mitchum's kid? You think he's starting the whole freaky vision vibe like you? We got ourselves another *Village of the Damned* outcast or what?"

Sam stepped over a crumbling monument dated 1865, frowning at his brother's description. "Actually, yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head. There's more too..."

Dean stopped again, forgetting their prey for an instant to stare at his towering sibling. "More? Like what, Sammy?"

"Remember when Grayson said something to me about children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generations? I finally recalled where it's from, Dean. The whole thing is about sins of the fathers."

"Huh? Sammy, you're making about as much sense as that lap dancer back in Philly..."

Sam sighed, realizing that Dean just wasn't seeing the connection. "Grayson singled me out because he knew I was like David. Some ghostly sixth sense told him I was like Mitchum's son. The whole "sins of the fathers" thing *has* to be tied in too. I mean, c'mon, if Mitchum isn't classed as a sinner, then who is?"

The sound of a spade in the distance hitting on something hard caught Dean's ears and he held up a hand, torn between the gig, and Sam's ramblings. "You're saying you think Dad did something evil and that's why you got stuck with those wonderful Clark Kent-like abilities of yours? Dude, Mitchum might be a scum bag, but no way you're classing Dad with that S.O.B." The hunter scowled and ducked low, moving towards the repeated whacking of metal on what was presumably a casket.

"No, Dean...I just..." Sam stopped when he realized he didn't have an answer.

Paul Mitchum had openly admitted he and his wife had thought they would be childless, but then, like some miracle David had come along late in life. Maybe David was less a miracle and more some kind of demonic payment. What if the special kids all were? What if Haris paid off a debt by giving the special kids to certain families who had served him? *Dad wouldn't...*

The more the hunter thought about it, the more confusing it became until his head began to thrum. Like Dean, deep down he was convinced their father would never willingly or knowingly work for a creature from hell. So what did the "sins of the fathers" phrase really mean? Sam was convinced Grayson had directed it both at David, and at himself, and he was convinced now it was about their abilities. *I need to speak to Dad...*

"Sammy..."

Sam felt a hand on his forearm holding him lightly back, and when he looked up he saw why.

Paul Mitchum had opened the grave of a young soldier named Alan Hartman and had begun to hack at his casket with the spade he'd dug the hole with. Now, though, the chopping noises had ceased, only to be replaced by the sound of a grown man whimpering, begging, pleading for his life.

"Ryan...I swear I didn't change those orders...please...PLEASE!"

"Mitchum's a coward," Dean scoffed in disgust. "No big surprise there." He leveled his shotgun and dodged from behind the tomb where he'd been hiding.

Sam followed, pump action tucked into his shoulder ready to dispel Grayson's spirit.

"Sonofa..." Dean felt his throat and lips suddenly go dry and he stopped mid-gait.

"Multiple haunting my ass. Forget *Thirteen Ghosts*, we're talking full on Arlington uprising!"

Sam swung his Remington left and right, but had no clue where to aim or shoot first. There were simply too many ethereal targets massed around the dead Ranger's open grave.

What neither brother had expected was now facing them in full ghost platoon glory.

The only thing between the Winchesters and a petrified Paul Mitchum were fifty angry spirits, every last one with a weapon trained expertly on their former commanding officer.

"Hey! You wanna direct some of that pent up fury over here!?" Dean's eyebrows knitted and he tried to single out Grayson from the crowd. The sergeant was obviously the leader of the pack, and if he could dispel his spirit even momentarily it might buy Mitchum precious time.

The problem was, even when several of the soldiers' spirits turned, Dean realized he still couldn't spot the spook he was looking for. The platoon was covering their leader's ass while he got his revenge.

"No!" Sam looked beyond the line of grunts protecting Grayson, only to realize a second line had formed around Paul Mitchum, firing squad style. The hunter pulled back on his trigger and then cocked it, firing again several times in quick succession. "Dean!"

Dean spun on his heels and let his own weapon empty into the vaporous crowd, but there were just too many spirits and not enough salt-ammo to stop the inevitable.

Watching as a bloody, slow motion picture was painted before them, the Winchesters were forced to observe an act of ghostly military revenge that had waited three decades to pan out.

The soldiers M16s tore into Mitchum as if the weapons, and even the bullets were still real and on full automatic. Within seconds, the rifles' clips were empty, their owners finally sated in their desire for justice.

At the bottom of the recently re-opened grave, Mitchum lay in a mass of blood and tissue, torn to a pulp with a myriad of unearthly projectiles that had already vanished from his body as if they'd never existed.

"Sweet Jesus..!" Dean's lips pouted and he quickly broke the barrel of his weapon, stuffing in two more shells. The action, though, was pointless.

The moment Mitchum's heart stopped beating, the second the last glimmer of life vanished from his eyes, Grayson's platoon began to fade. Forms that once had shape and purpose began to ebb away into the night like a badly drawn sketch being erased from a page by the irate artist.

"They got what they wanted..." Dean lowered his shotgun as each ghost-Ranger dissipated outwards from Mitchum's dead body.

When almost all the soldiers had gone, only one figure remained, its M16 trained towards Sam. Dean instantly resumed his defensive posture, ready to blast Grayson's phantom body into oblivion, but Sam held up a hand, stopping any further action.

"No, Dean, they *didn't* get what they wanted..." Sam took a tentative step towards Grayson, despite the scowl of disapproval from his brother. As he drew closer to the putrefying wraith, though, Grayson's eyes shimmered a deep crimson and the spirit was gone in a dynamic flash of white luminance.

"Guess Jarhead doesn't like your brand of aftershave, Sammy. Told you it was way too girly..." Dean grimaced and walked to the edge of the grave where Mitchum's mangled, hole-filled cadaver now lay twitching. "We could just fill the grave over," he offered, unsure how else to explain a body full of shell holes with no actual bullets to be found.

That could be Sammy in just a few weeks. Dead, and me standing by helplessly...

Sam shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose hard with his thumb and forefinger as a habitual – if not wanted – throbbing began to burn behind his eyes. "Mitchum's body is the least of our worries. Dean, Grayson hasn't done yet." The younger brother turned, his face contorting into a familiar expression of mental and physical pain. "Sins of the father." He paused, eyes darting to Mitchum's corpse. "Dean, the platoon's going after David!"

"Are you sure? I mean, the kid wasn't even around when those guys died." Dean waited for a response knowing Sam had seen or sensed something more than this simply being intuition. "Shouldn't we just burn the bones, job done?"

After a second, Sam shook his head, clearing away the after-images of his mini-revelation. "No time to drive between all three cemeteries before they get to the kid. C'mon, we have to hurry. They're already surrounding the house..." he took a last look at the man they had failed to save and then broke into a jog back towards the Impala.

Maybe they never had a chance to save Paul Mitchum, but his son shouldn't have to pay a debt owed for so long. *Maybe I'm paying a family debt too. Maybe all the gifted kids are.*

Dean followed his brother, only slowing as he passed Mitchum's expensive ride.

The Jaguar's trunk was still open, the lid swaying slightly as a strong gust of wind caught it at a compromising angle. Enticed briefly by what may lie within, the hunter bobbed his head into the gloom of the car's rear and gawked.

"Son of a *bitch!* The guy had a bigger armory in his trunk than a friggin' Terminator ..."
He raised a brow appreciatively and plucked out two grenades in amazement, only to find a huge hand grabbing his arm and dragging him away before he could delve further.

"Don't worry, Dean, he still didn't have as many toys as you do in the Impala," Sam snarked. "Now can we just *hurry?*" he pleaded, dropping into the passenger seat as his brother bounced down heavily beside him, stowing his latest acquisitions in his jacket pockets.

"Dude, speed is my middle name..."

The Chevy's wheels screeched along the blacktop, leaving a trail of rubber behind as the elder hunter spun the car in a one-eighty back to the Mitchum home. His reflexes were fast, the car was faster, but a spirit had the ultimate advantage of not needing time to travel between two points like a mere mortal.

"Speed?" Sam shook his head with a small smile. Despite the severity of any given situation, the Winchesters always found time to rib one another. "Funny, I always thought your middle name was Audrey..."

"Huh?" A suspicious scowl appeared on Dean's face, accompanied by a firmer grip on the car's wheel as the Impala fishtailed around a sharp hairpin.

"You know, the thing in *Little Shop of Horrors* that's always demanding FEED ME?! Dude, so you..."

"Ha, friggin' ha..." Dean huffed. "I mean, anybody would think I ate a lot or something..." He sulkily mumbled under his breath, avoiding the admission he really did like to chow down after a hunt.

* * * *

Outskirts of the Mitchum Property

Dean turned the Chevy onto the dirt lane leading to the Mitchum home and quickly tapped the car's brakes until it slowed to a mere crawl. From their position, both brothers could see the large wooden house they'd visited earlier in the day – except tonight, something was different.

Instead of mere moonlight illuminating the normally tranquil scenery of flourishing corn, a new radiance had taken a hold on the rural panorama. Red garish flames licked through the sheaves, some strange white hot liquid adhering to their shafts like burning glue that could not be vanquished.

Along with the unnatural fire came an even more unnatural heat. A heat so engulfing it almost sucked the oxygen from the surrounding air, suffocating any living thing that got too close.

"Shit..." Dean's jaw dropped. He'd never been in the forces, never faced such monstrous weapons, but he knew with a certainty in his heart what was now burning the corn, and eventually the Mitchum home with a vehemence. "Man, napalm...friggin' *ghost* napalm..."

"They can do that? I mean...we've never seen anything like it..." Sam couldn't take his gaze from the strange flames, the almost fog like smoke, but most of all, he couldn't tear his eyes from what lay within the miasma of heat.

In life, the soldiers had feared the incendiary substance as much as they feared the enemy, but now, Grayson's troops used the flaming cornfield as cover.

Dean shook his head. "Dude, seeing is believing. One thing is for sure; no way I'm picking my way through that on foot." The hunter's boot kicked down on the Impala's accelerator, fully intending to smash through the corn like a vehicular battering ram.

Instead of surging forward with its usual growl of power, however, the Chevy seemed to cough as if the napalm's effects were sucking the life from its engine. With a strange hiccupping sound from beneath the hood, the car's revs dropped, then surged, then died altogether.

Sam looked to his brother and then the dashboard as the entire instrument panel illumination – save for the radio – grew dim. "Tell me we're out of gas..." he grimaced and was given an answer, although, not one he was expecting or wanting.

The radio hissed, the static purr from the car's speakers making both hunters flinch as "The Animals" began to warn of impending doom.

*We gotta get out of this place
If it's the last thing we ever do
We gotta get out of this place...*

Dean turned off the ignition, giving in to the inevitable.

*And one thing I know is true, yeah
You'll be dead before your time is due
You know it...*

"Guess ol' Jarhead wants to play *Rambo* goes *Children of the Corn*..." Dean grabbed his Remington from the rear seat and his eyes darted to the house in the distance. The building was in darkness – not a good sign. Either David was out cold, trapped, or he was already dead at the soldiers' hands.

There were gaps in the firestorm, places they could probably make it through and get to the Mitchum home if they tried. The question was would Grayson allow it? Dean doubted it. He doubted the sergeant had any remorse any more. Years in the ether tended to do that to a spirit.

"Dean, can we get through that stuff? Isn't it meant to burn to the bone?" Sam grabbed his own weapon and began evaluating a course through the blazing corn. Had Grayson's platoon used ghostly flame throwers to spread the napalm, or was there something even more insidious waiting for the brothers?

Dean pushed open the Chevy's door without answering and instantly felt the concentrated heat on his skin. He knew how napalm worked, at least normally, but there was nothing normal about their situation. Nothing concrete to base his assumptions on beyond knowledge passed down from their father. "Don't let it get on you, Sammy. The freakin' stuff will stick to your skin like molasses."

Sam skirted a charred and still smoldering clump of crops and earth, darting after his brother as they dodged between the gaseous flames. "In short, avoid burning bushes and pissed off sergeants at all costs?" he panted, realizing for the first time that it was hard to breath in the atmosphere, hard to talk and not feel giddy.

From their left, a short crack of weapons fire made him jar sideways and then skid to the ground. He felt his hands sink into the earth to steady his fall and he instantly

recoiled, thinking of the searing chemicals that had been sprayed wantonly over the area.

Mercifully, as Sam drew back his hand, his flesh remained untouched and intact, but he realized with a grunt of fear that he had dropped the pump action he'd been gripping. Even using the light from the fire around him to search, there was no sign of the gun – and no sign of Dean. Without either, Sam had nothing to fight with.

Am I going to die here even before Haris gets his chance? On some level, the idea was comforting. *No need for Dean to take the blame. No need for Dad to ever know...*

“Sammy!?” Dean’s panicked tones had a coarser edge to them as he yelled out into the night. Sam wasn’t sure if it was the smoke fumes, or a more harmful effect brought on by the napalm. He squinted, looking for a shape to put the voice to. Something familiar to hold onto instead of the approaching forms of Grayson’s men.

In the smoky mêlée the shadows reminded the younger Winchester of a previous hunt that had gone badly wrong and he’d almost been blinded. At least he had lived that time. But then, since his deal the word “life” was pretty relative.

Something rustled in an untouched section of corn just behind where he’d fallen, and Sam tried to roll on his back to see exactly what was approaching. He pulled out the Glock tucked in the back of his belt and noted his hand was trembling. *What am I afraid of? Death? Funny for a guy who so easily sold his damn soul...*

Sam knew the gun was useless against a spirit, but if it was one of the soldiers, he’d at least go out fighting it, *and not relent to some demon curse!*

The unblemished sheaves swayed more, and as Sam’s smarting eyes focused on them he lowered his weapon and gawked. It couldn’t be, not here, and yet it was.

John Winchester pushed aside the corn with the barrel of his battle-worn shotgun and simply nodded towards his youngest. It was strange how the father acknowledged each son differently, even though his love for both was equal.

With Dean there was always a hug, a word of encouragement - or more often than not a rebuke for wayward behavior. But with Sammy, it was always the unspoken sentiment from John that carried the most weight. Always the slight twitch of a smile beneath his beard or the bob of his head, eyes twinkling.

“Dad...” Sam’s mouth opened and in a flash all thoughts of Grayson’s platoon vanished. All Sam could think of was the deal. John would find out, he’d know, and there would be anger, resentment that Dean had allowed it to happen. There would be an argument.

More staccato gunfire ripped across the field, and somewhere near the Mitchum home something exploded into the night sky like an A- bomb. A white mushroom cloud erupted, and even more intense heat washed over the rural landscape.

“Dad, down, NOW!” Dean barged into view, shotgun in just one hand and blasted two shells straight into the napalm engulfed crops to their left.

Something within the glowing plasma storm seemed to explode, and as its form blasted outwards Dean skidded down onto his knees to avoid the shower of acid-like liquid that came with it.

John hunkered too, matching his sons’ positions on the ground as he smiled slightly, resting his shotgun on his knee. “Looks like you boys are in way over your heads.”

Dean huffed, ramming two new shells into his weapon as his eyes scoured the backdrop for more bad guys. “Good to see you too, Dad.” He snapped the barrel closed. “We got a kid stuck in that house, full on zombie platoon action after his hide, and napalm up our asses. Just another day at the Winchester office of deluded ghostbusters...”

The hunter leapt from his crouched position and fired off at another long-dead target before bouncing back down with a scowl. Family reunions for the Winchesters were

never easy, but this one was just plain bizarre. “Oh, and Sammy boy lost his gun already.”

John ignored the jibes, ignored the façade he knew his eldest had worn so very well lately. There would be time for reconciliation later. Time to set wrongs right. Time to save Sam before it was too late.

For now though, the elder Winchester had to be what he’d been trained for in his younger years.

John Winchester *the soldier* had to take charge, had to delegate – had to save the day. He looked at his children through the eyes of a seasoned marine, not a hunter, not a father.

“Sam, I want you to take my gun and go for the kid. Keep low, and stay away from the flames. If that stuff touches you, you’re talking one helluva burn.” The deep whiskey tones were even more commanding than Sam had remembered, like a master sergeant hammering home the importance of caution on a mission.

“What about me?” Dean’s expression looked almost hurt. He was the protector, the elder - Sammy shouldn’t be going it alone. *Not when he has so little time left as it is...*

John turned his head, but his eyes still watched the ruckus that was ensuing around them. Bright orange flames danced in his eyes echoing a time the family would rather forget. “You found the bodies?” He asked the question, but it was more of a statement. The father knew his sons well, knew their every move because he had taught them that way.

“Yeah, three different graveyards. We couldn’t leave the kid to salt and burn them all there wasn’t enough time, and besides Grayson, the leader, is a stubborn S.O.B.” Dean ducked as something whizzed past his skull too close for comfort. Ghost hunting was one thing, but being in an all too real firefight in the middle of Nebraska of all places was just unnerving.

John didn’t hesitate. Handing over his grizzled gun to his younger son he pointed towards the house in the distance. “Sam, get the kid,” he ordered. “Dean, go find Grayson’s body and burn it first. He’s the catalyst. The one keeping them here.”

“What about you?” Both brothers’ smoke-laced voices chimed in unison.

John smiled wryly, almost mimicking his eldest’s rebellious grin save for the fact the father had a beard to hide it. “I think I can hold the fort,” he insisted with a grunt. “You boys just show me I raised you right...”

Dean almost snapped his long-established “Yessir” back, but then bit his lip. If he’d followed his dad’s orders and looked out for his brother, Sam wouldn’t have ever made any demonic deals. No, he wasn’t fit to take orders anymore. He wasn’t good enough to fight the good fight, because in the end he always failed.

“GO!” John barked, pulling another, shorter shotgun from beneath his long overcoat. He nodded again to both sons; his love, his trust shining through beyond all else. Then, the hunter charged into the darkness, heading straight for the scorching corn stalks and all that went with them.

Dean cocked his head, a moment of admiration stealing him over. He smiled proudly, jerking his thumb towards the sound of shotgun fire. “Now THAT,” he affirmed, “Is a real hero...”

Sam didn’t say anything, but scrambled from his position on the ground as his brother kicked into a jog back to the Impala. He looked fleetingly at Dean and then the house he needed to get to, and with a smile of his own he began to dodge a new course through the maze of corn and flames. “No, Dean,” he muttered. “You are...”

* * * *

Dean reached the Chevy in double quick time, finding the air farthest from the burning field much more breathable. He took a second to lean on the car and gulp down fresh, untainted air before climbing inside.

The hunter reached for the ignition and his hand wavered over the keys. In the fray, he had forgotten one important thing. The car had stalled due to some serious spiritual intervention. It was doubtful that would have changed while Grayson's platoon still roamed the normally pastoral Oxford.

Dean twisted the key anyway, muttering a sharp and very annoyed "shit" when the car's starter groaned in response and then failed to even turn over a second time. "Shit!"

Dean clambered back out of his "baby" and grabbed a fold-away spade from the trunk, licking his lips as he tried to fathom a solution. The cemetery where Paul Grayson was buried was much too far away to make it in time on foot. He was in great shape, but he'd need angels' wings and a little Godly intervention to make the distance before David, and maybe the remaining Winchesters, were toast.

Eyes roaming in sudden panic, Dean latched onto something shiny lying in a patch of crushed but unsullied corn. Moving closer, the shape became more recognizable as a dirt bike – David's bike.

"Son of a ..." Dean grabbed the handlebars, tugging the Yamaha up from where the kid had tossed it in temper early in the afternoon. The bike was unharmed, but there were no keys. Still, that little obstacle never stopped a Winchester.

Within a few seconds, the bike roared to life as Dean kicked at its starter, sighing with relief that Grayson had finally overlooked something that might go in their favor.

With a strange grin on his face signifying it had been a long time since he'd been on anything with less than four wheels, Dean revved the off-roader and sped down the pot-holed lane towards his goal. With the bike he could drive cross country far easier than with the Impala, and maybe, just maybe there was still a chance to win the fight.

* * * *

Sam rolled across the house's porch, tucking his body in tight as he landed beside the screen door. He took a long, ragged breath and then looked out back at the burning corn.

The field blazed with a strange luminance and heat, and the young hunter couldn't decide whether it was the ghostly presence that filled it, or the other-worldly napalm they had brought with them that caused the strange aura. He looked down at his hands, noting the black soot that covered them already. Better grime than the evil gel that burned to the bone and was now covering half the surrounding countryside.

"David!" Sam tried to call out the young man's name, but his throat felt like it had been rubbed with sandpaper. "David!"

"I'm...I'm in here..."

Sam blinked and allowed himself to take down another long breath even though it made his lungs burn. Mitchum's son was still alive, and there was still a chance they could save him. *If Dad holds off Grayson. If Dean burns the bones.* So many ifs, but all that mattered to Sam was that they saved an innocent life. He wanted to save so many before his own time, but that time was running out and he knew it. *Just one more...he doesn't deserve this.*

Pushing up from where he'd landed, Sam spun his body through the screen and into the corridor, his shotgun tucked into his shoulder in case of any trap.

David Mitchum was waiting, his features ashen, his eyes streaming from the heat, the smell, the acrid fumes that were engulfing the grounds of his childhood home. “They came from nowhere...I ...” He swallowed, sensing something and his eyes suddenly refocused behind the approaching hunter. “They’re here...”

Sam twisted around, shotgun still held tight to him.

Walking through the screen as if it didn’t exist was a figure – something that had once been a soldier, but that was now engulfed in a ball of spiraling flame.

Through the orange and red hues Sam could still make out a uniform and the features of a young man that were melting as his flesh was scorched from his bones. Cheeks, eyeballs, all dissolved as if eaten away by acid, but still the soldier moved forward, his one sole purpose to finish his mission.

Sam couldn’t take his eyes from the spectacle. It was garish, gory, but most of all it reminded him of the time he’d gone home to Lawrence. The time Mary, his mom, had appeared in a glowing ball of fire, only to vanish again, giving up her spirit to save her two sons.

“Can’t be real...” David Mitchum felt bile rise in his throat and he stumbled back until his spine met solid wall. He’d heard his father’s war stories. He knew the atrocities that happened in Vietnam, but nothing could have prepared him for this.

Sam stood fast, ignoring the fear the spirit was trying to instill. His finger twitched, fully intending pulling back on his weapon’s trigger and sending the burning creature back to hell, or wherever it resided.

Click.

Sam’s gaze left the approaching specter just long enough to note that the shotgun hadn’t fired, and in all probability never would. Somehow the hammers had both turned into some molten mulch that now oozed along the metal surface. He could feel the temperature as the shotgun began to seemingly superheat in his hands, and after a long second he yelped, tossing the gun down before it started to burn into his flesh.

The weapon clattered to the floor, a useless tool in a bizarre fight.

The burning soldier ignored the noise, ignored the terror on David Mitchum’s face as it ebbed towards him, its eerie afterglow undulating and throbbing as if the flames were alive – part of him now.

Sam stole a glance over his shoulder and realized there was nowhere to go. The thing had them boxed in and the nearer it grew, the more they became pinned to the wall. He stretched out both arms protectively, taking a sentinel like stance in front of his charge. *Better to die saving a life than by Haris’s hand.*

The spirit paused, and for a time Sam thought there was still some modicum of morality left in its disembodied soul. He swallowed, but his mouth was dry.

The writhing flames seemed to draw out a weapon – a knife Sam had seen the likes of before in Hollywood war movies, a knife Dean would have been proud of.

The soldier’s molten arm extended until the blade teased at the young hunter’s throat, but didn’t yet slice. There was nowhere for Sam to go, no way to fight past the thing before him without his own body catching fire.

The hunter’s throat bobbed convulsively, the heat from his assailant growing in intensity as it leaned in close, two fiery red eyes now sparking like firecrackers in the midst of the blaze.

“Sins of the fathers...” The rough cadence could hardly be called a voice, but the dead man’s words were discernable enough, just enough to understand what he wanted.

And in that moment, as the tip of the serrated blade nicked into his flesh, Sam wondered if perhaps he and David Mitchum really did deserve to die.

* * * *

Dean slowed the Yamaha as he reached the perimeter of Spring Grove Cemetery, wondering just how he was going to find Ryan Grayson's grave. At night, with no light it was nigh on impossible to see the names carved into the monuments, and as low cloud cover swept over the moon, not even the evening sky was able to lend a hand to his task.

Worse still, he wondered how he was ever going to dig up the soldier's remains and torch them quickly enough to be of any use to Sam and his father. Digging graves was something he'd gotten adept at, but it wasn't exactly a quick job. *Which is why sneaky Sammy always delegates that to me.*

Dean slowed the bike more until the soles of his boots scraped along the earthy surface, helping him keep his balance over the rough hewn ground. "C'mon, Sarge, playtime in the boonies. I'm here to salt and burn your ass! Don't you have anything to say about that?!"

The hunter began to shout, hoping his threats would actually lure Grayson's spirit to the cemetery to try and protect its earthly remains.

Still, there was nothing save for the hoot of an owl hiding in some overhanging trees. Dean pulled a face at the unseen bird as it seemed to taunt him, tempted for a second to flick a different kind of "bird" its way in response. He shrugged off the idea and hopped from the off-roader, killing its engine.

Propping the bike up next to a short fence, he began to look for tell-tale signs of recent work. With a sigh, he realized there were at least two graves that had been recently dug – and that was just in this section of Spring Grove.

Grabbing the shovel and opening it up, he tucked his shotgun under his arm and kicked into a jog towards the first wooden marker. The ground was still too soft for a headstone to be erected, and as there hadn't been any recent rain, the loose dirt might actually aid the hunter's task of a quick dig.

Dropping to his knees, Dean rubbed flecks of soil from the small brass plaque on the marker and almost couldn't believe his luck when the name Grayson emerged under his fingertips. "Gotcha, Jarhead!" he grinned, rapidly ramming the shovel into the ground as he began to heave soil away from the casket below. *Just hang on Sammy, Dad...*

Dean began to sweat, but he ignored even the urge to mop his brow. There was no time for pleasantries, not while a tiny part of Nebraska burned with the remains of his family in it.

The ornery-sounding owl hooted again, and this time the cry was accompanied by the snapping of several twigs as someone - or something - began to push their way through the thicket that surrounded the cemetery.

Just as Dean felt the edge of his shovel bite into Grayson's casket, his mind began to scream that he was now the hunted, and he was trapped down a hole with no place to hide, just like Paul Mitchum had been.

He brought the shovel up over his head and slammed it down hard, ramming it into Grayson's coffin like a sledgehammer over and over again until the heavy wood gave and splintered open.

Using his free hand, he tugged out a small packet of salt and tore the edge open with his teeth. Sprinkling it into the crevice he'd made seconds previously, he watched as the tiny granules filtered through onto dirty white bones.

Dean sucked in a breath, knowing the rustling from above was getting closer. *Maybe it's some kind of groundskeeper? Yeah, right, and I'm friggin' Mary Poppins with a spade!* He pulled a face at his own descriptive mind play and then fumbled yet again in

his jacket to find a small can of lighter fluid. It was amazing just how much he could cram into a few small pockets, and even more amazing the uses he could put the items to.

From above, there was the distinct click of a clip being slotted home into a weapon and Dean knew his time was up.

Letting the spade and can of lighter fluid slip through his fingers he snatched up the shotgun he'd brought with him and whirled, pointing it upwards out of Mother Nature's sepulcher.

Only the blackness of the sky greeted him, the clouds still hovering ominously like a shroud over the heavens.

Dean held his breath, wanting to hear every single noise and know where it came from.

More twigs snapped, and the hunter determined the intruder was approaching from his left. Daring to clamber from the grave, his hands slid in the crumbling earth and he was forced to toss his weapon over the edge before he could gain a hold.

Dean felt his fingers obtain a tenuous grip and he hauled his body upwards, rolling to the right as he landed topside.

The second he regained his balance, he looked to where he'd tossed the shotgun, hoping to reclaim it before Grayson made an appearance. The gun lay innocently under the soldier's grave marker, begging for Dean to retrieve it.

The hunter hunkered forward, his hands reaching for the weapon while his eyes searched for Grayson in some bizarre hide and seek game between hunter and hunted.

Just which one of us is which?

In answer, Dean's Remington began to move as if it had a life of its own. The barrel spun around, pointing it towards him before it seemingly cocked itself and fired.

Rock salt erupted from the weapon rendering it useless without a reload.

"Guess I shoulda known better than to play with guns around a vet..." Dean rolled forward, missing the blast from his own gun by several inches and coming to rest against a small granite headstone with a muffled grunt.

As his back dug into the cold stone he realized there was more than just his own momentum pushing him back against the memorial. There was an outside pressure pushing at him, not only pinning him to the tombstone, but forcing him up until he was on his feet, arms glued to the mossy stone as if he was pulling Gs.

What's Jarhead doing? Trying to make me stand to attention here?

Dean tried to turn his head despite the terrible weight squeezing at him, clawing at his body until he felt like he was under a hydraulic press. Eventually, his muscles allowed the move but it was a painful one.

"Nice to meet you again, Sarge..." Dean spat the choked words out in a gurgling cough of defiance as he finally set eyes on the soldier torturing him. "You know, I think I saw this movie...always ends crap for the bad guy..."

Grayson didn't speak, didn't offer to even move – he simply watched as his unseen hand began to crush the life from the young hunter.

Once, he'd been a man of honor, a man who wanted to save young men's lives, not take them, but since coming back to Oxford he had been taught a new lesson. He was dead, there was no coming back, and for that he wanted retribution, justice – no matter who he had to destroy to achieve it, because in the end, if he didn't get that retribution, nobody would.

The shimmering, half luminous form of the sergeant stood squarely between his own open grave and the convulsing body of Dean Winchester. Even if there had been a way to release his ghostly grip, there was no way past him, no way to burn his remains and save John and Sam.

"NO!" Dean's head snapped harshly back into the monument he was pinned to and he howled in temper, not caring who heard his harried cry. He was angry for failing again. Angry that he wouldn't even have a chance to save his little brother from Haris's deal. He didn't care about his own physical pain, or the pressure now crushing at his lungs until the air was forced from them.

All that mattered was family.

Grayson seemed to sense the emotion, to feel it through his own warped ethereal soul, and it angered the soldier further. Mitchum had been given the chance of a family, he'd been given the chance of a wife while a whole platoon had died to save his dirty secret.

The disembodied thought was enough to make the soldier's spirit snap. Forgetting the weapon strung from his shoulder, he balled both fists, claspings his eyes shut in a fit of rage so intense Dean suddenly felt the pressure on his body release, only to be replaced by another, more familiar sensation.

The hunter felt his spine smash into something, but as his neck cracked backwards, smacking the back of his skull into the same object he couldn't really focus on what. He was dazed, disorientated, hurting, but as Grayson used him as some spiritual punch bag, slamming him from grave to grave, only one thought still held fast in his mind.

Sammy, Dad...

* * * *

John let both barrels of his weapon empty into a semi-visible grunt and then ducked as a salvo of machine gun fire rattled towards him. The ghost soldier vanished, and as the elder hunter narrowly missed a round to the shoulder he tripped, falling face first into the cornfield.

Pushing his hands out in front of him to take the tumble as gracefully as was possible, he rolled with the fall, almost catching the edge of his long overcoat in nearby napalm flames.

John groaned with the effort it took to tug his weary body sideways just enough not to catch fire and then swiftly launched himself back upright, not giving his aching muscles any respite from the stresses he was making them endure.

This was like being back in the Corp – except this time the enemy was a far more formidable foe than any human soldier.

Another burst of gunfire erupted, this time from not one, but a group of Grayson's men who had decided to band together to kill their prey.

John hastily reloaded his weapon, using the rusting hulk of some old farm machinery as cover.

Ghostly bullets twanged into the corroded metal, ricocheting as if they had real substance. Tiny sparks flourished from the multiple hits like fireflies in the evening sky.

John ignored the barrage, snapping his favorite shotgun's barrel back in place as he skirted the old harvester. It was funny, but Bobby Singer had given him the gun years ago, and although he had many a better weapon in the back of his truck, this one always felt *right* on a gig like this one.

The elder Winchester rubbed at his clouding eyes, searching through the darkness and flames for signs of his youngest. Sam had had plenty of time to make it to the house and back and yet he still hadn't returned.

If something had happened to him now, John would never forgive himself. It was funny, but even through Dean's possession he had always had hope, maybe even faith if

it could be called that. Never once had he doubted that good would win through and the demon would be expelled.

And yet, now, now that he knew the price of Dean's so called freedom, for the first time he actually realized that losing a son was a very real possibility.

Not here. Not now. Not today...

John pushed forward towards the Mitchum home, moving slowly and keeping his body low. There was no real chance of cover – not even using the flames, but if Sam needed him, John swore he'd be there.

Just one damn time in my life, I'll be there...

John felt – no sensed something snag at his boot, and with a sinking sensation he looked down. A soldier shouldn't allow sentiment to cloud his actions, and just for a moment he'd allowed that to happen.

His heart began to pick up speed and he only just dared to take a breath.

Running across the short unscathed patch of cornfield he'd tried to traverse to get to the house was a trip wire, and attached quite professionally to the wire was a US army issue claymore mine.

One move, one exaggerated breath, and John Winchester would find himself reunited with Mary.

** * *

Dean felt his body almost bounce away from yet another stone monument as Grayson continued to toy with him. He could feel the icy stonework cooling his bruised and battered façade as he slid down the front of the grave marker, the deep grooved engraving rubbing against his skin and almost writing out the epitaph in his brain as if he were reading Braille.

The hunter blinked, sensing blood and grit intermingling in his eyes, distorting his vision. The golden lettering he had been slammed against swam before him, teasing, but not quite forming real words. He forced his eyelids to close again and then when he reopened them the memorial's message finally made sense.

Loving Brother...

Dean hacked and stumbled backwards, knowing he would soon be thrown again by Grayson, but suddenly not caring.

Loving Brother...

He had to get up. He had to somehow finish the job he had started in the soldier's open grave. Sam needed him tonight, and he needed him to beat Haris's deal.

An unseen hand took Dean's collar and lifted him until his feet dangled a good two inches from the ground. Blood splattered from his nose down onto his jeans, a few droplets dribbling further until they tainted the tan hide of his boots.

Dean struggled, looking down into Grayson's corrupted, glowing eyes as the sergeant watched him. It wasn't over yet. It was never over for a Winchester.

"Go ahead, kill me," Dean dared, his features contorting into a pain filled grimace. "I'll just finish your sorry ass on the other side..."

The image of Grayson's half decomposing form seemed to falter, uncertain if such a thing was actually possible. Could a ghost really kill a ghost?

It was something very few un-dead ever considered, but thanks to Dean's mother, something he had first hand knowledge of.

Dean's bloodshot eyes sparkled with renewed energy as he saw Grayson hesitate. The thing that had once been human was unsure now of its power, unsure just how far up the food chain it really was on the other side.

"One spirit can cancel another out in a heartbeat, Jarhead, and don't think I wouldn't do it after tonight, because your boys are really starting to piss me off..." The hunter felt the hold on his collar lessen and he abruptly plunged back down to earth as gravity resumed play.

The dry soil that covered Dean's lips as he face-planted the ground had never been so welcoming. The tang of loam was unmistakable, it was tangible, it made him feel alive again despite his body telling him it shouldn't be. Every muscle, every cut screamed for his attention, but he had other priorities.

Dean pushed up on one knee and felt something in his back snap in protest. No doubt his joyride into several tombstones had pulled or torn something, but it could wait. Sam and John could not.

He blinked again, assessing his position, and from what his bleary eyes could tell he was once again trapped between Grayson and the open casket.

Grayson sensed the hunter's plight and let his flaking lips curve into some semblance of a smile. "Sins of the fathers..."

"Dude, I got a long list of sins all of my own. You got a beef with Dad, hell, get in line." As he talked, he slid a hand into his jacket pockets and began fumbling through the junk deposited there. Feeling something cool and metallic with his fingers he smirked, finally knowing he could end the fight.

Grayson didn't appear to understand the jibe and his form shimmered, looking like a bad Sci Fi show hologram gone wrong. He reached slowly for his M16, bony fingers finding the trigger just as Dean jarred something from his jacket.

The hunter pulled the pin on the grenade, silently thanking Paul Mitchum for doing at least one decent thing in his life. Lobbing the small, yet deadly object with his best pitch, Dean aimed for the open grave mouth and then dived behind the nearest monument for cover.

Boom!

Dean counted away three seconds then stiffly moved from his hiding place with a grunt. The niggling ache in his back returned as he scrambled to his feet, but it was numbed mentally somewhat by the consuming flames that licked from Grayson's last resting place.

The sergeant was gone, his spirit eaten up by the salt and explosion as surely as if he'd walked on a land mine in Nam.

Dean stumbled forward with a harsh limp until he was level with the blazing grave. If he hadn't more paramount concerns to plague him, it might have even been entrancing to see Grayson consumed by the writhing inferno. "I guess I just gave a whole new meaning to fire in the hole," he shrugged, the motion causing an even sharper pain down his spine as he headed back to retrieve the dirt bike. *Damn, I think I'm gonna need to get me one of those Swedish girl masseuses after this...hell, maybe two...*

* * *

Riding the bike back to the Mitchum home proved a lot more painful than the journey out to Spring Grove cemetery. Every bump in the ground or sharp turn tugged at the hunter's spine, reminding him that playing involuntary chicken with tombstones had a definite downside.

Dean ignored the sting, though, pouring on the gas until the remains of the cornfield came into view.

It was early morning now, and the last vestiges of night were already ebbing away, replaced by a scarlet dawn radiance that seemed to exaggerate the scene that greeted him.

The field that had once been a bright golden panorama of billowing corn crops was now nothing more than a charred and blackened blanket that smoldered and smoked like the remnants of a Viking funeral pyre.

Worse still, the only evidence that there had ever been a house here were a few marled and scorched timbers still forming some bizarre steaming endoskeleton that would never see inhabitants again.

The air was filled with some strange smell, and Dean inhaled carefully, not wanting to take down too much of the sickening odor. Was it human flesh mixed with the chemical napalm residue? The idea made him want to gag and he pulled back on the bike's brakes, abruptly needing assurance that this was not the last resting place of his father and brother.

"Sammy! SAMMY!" Dean turned off the Yamaha's ignition and climbed awkwardly from its muddied frame, reminding himself that perhaps he still preferred four wheels after all. "Dad!"

The earth that he walked on hissed and cracked and the hunter realized that molten embers still burned beneath his feet. He ignored the popping sounds and began to tread a careful path towards the remains of the house.

Why does it always have to be fire with this family?

Mary had been taken by fire, so had Jess. The element seemed attached to the Winchesters in some Ungodly way that saw every last one of them stolen away by it. Maybe it was Haris, maybe it was some curse they couldn't fight and would all succumb to.

"Sammy! Dad!" Dean felt his eyes begin to water and he couldn't even attribute the action to fumes. He put a hand to his mouth as he spotted a shotgun barrel among the debris, its wooden stock burned completely away. It was the weapon John had given to Sam the previous night. Dean knew every gun in his father's collection – had helped him clean and strip them from being just a young kid.

Can't be gone...

And yet they could. Just a few minutes late in burning Grayson's remains would have been enough to lose them forever. Dean had failed again. He had failed his brother, failed his father.

Pulling his Desert Eagle from his waistband he rested the automatic in his calloused palm.

Its shiny silver surface glared back at him, reflecting tear-filled hazel eyes that had lost the will to go on. Without John, without Sam there was no battle, no point in taking out the demon – no future even if he did finish Haris.

Dean bit into his bottom lip and dragged down a harried, choppy breath, his fingers clasp the gun tightly, uncertainty clouding his judgment.

Maybe it was better this way...

"Dean!" Sam's smoke-scarred voice was like a delusion, a fantasy so sweet it couldn't really be real, could it?

Dean looked up as his brother strode from behind the ruins of the Mitchum home, John and David walking closely at his side. They were soot covered, sweat drenched monsters that only several showers and several more hard drinks would fix, but they were *alive*.

The hunter swallowed, unsure for once if he could keep his emotions in check. He was the hard one, the one with the exterior of granite, but even just for one moment the

thought of losing his father and brother had been too much. How then, would he feel when Sam's birthday grew closer?

But then, there would always be the Desert Eagle.

Dean slipped the gleaming .45 back behind his belt and rubbed away the moisture from his face before either John or Sam saw his moment of weakness. If only Sam had realized when he'd made the damn deal that he really wasn't saving Dean.

There could be no Sam without Dean, and no Dean without Sam – it was inexorable.

"I'm guessing you sent the sergeant on a new mission?" John smiled at his eldest, noting the troubled expression he was so careful to try and hide.

"Yeah, Jarhead's gone..." There was no sarcasm, no jibe, just a sense of relief. All Dean wanted was to crash onto a bed – preferably a soft one the way his back was screaming. He wanted to sleep, to pretend everything was alright now, that there was no deal.

"They're all gone?" David Mitchum turned to Sam to ask the question. Sam was like him, linked perhaps in some undefined way that only the Universe understood. That bond made the young man trust the stranger when perhaps otherwise he would have been more cautious. Especially after the past week's events.

"They're gone," Sam confirmed, unsure how to tell the young man he'd not only lost his home, but his father too. The gangly hunter rested a hand on the shorter youth's shoulder, trying to reassure him before he had to explain. "David, your dad..."

David Mitchum shrugged off Sam's grip and pulled away, turning until his back was to the group. In a soft, quivering voice he stammered, "I know...he's dead. I saw it." He turned back, his eyes locking with Sam's. "Why? Why do we see these things? Why *us*?"

Sam wished he had the answer, but he didn't. Looking across to John, his normal puppy dog expression changed to one of chagrin because somehow, his father did know. Zack Murzak had hinted at it, Grayson's spirit had hinted at it.

How long before John finally told the truth?

Sam turned away from his father feeling like the deal he'd made had been the one true act in his life he'd had control over. "I don't know," He answered honestly. "All I know is that we have to carry on. Use what we see to try and help people..."

David took a breath and glanced around at the remnants of his life scattered in the ruins. He kicked at the cinders with the heel of his boot and something gilt edged surfaced from beneath a smoking clump of upholstery that had once been part of his father's favorite chair.

Kneeling, he used the edge of his shirt to tug the gold-edged frame from where it was wedged. The glass was cracked in a spider's web pattern that covered most of the photograph, but still, the image below was quite discernable.

Of all the things to survive the napalm's intense, all-consuming heat, it had to be that one tarnished picture.

Sam gently took the frame from the youth's hand and rubbed away surface dirt to find Paul Mitchum and Ryan Grayson staring back at him from some Vietnamese base camp perimeter. It was the same image he'd seen when visiting the Mitchum home before, but this time, it seemed to hold a more poignant message – even for him.

"I'd like that," David finally offered, and when Sam frowned he added. "To try and help people with my gifts. Maybe it really was what I was given them for, ya know? Maybe set a wrong right..."

* * * *

**Field, somewhere south of Oxford
Nebraska**

Dean prodded the camp fire with a short branch, taking a swig from his beer as he watched the flames increase with his probing. It had been awhile since the Winchesters had been together like this, and if he recalled correctly, that time had been pretty heated too – and not from the fire.

That time the row had pretty much been about vampires and John “going it alone” far too often. This time, Dean sensed the roles would be in reverse and he and Sam were about to get chewed new asses. Which of them would bear the brunt of John Winchester’s anger over their shortfalls remained yet to be seen, but from the look on their father’s face and his painful silence since they’d made camp, it wouldn’t be long before a very bitter explosion.

John was sitting across from both his sons with a beer of his own, but the bottle had yet to be opened. Instead, the hunter simply stared at his hands, running one palm over the other in a repetitive motion that was probably the hunter’s equivalent of the little squeezey stress balls health shops tended to sell.

The father was pent up, coiled like a double helix until his jangling nerves couldn’t wind any tighter.

In a drunken moment before they’d set out for Oxford, Dean had called John and told him the truth about Sam’s deal. Hell, Dean had been so deep in his own wallowing and failure he hadn’t thought what the repercussions of such a call would be – not until now. Not until he could see the hurt in his father’s eyes. Eyes that normally had all the answers, *but not this time...*

“So, how long before you were going to tell me?”

Dean’s head snapped up, the jerk of his neck sending a lance of white heat along the jarred muscles of his spine. He’d expected the question, even expected the scathing tone with which it was delivered. But the one thing he hadn’t counted on was it coming from Sam, not his father.

John’s eyes locked instantly with his younger son’s and the pair seemed to glare at one another so intently Dean expected one or the other to throw a punch across the low flickering flames of the fire. He’d seen it happen often enough in the old days when Sam and John had bickered over Stanford, but this time it was different. This time perhaps Sam was right.

“What is it, Dad? Some kind of demonic curse vested on the kids of families who’ve sinned, huh?” Sam tossed a small log on the fire, causing a bright flare of heat and sparks as it settled into place. “You see, I finally figured all this out. All the gifted kids like me come from families with a few skeletons in their closets...”

“Sam? What the hell are you talking about?” Dean had been waiting for a full on Winchester feud over the Haris deal with father and son sparring to the end that each was right. Bringing the whole special ability thing into the mix was startlingly unexpected.

Sam didn’t listen to his brother, instead, he continued with the truth as he saw it. “All the kids like me, their families sinned big time, right? I never saw the name connection before.” The younger hunter paused, his temper flaring. “Matt Ismay, Ismay as in the guy who designed the Titanic...the guy who cost hundreds of lives. Matt Teller? Man, *Teller* as in *Manhattan Project*...hundreds more wasted lives because of the damn A-bomb.” Sam flinched at his own words. It was hard to accept that every gifted kid’s forefather had been the instigator of something bad. “I’m betting Williams, Kyle’s family name, means something too. Paul Mitchum’s sins speak for themselves, but what about you, dad? What did you do? WHAT DID YOU DO?” The question was more like a guttural, burning scream.

“Now hold on a minute, Sammy!” Dean’s brow creased and he sat forward, his own voice raised. “Dude, Max Miller? We don’t know that his family had any dark secrets,

apart from what his dad did to Max. You're clutching at straws here." He looked to John for affirmation. "Right, Dad? 'Cause our family doesn't have any evil secrets, right?"

There was a short silence, only the cracking of burning wood permeating the small clearing.

John licked his lips and, pressing a hand to his forehead, addressed his youngest first. "I didn't do anything, but William Winchester did..."

Dean balked. "William Winchester? Like the freakin' rifle? But we're not related..."

"Like the rifle," John conceded. "And like the curse. You boys know it well enough."

Sam's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "The Winchesters and their home were said to be cursed because of the thousands that died when the repeating rifle was unleashed on the world..."

"So you're saying all the kids like Sammy got their gifts because of some past family crap? Evil breeds evil?" Dean shook his head. "I'm so not buying that mumbo jumbo. No way is Sammy one of the bad guys, not now, not ever."

"It's not a curse." John focused on Sam, his saddened eyes apologizing for his ancestors' legacy. "The gifts aren't evil. Look on them as nature's way of putting the balance back into the world. For every wrong, there must be a right."

Sam shook his head, unable to accept the truth now it was finally emerging. The timing, after all couldn't have been worse. "If we're all so good, why does Haris want us? Why did he burn mom above my crib..."

The elder hunter rubbed at his beard, hating to tell the next part. "Haris wants all the gifted kids as soldiers on his side; if they refuse to turn, then he intends to take their gifts and kill them. I don't know all the facts, but from what I've been able to piece together he marked the gifted babies like you at six months old. I still don't know why. Your mom must have just gotten in his way."

"So, mom, Jess, they died because of a name? Because of some stupid balance of nature that I might not have wanted any part of?" Sam kicked at the fire, sparks and cinders showering the clearing - even that was better than lashing out at his father. It wasn't John's fault he was some distant relative of the famous gun maker. It wasn't John's fault that Sam had been endowed with certain gifts, but still it was easy to apportion the blame out that way when the chips were down.

Dad could have told me sooner. Let me decide my own fate.

But he had decided his own fate with Haris, hadn't he?

"Sam, this wasn't how I wanted you to find out, but it's not every day you learn you and a few others could be the only thing that can save mankind. We already know there's a war coming. I didn't want you to know about your gifts until you were ready to shoulder the burden, ready to wage a battle we might not win." John stammered for the first time in his life. He'd planned so many times on making this speech. Worked out just how to explain that Sam was the key, the one Haris wanted so badly because he was somehow the strongest, but in the end, Sam was still his son, and it was like giving him up to some greater, deadlier destiny. "That's why the yellow-eyed bastard tried taking your powers with that ritual - because you wouldn't turn and work with him. If he can upset nature's balance of right and wrong...evil wins the war..."

"You've known this all along? Just when were you planning on letting us in on the big secret?" Dean jumped to his feet and swung a right hook at his father so hard it could easily have broken John's jaw had it impacted. He'd always respected John, trusted him, and yet he'd held back information that could change Sam's life. Maybe he'd thought he was protecting his youngest, but the deceit just wasn't acceptable - not to Dean. After all, he was already struggling to cope with Sam's ruse. Was he so useless no other Winchester trusted him anymore?

"If I'd told you, what difference would it have made?" John caught his eldest son's punch in his palm and twisted, deflecting the blow harmlessly, for once allowing his son's rebellion because he knew it was more than called for. Sam was special because of his bloodline, and Sam would be haunted by that while ever he lived.

While ever he lived...

John's heart skipped in his chest and he felt guilt-fuelled adrenalin begin to course through his veins. Being a Winchester might have given Sam more than just a few gifts. Ultimately, it may have signed his death warrant.

"You're accusing me of keeping things back," John retorted, his tone getting deeper as his anger grew. "I'm not the one making deals with demons."

The instant the words came from his father's mouth, Dean recoiled. Sam had made the deal for him, and if there was any guilt to be had it was his to carry alone. His shoulders slouched and all the fight in him vanished, leaving the shame-filled, empty shell of a hunter behind. "That was different..." He mumbled, waiting for John's backlash to continue.

"That's enough!" Sam stepped between father and son, making himself an emotional dam, cutting off further verbal abuse that would be regretted by both parties later. "We've *all* made mistakes. It's time we dealt with them like adults." He frowned, realizing suddenly that John actually knew what he'd done. How was that possible? His eyes narrowed, settling on his brother. "How did Dad know about the deal?"

"Because I called him, alright?" Dean became defensive again and pulled away from both men, his own temper still simmering. He had the right to protect his brother, and if that meant asking their dad for help then he would, and had. In retrospect, the drunken call may not have been the right move, but he didn't regret it.

Maybe this would be the last family reunion they'd have, and even if it wasn't exactly an amiable gathering, at least they were together. The Winchesters spent too much time apart, too much time hunting and not enough time actually *talking*.

"It doesn't matter how I know," John interceded, sensing Sam's feelings of betrayal. "I'm here now, and we have things to discuss." He gestured towards the fire and an unopened pack of Coors. "Are we going to act like men?"

Dean took the cue first, sprawling back down to where he'd been seated before. He never could refuse a John Winchester order, not even when his blood still boiled with a rage so hot it was like being possessed all over again. "So, you know a way outta this for Sammy, right? I mean if Mother Nature loves his ass so much there has to be some kind of demonic loophole for geek boys in distress."

John retook his own seat and tossed each son a new beer. Once Sam finally gave in pouting and sat down too, the father nodded. "There are things out there if you know where to look. Legends that may or may not be real..." His eyes seemed to go far away, as if he truly believed the Boy Scout campfire tale he was telling.

"Like the Colt?" Dean asked, taking a long gulp of Coors and wishing he'd brought more food with them from the local mini-mart. "Or maybe this bauble?" He fingered the amulet around his neck, remembering how it had easily kept a demon at bay before. "I mean, this thing repelled one of those black-eyed freaks, and what about that cowboy hunter named Claviger that once owned it? It has to be something special, right? Or what's the whole "guardian" deal about?"

John's gaze latched momentarily onto the golden trinket around his son's neck and a bemused smile crept across his features, only slightly hidden by his ever-growing beard. "It can't help us this time," he stated offhandedly. "But I think I know something that can..."

"A fairy wand? Oh, wait no, how about asking a genie in a bottle for a wish...except old Harry kinda IS a freakin' genie..." Dean took another drink and didn't even notice the harsh glower of disapproval from his father.

"The Seal of Solomon," John resumed his explanation. "It was a magical signet ring that was said to have the power to control demons. According to various texts King Solomon used the ring successfully to trap them in some kind of vessel, hence the whole genie, or jinni in a bottle legend we have today."

"But it's just a legend," Dean countered. "A few thousand years old legend that we have no proof had any basis in reality. Yeah, this ring should be real easy to find. I'll just mosey on down to the nearest pawn shop. Or hell, maybe we could hire Indiana Jones to find the sucker..."

"Dean..." John was in a charitable mood, given the circumstances, but Dean was pushing his luck and sarcasm way too far.

"Dad, I hate to say it but Dean's right. Looking for something that hasn't been seen for so long is like searching for the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail..."

"And you don't think I'd scour hell itself for those things too if I thought they'd break the damn deal?" John couldn't look at either son, so instead he trained his eyes on the fire as he added fresh kindling. "I know this isn't going to be easy. I know we're running out of time, but I think I may have a lead on the ring..."

Dean instantly bolted upright, his muscles visibly stiffening at the news. "Where? Why the hell aren't we in the car already?"

"I've known about the possibility of the Seal way before Sam's deal. Like the Colt, it's always been one possible way to defeat Haris. Over the years I've come across markers, clues...but the Colt was the easier find of the two so I pursued it first..."

"Dad, c'mon, just tell us already! Where the hell do we find this thing so we can go kick demon ass and free Sammy?" Dean dropped his beer bottle and began gathering items from around the camp, quickly throwing them in the Impala's trunk without caring about neatness.

When he realized John wasn't answering or attempting to join in the mass exodus, he paused, knowing why. "You're thinking of going it alone again aren't you? After all we've said, after all that's happened..."

"No way you're leaving here without us this time, Dad," Sam stood over his father, waiting for the argument, the denial he knew would come. "If you're doing this for me, then I should at least be part of the fight."

"We both should," Dean added as he watched for his father's reaction.

John swirled the dregs at the bottom of his beer bottle. "Alright," he conceded far too easily. "We'll start out in the morning – together. Now do you think we can maybe finish a beer without trying to punch one another out?"

Dean's face flashed briefly with suspicion, but then he grinned mischievously and ducked his head into the Impala's trunk. When he reappeared he was brandishing a rather aged looking bottle. "Oh, I think I can do better than beer." He shook the glass container and then carefully brushed away a thin film of dust.

"Jeez, dude, what the hell are you trying to do, poison us into submission? That bottle looks old enough to have actually been around before Methuselah." Sam scrutinized the label on the beverage, noting it was very faded and had been handwritten haphazardly, as if the author had been intoxicated at the time.

"Meths wha..? Dude, this is pure Cajun moonshine!"

John and Sam both smiled. Perhaps just for a few hours they could pretend they were a normal family on a normal camping trip. It was something Sam had always wished for as a child but never quite got – until tonight.

Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we...may die

Sam grimaced and rummaged until he found three mugs in the backpack he was leaning on. Not every adage had to be right. Maybe some just needed a little editing...

Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we ...kick demon ass!

Sam couldn't help but wonder how the very "Deanish" thought had entered his head, and his wan smile grew into a full dimple-grin. He nodded towards the ancient bottle, mug held out. "Just pour, dude..."

* * *

Sam sat on the edge of the Impala's hood watching the night sky as if it was about to give up the Universe's secrets. It was past midnight, early for any Winchester to sleep, but after downing almost three bottles of the rogue moonshine, John and Dean had finally collapsed into drunken slumber.

Sam didn't blame either of them. He only wished he could drown his problems the same way. The thing was, no matter how much alcohol he consumed, it just didn't seem to work – nothing did.

Even now, free from the worry that he was somehow connected to the demon, Sam could have no solace. All he could do was learn to accept the inevitable, embrace it even.

The young hunter shoved his hands into his pockets, suddenly feeling the night chill. He pushed away from the Chevy and began to walk, not really choosing any one direction. Sometimes being alone was the only true peace he knew.

Being around Dean meant those angry hazel eyes watching him, counting down the hours until Haris came calling.

Dean meant well, but the constant coddling only made the truth that he was going to die soon seem more real. While ever his birthday remained a distant date in the future Sam could pretend there was no deal. Pretend he still had a life to live – a life where he could use his gifts to do what he did best.

"Sammy?"

Sam turned in surprise to see his brother watching him through bleary eyes, apparently not as drunk as he'd earlier appeared to be. "I needed some space," he made no excuses, they were beyond that now.

"You okay?" Dean watched Sam think about it. It had been a dumb question, but he just hadn't known in that moment what else to say. Sammy was still reeling from the truth about his gifts; he was still tormented by his deal. How could he be okay?

Sam huffed and his lips creased into an ironic smile. "To be honest, part of me is relieved, ya know?" He shrugged. "I guess there was always had a part of me that thought...that thought I was connected to the demon somehow..."

"I could have told you different, dude." Dean staggered a little, steadying himself on a tree trunk to his right. "You're *my* brother. Nothing demonic about your ass..."

"Still, it feels good to actually know it, ya know?" Sam glanced back up, outwardly mesmerized by the heavens. "Did you know some of the stars we take for granted burned out hundreds of years ago, and we only see them because their light takes so long to reach us?"

Dean nodded, but didn't need to answer. Sam wasn't really talking about some flicker in the night sky, he was talking about how a light, *a life* could be extinguished and yet still shine on somehow.

Sam was talking about the deal, about dying, about leaving something behind when he was gone.

"Sam..." Dean turned to face his brother, but Sam continued to look up. "Sammy, nothing is gonna happen to you while I'm around. I told you that before...nothing's changed." There was no humor in his whispered words, just a simple promise.

Sam knew that tone well, knew that Dean would never give in, but part of him didn't want that. He wanted Dean to try and accept some things couldn't be changed – he'd begun to accept it himself, but his brother would be harder to convince.

Dean had so many different facades for any given occasion, so many differently fabricated walls he could slam up as the need arose. Sam was sure if his brother ever saw a shrink he'd be classed as having some multiple personality disorder, his mood and demeanor could change so quickly.

Sam had seen it only hours earlier with their father. One minute Dean had been ready to punch John out, the next he'd swung into full on snark mode like someone had flicked a light switch.

The masks were great while they were working gigs, but right now Sam hated them, hated not knowing what his brother was going through because of him. Was Dean still angry about the deal? Or was that just another layer that was concealing his true pain?

Unable to think of an answer to his brother's pledge that seemed even half appropriate, Sam deflected the topic – Dean wasn't exactly the only Winchester who was good at evasion and obfuscation. "Dad agreed to us tagging along way too easily..."

Dean's licked his lips, hating the tang the bitter-tasting moonshine had left behind. "Yeah, I'd kinda noticed," he slurred. "Think we should maybe take turns at sentry tonight to make sure he doesn't pull a freakin' Hilts act in the morning?"

Sam's jaw twitched, the idea of playing spy on their father somehow making him feel unsettled. "Man, you wouldn't last an hour. Ten minutes you'll be snoring like *Babe*."

"At least I don't *look* like *Babe*..." Dean made a few snorting noises that were meant to be his best porcine impersonation and then grinned so hard tiny wrinkles formed around his eyes. "C'mon, let's go sleep; we got a ring to find in the morning..."

Sam shot out an arm, one of his huge paws catching his brother as Dean almost tripped on a fallen log. It felt strange, like the deal had, somehow wrong that he should ever need to save "big bro" from anything.

Dean huffed playfully and pushed away any further help. "I can make it, Samantha. Takes more than a few shots of moonshine to keep this Winchester down." A tiny hiccup escaped his lips and he held out both arms, attempting half successfully to balance to prove his lucidity.

"More like few bottles," Sam corrected, his gaze slipping from his brother's wavering form to their camp site as he realized something was missing. "Dean..."

Dean sensed the sudden change in his brother's voice – a transition from playfulness to urgency all told with one hissed word.

The elder Winchester sobered instantly, as if the alcohol had been somehow pushed from his veins by pure strength of mind. It was a reaction Sam had seen before, but that never ceased to amaze him. Not that the reaction would do any good, it was too late.

The place where their father's truck had sat tucked neatly beside the Impala was now an empty, grass-covered space.

"Sonofa..." Dean glowered at the spot as if his stare alone would magically bring the vehicle and their father back. "I knew it! I just friggin' *knew* it!" Anger laced his words – a new kind of anger born of desperation and frustration. It wasn't fair John always did this to them, it wasn't fair he thought he should be the only one put in harm's way.

Weren't Dean's sacrifices enough already? Wasn't Sam's?

Dean let a shaking hand grab at the driver's door of the Impala, tugging it open with a jerking motion that made him wince as it tore at his back.

"Dean! What do you think you're doing? You're not fit to drive and we haven't a clue which way Dad is headed! DEAN!" Sam stopped his brother from closing the Chevy's door, but it didn't matter because his irate sibling had already faltered before the keys had touched the ignition.

A white crumpled note had been stuck to the Chevy's wheel with a torn piece of Duck tape. It was a spidery scrawl that both Winchesters recognized as their father's.

Dean snagged the paper from the tape and read it several times before handing it dejectedly over to Sam.

"Can you believe that man? He tells us you're some kind of friggin' Messiah that's gonna save mankind along with the other special kids. Tells us the only way to save you from Haris is some baddass ring that belonged to Solomon, and *then* he sends us on another friggin' hunt while he goes off playing Indiana Jones. And we're supposed to just accept it? He slammed a fist into the dash so hard red welts began to appear across his knuckles. Dean didn't even notice. The pain was like some mental astringent and he fed on the rush.

Sam read the note out loud, his head shaking as he realized Dean was right. B

Boys

I have a lead on the Seal and will be in touch as soon as it's safe to do so.

Call this number: 410-341-2667

I knew this man in the Corp and he needs our kind of help.

Dad

"Screw calling this guy. I got bigger fish to fry." Dean rammed the keys into the Impala and cranked the ignition, glancing up to see if Sam would follow. "C'mon, Dad can't have gotten very far. We were only gone minutes."

Sam shook his head, keeping hold of the driver's door so Dean couldn't drag it closed and drive away. "No, Dean. Dad gave us an order..."

Dean's brows snapped up in surprise and he looked at the note hanging limp in his brother's hand. "Since when did you ever want to follow Dad's orders, huh?"

Sam looked intently at the dirt road his father had used to make good his escape. The longest conversation he'd ever had with John had been in a cabin once while Dean had gone searching out some dead man's blood. He'd learned a lot about the grizzled hunter that day, about his hopes as a parent, and his hopes for his children.

Maybe John and Sam would never quite see eye to eye the way John and Dean did, at least not on the surface, but deeper, the father and son bond ran true.

Dean was probably right that they should follow – probably right that this time, of all times, was the one to defy their father. And yet, Sam just couldn't do it. The fight had gone out of him - against the demon, against John's orders, against life.

"Dude, since when did you give a crap about what Dad says?" Dean demanded again, his glare darkening even further as he saw the look of defeat in Sam's eyes.

Sam let the ragged note fall from his fingers.

"Since now, Dean..."

The End