

**Season Two**  
**Episode Thirteen: Extinction**  
**By Kittsbud & Tree**

Sunlight beamed through the window, clouds hung lazily in the spring sky, and birds chirped joyfully, accompanied by the occasional buzz of a passing insect. Surely, this was a perfect morning as Sam struggled awake, passing through that brief moment when sleep fought with consciousness, dreams colliding with reality. But as his eyes finally opened, crusted lids peeling apart, he realized that the sun wasn't really shining, at least not that brightly. The birds weren't singing and the buzz, well, that was his brother, snoring loudly in the bed next to him.

Sighing, Sam grinned. What had he expected after all? This wasn't a storybook morning, the first day of the rest of his life. He was Sam Winchester after all, and there was nothing idyllic or storybook about his life, not now, not ever.

Surely the fact that he was living, breathing, and in one piece should have in itself been reason to celebrate, but add to that, his brother had apparently vanquished their life-long nemesis, Haris, then yes, this day was as perfect as he could ask for. Why, then, did he feel as though something was just a tad off?

Ignoring the whisper of a feeling, Sam stretched; extending his entire body, from the tips of his toes to the ends of every finger, feeling every joint pop, each muscle pull, every sinew twitch and then relax. There was some residual stiffness, some awkwardness in his body that felt foreign and reminded him of how close to death's door he had come.

*"Close?"* he chided himself. *"Hell, I went beyond close. I kicked the door open and was one foot and four toes inside."*

He lay there for several more minutes, listening to the sounds outside the motel room, but once again, the chainsaw respirations of his older brother caught his attention and he turned slightly to face Dean. Under any other circumstances, Sam would have already thrown a pillow or have shouted out to wake Dean and stop the noisy slumber. This morning, the snoring was simply another sign of a better day, or maybe even better days to come.

When was the last time that Dean had slept so soundly he snored? For that matter, when was the last time Dean had slept period? So focused on saving Sam's life, getting him out of his deal with the demon, he had been operating on pure adrenaline and desperation until the night that he came back into Sam's hospital room to find him alive and well instead of ... well instead of what they had both feared.

So, Sam lay there and listened to Dean snoring; the cars as they sped by on the highway; the couple arguing in the room next door; the maid as she pushed her cart, one wheel wobbling raucously in the hallway outside; even the sound of his own heart beating steadily within his chest. Sounds of life, sounds that proved he was alive.

While the noises droned on, Sam's thoughts began to internalize. With Haris out of the picture, what did that mean for him? All of his life had been focused toward this one task, this one goal, and now it was completed. Where did he go from here? What about his family? What did it mean for them? His father had certainly spent every waking moment and every last resource hunting this demon. What would he do now? For that matter, his father wasn't even aware that his archenemy had been defeated. They should probably do something about that.

And then there was Dean. His older brother had never known a day without hunting, a moment without guns, or a life within the boundaries of normality. What would Dean want out of life now? Would he choose to still chase the many evil things that walked the earth or was this now finally the time that Dean had enough and would move on in favor of pursuing his own heart's desires?

“Earth to Sam! You alright there, Sammy?” Dean’s voice broke through the haze of thoughts, dragging the younger man back to the small motel room and to the worried look of his older sibling.

Dean hovered nervously at the edge of his bed, hair still tousled by sleep, face creased from sleeping against the watch that still remained on his wrist from the night before. Despite his outward appearance, green eyes, however, were bright, alert and ready for action; muscles were taut and ready to spring into battle at the first sign or word from his brother that all was not right.

Sam smiled back at Dean, noticing the hunter’s tension and hoping that the gesture put his brother at ease. “Sorry, I’m okay, just thinking,” he then added.

“Yeah, well it looked a lot like you were just staring blankly at the ceiling dude. Can you warn me when you’re gonna be catatonic? I’ve been talking to ya for the past five minutes,” Dean complained, rising from the bed.

“Sorry man, I guess I just got wrapped up thinking about everything that’s happened lately,” Sam explained. “Besides, dude, you were sawing logs here a few minutes ago. Hell, you probably woke yourself up snoring as loud as you were.”

Dean looked back over his shoulder on his way to the bathroom, casting Sam a sideways glance. “Dude, I do not snore!” he challenged.

“Chainsaw, I swear! Wake the dead, worse than anything I’ve ever heard, maybe even Dad,” Sam teased, ducking as the empty pizza box from last night’s midnight snack flew at him from across the room like some miniature UFO.

“That’s low Sam. Nothing’s worse than Dad,” Dean huffed, storming into the bathroom.

“Maybe even worse than Bobby!” Sam shouted back, laughing loudly as the bathroom door slammed shut.

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Dean sat at the small motel room table, fingers gliding over the laptop when Sam emerged from the bathroom. Steam filtered in from the room behind him, evidence of yet another long hot shower. Sam had indulged in one nearly every day since being discharged from the hospital. He made no apologies for his lengthy pampering, feeling like for once it was nice to be relaxed and carefree. Dean never challenged his brother, content to let Sam enjoy whatever comforts he chose after his all-too-close brush with death.

Sam dropped down to sit on the nearest bed, toweling his hair dry with one hand while he absently picked at the frayed knee of his jeans with the other.

“So what are you surfing for?” he asked tentatively, slightly afraid that the few days worth of rest had already worn thin on Dean’s nerves and his older sibling was now off in search of a hunt.

Dean looked up, a twinkle in his green eyes, a flash of a smile that he just as quickly hid, his fingers tapping on the keys furiously as he answered.

“Um, nothing,” he stammered. Sam jumped to his feet, curiosity now more than piqued.

“Seriously, what are you doin’? Looking for a hunt?”

“Yeah, sure, but there’s nothing really out there,” Dean answered, his hands reaching to close the laptop just as Sam came to stand beside him. For all his haste, his reflexes were a fraction too slow as Sam caught a final glimpse of a scantily clad young woman flashing across the screen.

“Dude! Exactly what kind of hunt were you looking for?” Sam asked, laughing.

“Yeah, well, there’s nothing good on the TV and the ladies at the local bar, well, let’s just say that I ain’t been drunk enough for any of them to look good!” Dean replied, smiling easily back at Sam.

Sam clapped him on the shoulder, nodding in agreement. He knew his brother wasn’t all that particular when it came to the female persuasion, so for Dean to admit

that nothing with two legs and boobs at the local bar had remotely caught his eye, well that was an all-time Dean Winchester first.

"Well, surf away, just don't get anything on the keyboard," Sam teased.

Dean glared in return, but couldn't maintain any semblance of irritation. It had been far too long since he'd seen his younger brother appear so lighthearted and stress-free. There was an unfamiliar brightness to Sam's eyes, fewer lines around them, less darkness. Sure, Dean could chalk all that up to more rest, more sleep, but he knew deep down that mostly it was due to the burden of that friggin' deal being over, and oh yeah, Haris being buried at the bottom of the ocean or wherever demons went when they were destroyed forever.

Whatever the reason, he was just happy to see something that resembled old Sam back. The Sam he remembered from before the deal, from before he was possessed, from before there were visions and curses and mob bosses and hunters that all wanted them dead.

Dean watch silently as his younger brother dressed, going through the ritual of preparing for another day. Another day of what? Dean was bored. Truth be told, he needed action, a purpose, a hunt. As much as he had been trying to let Sam rest and recover, giving his younger sibling ample space and time to convalesce at his own pace, Dean was soon to jump out of his own skin if he remained inactive much longer.

He'd tried occupying himself with much needed maintenance on the Impala, but finishing that, he'd been left with only the weapons requiring any attention. Figuring that a bit too blatant a hint, he'd avoided bringing out the gear bag. So with nothing more to occupy his time than the TV or the laptop, he was desperate. Like a caged tiger, he could feel himself ready to pace the small confines of the motel room, walking the edge of the space seeking some small chance for escape.

When Sam tied his shoes but then flopped back on the bed against the headboard and proceeded to flip through the channels with the remote, Dean couldn't stand it anymore.

"What do you think we ought to do today, Sam?" he asked tentatively.

"Huh?" Sam responded, looking up. "Um, I dunno."

"Well, we've been sitting here, in Conneticut no less, for nearly a week. Not exactly the capital of fun, or ah, the best place for us to be to be hiding from one Luciano Ferinacci. I mean, hiding in plain sight and all might work in the movies, but I'd kinda prefer to put more than one state between us and him," Dean stated bluntly.

"Yeah, mob boss, pissed at us, Alaska might not be far enough away," Sam agreed.

"Look dude, we need a plan or something. I know you probably aren't ready to go hunting and I'm not saying we have to, but we can't just sit here. I'm thinking we need to head in some direction and I think we need to call Dad," Dean rattled out, hoping that if he said it fast enough it might somehow sound more convincing.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing," Sam readily answered. "He doesn't know what happened with the Seal or me or Haris. We should call and tell him."

Dean pulled the cell phone from the pocket of his jeans, weighing it in his hand before flipping it open. A hundred thoughts flashed through his mind. What to say? How would his dad respond? He thought now of the missed call from his dad, forgotten in the panic of the moment as he rushed to his brother's side at St. James Hospital. He'd not thought to return the call that day, so overjoyed at seeing Sam alive and breathing. Then, as that day turned into the next and then the next, it simply became more convenient to act as though he had forgotten altogether.

His finger hesitated as he scrolled down through the stored contacts, stopping on the cell number for his father. Taking a deep breath, his thumb pressed the call button while he silently hoped for a reprieve in the form of a voicemail greeting.

"Hello?" The abruptness of the voice startled him and for a second Dean was at a loss for a response, never for a moment expecting his dad to actually answer.

“Dean? Is that you?” John Winchester’s voice boomed across the phone loud enough that even Sam could hear him from the other side of the room.

“Uh ye-yeah, yes sir!” he dutifully responded, unconsciously sitting up straighter in the chair, coming to attention even though his father was not physically in the room.

“I’ve been waiting to hear from you. What’s going on? How’s Sam?” John asked, his voice dropping to the coarse baritone reserved for those moments when he was especially angry or had some important point to make to one of his sons. “Where the hell are you two?”

Dean answered immediately, years of ingrained training eliciting a reaction just as sure as Pavlov’s dogs drooling at the sound of a bell. “We’re in Connecticut. Sam’s alright.”

“His birthday? The deal with Haris? Do I have to guess or are you gonna fill me in on what happened?” The elder Winchester demanded.

Dean took in a deep breath. So much had happened, how much to tell their Dad? Between the poisoned bullet, the Seal, Ferinacci, Gudrun and the demise of Haris, hell, it had been a pretty full week.

“We found the Seal, Dad. We found it and we used it against that yellow-eyed sonofabitch. Sammy is alive, free and clear, and that evil damn bastard is gone forever!”

There was a long silence as Dean waited, one hand absently playing at the silver ring on his right hand while he waited for his father’s response. Across the room, Sam chewed silently on the edge of his thumbnail, listening as he was to the one-sided conversation and waiting to see the look on Dean’s face to judge their father’s reaction to the news.

This time it was Dean who broke the uncomfortable stillness. “Dad, did you hear what I said? The demon, it’s gone! I killed it. It’s all over.”

While he hadn’t expected his father to heap praise, Dean certainly hadn’t expected what happened next. The verbal onslaught that exploded across the cellular caught the young man so by surprise that he nearly dropped the phone.

“HOW DO YOU KNOW? ARE YOU SURE? DO YOU HAVE PROOF?”

The questions coming at him in rapid-fire succession, Dean’s face betrayed him as he fumbled to answer. Across the room, Sam sat forward, hearing his father’s voice booming from the phone and noticing the sudden wounded expression wash over his older brother’s face. Sam had seen this scenario play out before and he was determined not to watch it again here and now, not after everything they’d been through recently. Spinning around on the bed, he sat on the foot nearest to Dean, his hand held out, fingers beckoning the cell away from his brother.

Dean shook his head doggedly, refusing Sam. Squeezing his eyes shut for a split second, his free hand rubbed across his face as he pulled the phone back up to his ear.

“Yeah Dad, skinned the bastard myself. Got the pelt hanging off the rod in the shower. Tell us where you are and we can send it to you. Should make a nice rug for in front of the fireplace someday.”

Sam’s eyes widened in disbelief, the start of a smile creasing his face as he listened to Dean’s sarcastic response. For years, he had watched his older sibling blindly obey every order that issued forth from their father’s mouth. He’d even criticized Dean for his obedience. But lately, he’d also seen another side of his brother; as though Dean had been discharged from the Winchester army; or perhaps a part of Dean was tired of being questioned or second-guessed by their dad. Whatever the change, Sam was hopeful that it was another sign of them moving on to another chapter of life.

“Yeah, I’m sorry too, Dad,” Dean replied softly after a moment. “It’s just that there was so much going on and you weren’t here. You ditched us in Nebraska even after you said we’d look for the Seal together. Sammy almost died, Dad. What was I supposed to do?”

Sam watched now, the defiance replaced by the soulful pain that was always reflected any time Dean let down his guard and mentioned Sam's near miss with death. He knew the keen sense of responsibility that his older brother felt toward him, and saw it yet again as he choked out those last words over the phone.

"No, I don't know where we're going now. We haven't really looked for a hunt," Dean informed, glancing up at his brother but not missing the look that Sam shot him at the mention of the word "hunt".

"We'll be careful, Dad. I know we still got hunters on our trail. We have some ... uh ... other enemies now too," the elder sibling answered, pausing briefly as he listened to his father's reply. "We will, Dad. We'll let you know where we're heading as soon as we figure it out."

Dean rose from the chair, closing the cell and sliding it back into his pocket with an audible exhale of air.

"Well, that went well!" Sam offered, rising to stand next to his brother. "I don't know about you, but I could go for some breakfast."

"Breakfast? Hell, dude! After that, it's noon somewhere. I need a beer!" Dean replied, the keys to the Impala jingling in his hands.

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Despite his desire to drink the first meal of the day, in the end it was Sam that won out, convincing Dean that drowning his stress at the bottom of a bottle of beer at nine in the morning wasn't the smartest thing in the world to do. Ending up at the same local diner that they'd eaten at for the past four mornings, Dean did nothing to hide his irritation when the same middle-aged, gravelly-voiced waitress strolled over and tossed down the greasy menus.

"Same as usual boys or are you gonna look at the menu today?" she asked, her accent as thick as the wad of gum she continued to chew as she spoke.

Dean casually glanced at the menu and muttered "Two eggs over easy, ham, toast and coffee."

Sam cast him a disgusted look, already dreading having to watch his brother slop the runny yolks up with his toast. He'd never been able to stomach eggs cooked that way, and watching Dean eat with reckless abandon didn't exactly help matters.

"Ham omelet, dry, and wheat toast please. I'll have some orange juice today," he ordered.

"Wow, going all out today are we?" the waitress replied sarcastically, writing the last of their order down on her pad before gathering the menus and walking back to the counter.

The brothers watched her leave, exchanging knowing glances, before both broke into easy laughter.

"We've got to get out of here, dude!" Dean began, becoming suddenly serious. "Look at us. Same freakin' restaurant for four straight days, we're predictable. Anybody could damn well track us down."

Sam nodded, silently considering the paper napkin on the table. In his heart, he knew this moment was coming, long overdue in fact.

"So, do you have anywhere specific in mind?" he asked, still not looking up.

"No, not really. I mean, I'd like it to be somewhere that the rich and famous don't throw bizarre parties where the guests dress up like something we should be hunting, and we don't end up in a hot tub full of acid, but hey, other than that, no, nowhere specific," Dean answered.

Sam smiled quickly, looking for the courage to voice the words that hung at the back of his throat. As he was about to speak, his reprieve arrived in the form of the waitress with his juice and Dean's coffee.

When she walked away once again, Sam took a long drink, almost wishing in that instant that he hadn't talked Dean out of the early morning trip to the bar.

“Dean, I’ve been thinking,” he began.

“Well, that’s never good,” Dean interrupted, laughing again, but when he saw the sincerity in his brother’s blue-green eyes, he quickly fell silent. “Okay, so Sammy has something serious rattlin’ around in that giant brain of his. What’s going on, bro?”

Sam chewed on his lower lip, considering his next words as he watched Dean.

“I’m done,” he announced, hoping the finality of those syllables didn’t hold as much edge as they sounded in his head when he practiced them.

Dean blinked only once, hazel eyes never faltering, piercing into Sam’s before his mouth turned up into a smile and he shook his head slowly.

“That’s just ‘near-death’ talking. You’ll get back into the swing of things, get you a good hunt, like riding a bike,” he insisted.

“No Dean, not this time. I know I said this before, but Haris is really gone now. It’s finally over. After everything that’s happened, everything we’ve been through. I’ve had enough.”

“Sam, look, I know this one was really bad. I know that you were ready to give it all up and you were willing to do it for me. But just because we put one evil sonofabitch down doesn’t mean there aren’t still a hell of a lot more of them out there to fill in the gap,” Dean implored.

“I want more! I’m tired of this life, Dean. I’m sick of what it’s cost us: Mom, Jess, nearly you twice now. How close have I come to burying you lately? And how about all the people along the way? How about all the Melissas and Lauras and Reeds out there that we can’t help?” Sam pleaded. “I’m sorry Dean, it’s just that we’re constantly surrounded by death. I just can’t take it anymore, and I don’t want to.”

Dean watched his younger brother, really looked at him as Sam lowered his head once again and focused on the paper napkin that he had decimated into tiny paper bits while he had spoken his peace. Dean wasn’t especially surprised by Sam’s revelation, not if he was being completely honest with himself. Hadn’t Sam pretty much said the same thing that night in Chicago before the confrontation with Meg, and then again in Salvation?

Part of Dean wanted to just blow this off, humor his younger brother, eat breakfast and then go back to the motel, pack and head the hell west towards the sunset. Yet, even as the thought crossed his mind, Sam’s words echoed in his head. Melissa, Laura, Reed, countless others, like Sam said, so many that they couldn’t help, hadn’t saved. Death surrounded them, followed them, haunted them, and all too often tried to take them.

“Okay. So where are you going then?” he asked, quiet acquiescence.

Sam looked up, trying to hide the shock from his face, unable to hide it in his voice when he stammered out “Really?”

“Yeah, I get it. I understand. I might not agree, but Sam, I told you a long time ago, I understood that you always knew what you wanted. I always respected that in you. It isn’t any different now. Besides Sam, these past few weeks, last week, nearly losing you, I can’t do that again. If keeping you safe means having you completely out of harm’s way, not hunting, then so be it. You name the place and I’ll take you there.”

Sam nodded, smiling and relieved, yet still feeling as though there was one more thing he needed to get clear.

“What about you Dean? What are you going to do now? Isn’t there something that you want?” he asked.

Dean started to speak, but the loud cracking of the waitress’s gum stopped him as she appeared with their breakfast in each hand. Instead, Dean merely grinned widely, shaking his head.

“Dude, I just want my breakfast served by a waitress that doesn’t ruin my appetite. Can we just eat and get the hell out of Dodge?”

Sam nodded back, acknowledging the Dean Winchester avoidance tactic when he saw it. He dug into his own breakfast, carefully trying to ignore the sloppy mess that his brother was making as he tore into the eggs on his own plate.

For Dean, the arrival of food was a godsend. So long as he kept shoveling the chow in, then he couldn't be expected to answer any more of his brother's questions or carry on any further discussion about Sam's retirement from hunting. Likewise, he could also blame the huge lump in his throat on the large bites of food that he was cramming in. *Yeah, the food! That was it!*

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They finished breakfast with Sam chattering away, his relief exhibited in the rambling manner he moved from one topic to the next. First talking about Stanford, finishing college, and then even mentioning Sarah.

Dean remained silent throughout, forcing himself to smile, nodding occasionally, even telling Sam that it would be good to see Sarah and Kyle again. He'd been honest when he'd told Sam that he was happy to let his brother pursue his dreams and desires, but it still hurt. Just when he thought that their lives were finally going to take a turn for the better, suddenly he felt as though a part of him was getting torn out. Still, when had he ever really been able to deny his brother anything?

Following breakfast, they returned to the motel, packed the remainder of their belongings and pointed the Impala towards the west. Despite the motivation, despite the gnawing at his gut, Dean was happy that at least they were on the road.

Windows down, Molly Hatchet's *Flirtin' With Disaster* blared out of the speakers as the cool spring air caressed his face. Dean tried to focus on the road, tried to ignore all the thoughts that were going through his head, tried to tell himself that he could go back to hunting solo again.

*Been flirtin' with disaster,  
Y'all know what I mean.  
And the way we run our lives,  
It makes no sense to me.  
I don't know about yourself or,  
What you want to be - yeah.  
When we gamble with our time,  
We choose our destiny.*

"Great! Even the music has to remind me," Dean thought to himself.

He looked over to Sam, but his brother's face was obscured by the long mass of brown hair hanging down as he continued to type away on the laptop. For the life of him, Dean didn't know what Sam could still be doing on the computer all this time. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that whatever research Sam had been conducting, it had nothing to do with anything supernatural. Curiosity getting the better of him, Dean finally broke the silence.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

Sam looked up. "A little of everything, nothing in particular," he answered. "I just don't know, Dean. I thought I knew what I wanted, I thought I could just go back and drop right back into life at Stanford, but now, I'm just not sure."

"Oh?" Dean replied casually, trying to contain the glimmer of hope that seeped into his heart from being reflected in his voice.

"Yeah, I mean, after everything that's happened, after everything I've seen. Besides, I don't know if I can go back there and not be reminded of Jess," Sam admitted.

"I guess that's to be expected," Dean agreed. "I don't suppose you can live the life we have and then just pretend that it's never happened."

"I know that. I don't expect that. I don't want to forget it, Dean. I don't want to forget Jessica, but I do need to move on, and I don't know that I can do that at

Stanford. So I was thinking maybe I just need to go somewhere else, a different university.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, so I’ve just been kinda looking around. See what other schools are out there. Maybe one close to Sarah?” Sam added, a smile crossing his face, his eyes nearly sparkling at the mention of the beautiful brunette.

“Well how ‘bout you be sure to let me know where the hell we’re going sometime soon okay? Gas ain’t cheap, dude. We can’t just be cruising across the U.S. while you figure out which is the best party school,” Dean snapped back.

Sam recoiled slightly at the sudden shift in his brother’s temper. He briefly considered saying something back to Dean, wanting to get him to explain why he had responded so vehemently, but he saw how the older man had already turned his focus back to the road, and Sam knew that he wasn’t going to get his brother to talk.

Sam supposed he didn’t really need for Dean to tell him what was bothering him. He wasn’t blind; he could tell that Dean was trying his hardest to be supportive, to hide behind those well-crafted masks and make Sam feel as though that no matter what, Dean Winchester was perfectly fine. But Sam knew better. He knew how important family was to Dean and he knew that there wasn’t anything Dean wouldn’t do to try to keep the three remaining Winchesters together. Unfortunately, remaining together also meant hunting for Dad and Dean, and that was something that Sam simply did not have the heart to do anymore.

Reluctant to say anything to each other, the brothers rode in silence, each consumed with their own thoughts, their own personal torments. The low rumble of the Impala’s engine and the hum of her tires on the road created a rhythm that lulled Dean and before he knew it, the sun was beginning to set as he drove them across the western Pennsylvania countryside.

He didn’t need to look at his watch to know that it was well past seven, his stomach already having grumbled its irritation at being empty several miles back. Slowing the car, he pulled off the highway and into the small town of Manns Choice, Pennsylvania. The small burg didn’t look like much: one long street, one motel, one diner, and most importantly to Dean, one bar. He was tired and it was enough.

Pulling into the motel, he quickly checked them in, returning to the car just as Sam was gathering their duffels. The motel only boasted ten rooms and the bored teenage clerk had essentially given Dean his choice.

Unlocking the door to lucky room number seven, Dean flipped on the light switch while unconsciously sweeping the space for any immediate threats.

Sam followed behind him, dumping his bag on the second bed, then quickly opening the laptop and plugging the AC adapter into the wall. Without a word, the younger, soon-to-be ex-hunter dropped into the chair beside the small table and immediately resumed his prior work on the computer. Dean bit back a comment, shaking his head.

“Dude, hungry here. We gonna go get something to eat before they roll up the sidewalks in this town?” he asked.

“Give me a few okay? I just want to request my transcripts from Stanford so I can maybe start to apply to other schools tomorrow.” Sam replied, holding up one finger.

“Ya’ know, forget it Sam. I’m not hungry after all. I’m going out for a beer,” Dean grumbled back, heading for the door before his brother could answer.

Once outside, he continued to mumble to himself, looking back over his shoulder towards the light coming from the motel room and the brother that he had just stormed out on. He crossed over the empty street to the bar on the corner, the flashing neon light advertising cold **Rolling Rock** beer a welcoming sign.

Walking inside, Dean noticed that the tavern was nearly empty. Beside the bartender, there was only the town drunk passed out against a corner table and a lone man, nursing a bottle of beer at the end of the bar. Dean strode up to the dark-

stained counter, leaning against the edge as the bearded barkeep walked over to meet him.

“What’ll ya have?”

“Beer, whiskey chaser,” Dean answered, pulling out his wallet and placing several bills on the countertop. “Keep ’em coming, would ya.”

Dean wasted no time tilting back the shot glass, allowing the warmth of the alcohol to flood his body and momentarily dull his senses. The bartender dutifully refilled the small vessel as Dean chugged a large mouthful of the cold beer, his head slightly buzzed from the sudden rush of liquor on a relatively empty stomach. Taking a deep breath, he quickly threw back the second shot before dropping back to sit on the barstool behind him.

In his head, the voice of his heart battled with the voice of his conscience. He knew he told Sam that he would take him wherever his brother wanted to go. He could remember telling him that he understood his desire to move on to other things. But deep down inside, he couldn’t block out the ache that was gnawing at him.

It wasn’t the fact that Sam didn’t want to hunt anymore, although for the life of him, Dean couldn’t understand how his brother could possibly turn his back on that. It was the absolute fear of how he could ever watch out for Sam, protect him, and keep him safe if he was hundreds of miles away. It was the same nightmare scenario from when Sam had left for Stanford before.

Two beers, three more shots, and two and a half more hours of internal warring over what to do found Dean with nothing more to show than a head spinning and a stomach that was still rumbling for something more substantial than the liquid that the young hunter was currently filling it with. Still far from drunk, or that matter even from blissfully buzzed, Dean took a slight break from his own personal problems to eavesdrop into the conversation between the bartender and the older patron seated beside him.

The two were apparently debating the skills of the modern Navy, the older man having served in years past and passionately informing the bartender that while serving as a submariner, they had never managed to run “afoul” of any other submerged ships. Dean glanced up at the TV hanging in the corner, noticing the CNN coverage scrolling across the screen and the story of a Navy sub that had apparently hit some sunken ship out in the Atlantic. No one had been hurt, but the furor caused by the damage of a billion dollar military vessel by a scrapped piece of junk was apparently causing a stir.

“*Slow news day*,” Dean thought to himself.

As he was about to turn back to his beer, the door to the bar swung violently open, startling all of the occupants and even waking the drunk in the corner. The young man standing in the doorway would have been imposing even if it hadn’t been for his size. Standing nearly six foot six and easily over two hundred pounds, the newcomer looked to belong in a boxing ring. Still, worse than his size was the look in his dark eyes, a predator’s eyes.

He scanned the room, taking in all the occupants, sizing them up before striding confidently the remainder of the way into the establishment. His body never hesitated, never twitched, as he moved up to the older man seated at the end of the bar. With a wide sweep of his arm, the newcomer grabbed the older man by the throat and effortlessly tossed him across the room and into the opposite wall.

Dean immediately rose to his feet, stepping forward to meet the newcomer. A full head shorter and nearly fifty pounds lighter, Dean didn’t care. If the stranger was looking for a fight, then he came to the right bar on the right night. A week’s worth of inactivity coupled with the anguish of losing his brother to academia had left the young hunter itching to exert some pent up frustration.

The stranger never broke stride, advancing on Dean as though he were simply working his way through the room. As he closed the gap, the elder Winchester feigned surrender, opening his hands palm up. The stranger never stopped, his

expression never changed as he continued forward. Just as he was about to reach out towards Dean, the hunter twisted forward and let loose with a combination of punches that landed twice to the stranger's head and once to his abdomen.

It was like hitting concrete; only concrete might have been more forgiving. Dean stifled a groan, his right hand bellowing with pain from the abuse of the contact with the rigid bone structure of the attacker. He shook the tingling extremity, looking from his hand back up to the face of the man he'd just had absolutely no effect on. And then he knew why...

The face that looked back at him broadened into a wide sadistic smile. Dark eyes narrowed as the mouth opened to reveal a second set of teeth dropping into view. Fangs! Sharp, glistening fangs!

"Oh just great!" Dean moaned. "A friggin' vampire! You gotta be kidding me!"

As the creature advanced on the hunter, the bartender reached under the counter pulling out a sawed-off shotgun. Dean spotted the weapon but knew it would be ineffective.

"Mister, trust me. That isn't gonna do any good. Just get these people out of here as fast as you can," he instructed.

The bartender looked perplexed, but then spotted the vampire's long fangs and morphed face and rapidly heeded Dean's advice. For his part, Dean had run out of room, having backed up as far as the limited space would allow him. Caught now between the wall and the pool table, he watched as the bartender helped the last of the patrons out the front door.

"Well, it's just you and me now. Got the place all to ourselves. How 'bout a little eight ball?" he asked sarcastically. The vampire merely continued to glare at him, holding its position. Dean shrugged, "Oh well. Can't say I didn't try to be hospitable."

In a fluid motion Dean grabbed one of the pool cues and swung it around, striking the vampire on the left side of its head. Without waiting to see what effect it had, Dean continued his attack, next bringing the stick up and under the creature's chin, throwing the vamp's head back with an audible crack.

The huge bloodsucker staggered back a couple of steps, a momentary look of shock on its face. It hadn't expected to meet any resistance, much less in the form of a human so significantly smaller in stature. Fangs showing once again, it moved back toward the hunter.

Dean swung the cue stick once more, but this time the vampire caught it coming in with its left hand, snapping the wooden pole cleanly in two. Before Dean could react, the creature had him by the shirt and tossed him against the edge of the bar. A loud whoosh of air escaped Dean's lips as his back was driven against the hard, unyielding counter. Still holding Dean, the creature slammed his body for a second time into the bar. His spine screaming in agony, lungs burning for much needed air, Dean knew he was losing this battle.

"What I wouldn't give for a machete or some dead man's blood! Preferably not my own any time soon," he mumbled between gasps.

The vampire picked Dean back up by the throat, his feet dangling nearly two feet from the floor as the creature held him at eye level.

"I'm going to rip your throat out, human, and drain the blood from your body," it sneered.

"Didn't your mother ever tell ya not to taunt your food?" Dean snarked back, hands clawing at his neck, trying to break the vampire's grip.

Carrying him over to the pool table, the creature slammed Dean down on the green felt surface. Dean's vision darkened briefly, the vampire's stranglehold on his throat constricting even tighter and threatening the blood to his brain as much as it was threatening the air to his lungs.

He weakly slammed the base of his hand into the vampire's nose, hoping the soft tissue would give under the force as it would with any normal human, but it wasn't to

be. The vampire merely dipped his head down towards Dean's neck, fangs dripping saliva like a hungry dog.

Frantically struggling, Dean's hands flailed beside him bumping into something solid. One of the balls from the table rolled into his hand. Closing his fist around it, vision blurring, his eyes fighting to turn two snarling vampires into one, he poured every ounce of remaining energy into his right arm driving the black number eight ball into the creature's left eye.

Blood cascaded from the damaged socket as the beast reared back howling in pain. It lashed out with one hand, managing to cuff a still gasping Dean on the side of the head.

Dean staggered sideways, grabbing hold of the pool table for support as he sucked in huge gulps of air. As his vision cleared, he saw that the vampire had also recovered and was advancing on him yet again. If the creature was bloodthirsty before, then it was definitely well beyond pissed-off now.

It tossed aside barstools as it made its way back towards the hunter, nearly snarling as its fangs were bared once again. Dean knew he couldn't kill the thing, unarmed and certainly outsized. He felt the trickle of warm blood down the side of his face and the twinge of protesting muscles in his back. And then there was the present nagging problem with seeing two of the damn things when he knew there should only be one. He needed help, be it in the form of a weapon or in the six foot four frame of his now-reluctant hunter brother.

Dean spotted one-half of the discarded broken pool cue on the floor by his feet. Bending down, vertigo threatening to face plant him on the floor for good, he managed to grab the shard of wood and rise back again as the creature came to stand over him. Launching up from his knees, Dean never hesitated. He drove the broken end of the stick deep into the vampire's chest forcing it through flesh, muscles and tissue, glancing past ribs until he could force it no further.

The towering creature, stumbled for just a moment, stunned by the impaled piece of wood protruding from its ribcage. Dean wasted no time, scrambling from underneath the startled vampire and heading for the exit of the now deserted pub.

The cool nighttime air chilled his face and exposed skin, helping to bring him back to some level of alertness. He glanced back over his shoulder to see if the creature was pursuing him before he turned and loped towards the motel.

The town was deathly quiet and for a moment, Dean wondered where the bartender had gone. Surely the man would have called for the local law? No matter now, nothing that Dean couldn't take care of himself.

He reached the Impala, fishing the keys from his pocket and immediately rummaging through the secreted compartment until he retrieved his prized .45 and a sheathed machete. He considered the crossbow momentarily, but with no dead man's blood, the weapon was relatively useless.

Continuing on to the motel room, he noticed that the lights were now off, assuming that Sam had already turned in for the evening. "Yeah, all that college research sure can wear you out, can't it little brother?" he muttered as he slipped the key into the door.

"Wakey, wakey sleeping beauty," Dean shouted, flipping on the switch to the lights. "Time to get up, Sammy! Work has found us!"

But as the light from the nightstand filled the room with an eerie glow, casting shadows on the walls like some macabre silent movie, Dean froze in the doorway.

Bending over his sleeping brother, fangs bared inches from his brother's neck, the vampire looked up at Dean and hissed at him in defiance.

Something jarred inside the elder hunter, something that brought the deserted hangar in New Jersey back into his memory kicking and screaming. He had to react, had to save Sammy all over again. It seemed like it was his lifelong calling, but it was one in which he vowed never to fail.

“Hey, you pointy-toothed sonofabitch! Come get some of this!” Dean spun the machete like it was a mace, daring the vampire to attack him instead of his sleeping brother.

The fanged creature hissed as it spun from the still-sleeping hunter, angry that its feed had been interrupted. Saliva dripped from its teeth and open mouth, its hunger spurring it on for the kill. It wanted, needed blood, and it had no preference where the irony, red liquid came from.

“That’s it, come show me what you got, Spike,” Dean urged, gripping the hilt of his blade with both hands. “Did anyone ever tell you your orthodontist sucks, dude?”

The blond bloodsucker screamed, its primal urge to feed forcing it to attack rather than the taunts from the hunter. Arms outstretched ready to seize Dean, it took one leap over Sam’s bed and literally flew half way across the room at its intended victim.

It knew it was strong, way stronger than any human – than anything that had gone before it, even.

As the vampire slammed into him, Dean faltered, its weight pushing him backwards into the wall and almost knocking the machete from his grip. Keeping hold of the weapon with just one hand, he tried to catch the creature a glancing blow with it, anything to buy time.

The thing laughed, a deep, guttural chortle as it cocked its head back revealing its descending fangs once again. “I’m going to bleed you till there’s nothing left but a dry husk, and then I’m going to use your friend for my sweet.” It held a hand around the hunter’s throat, squeezing until he was forced to drop the machete in favor of trying to pry away the unnaturally strong hands. “Or, maybe I should turn him? Would you like that?”

Dean’s eyes shot to his brother, so deep in slumber he was still blissfully unaware of the fight that was ensuing only a few feet away. He couldn’t let this thing hurt Sammy, turn Sammy into a creature of the night.

“Ah, I see I’ve struck a nerve.” The vampire nodded, glancing from Dean to Sam as the younger turned, groaning in his sleep. “Friend? Lover? Brother?” It queried, its brow raising as it hit the right nerve and Dean’s face contorted in anger. “*Brother...*” It nodded.

“You won’t hurt him -” Dean’s voice was low, all the anger, the frustration abruptly washing away into something more peaceful – more certain.

“Hurt him?” The creature huffed, letting go of the hunter’s neck in the sure certainty that it was in no danger. It was omnipotent, or as good as, wasn’t it? “Oh, I’m not going to hurt him. I’m going to eat him, drink him...savour him...”

Dean stepped away from the wall he’d been pressed against, a similar confidence embuing him as the vampire. Letting his right hand casually slip behind his back, he kept up the barrage of sarcasm as his fingers gripped the butt of his Desert Eagle.

“Dude, so not the first time a Winchester’s been threatened with being the main course.” He shrugged, thinking of the Bender family in distaste. “Course, I think I was way more appetizing than my brother, but maybe you freaks don’t know good white meat when you see it...”

Dean bit down lightly on his own lip, drawing a thin film of blood that he promptly licked away after teasing the creature with it for just a second. “Mnn, tastes good,” he tempted.

The vampire tried to pounce, its mind telling it not to but its body unable to ignore pure instinct. It needed to sink its fangs into something warm and soft. It wanted to feel the tepid trickle of blood in its mouth as it sucked the delicious red nectar from the annoying human before it.

As soon as the bloodsucker made its move, Dean drew out his .45 from the small of his back and emptied every last slug into the thing’s chest.

Not one single projectile entered the vampire’s body. Most bounced harmlessly from its frame like it was wearing body armor. The odd bullet grazed its skin, but did no significant damage. And yet still, Dean’s plan had worked. The sheer force of

being hit by so many slugs at close range knocked the vampire backwards and it fell clumsily, only the footer of Sam's bed stopping it from hitting the floor.

While the creature shook itself, Dean tossed down his weapon and sank to the carpet, reacquainting himself with the machete with an ear to ear grin.

"Time for a little haircut, Spike!" Lunging at the blond as it staggered up from the bed, Dean brought the machete down hard to the vampire's neck, trying to decapitate the creature with one blow.

Suprisingly, the recently sharpened blade faltered, and Dean found it only half embedded in the thing's neck. Blood splattered from the wound, showering the hunter, the bed, his brother and half the other items in the room with a bright crimson spray that even a kindergartener wouldn't have laid claim to.

Dean winced, yanking back on the machete to make a second harder blow. "Ugh, friggin' gross!"

This time, the top of the vampire's spine finally gave way and its head toppled to the carpet, a look of complete shock crossing its features as the last vestiges of life faded from its brain cells.

The thing's body hovered in an upright position for several seconds longer, more scarlet pumping blood spurting from its recently severed veins and arteries.

Dean tolerated the garish sight for as long as he could stomach the blood spashing onto his face – onto Sammy's face. Then, with the tip of his boot he kicked the twitching cadaver in the back and it slumped forward to join its other half on the floor.

"I would say this sucks out loud," he commented wryly, looking down at the corpse. "But given your occupation I think that might be too close for comfort..."

"Dean?"

The elder Winchester instantly forgot the oozing body at his feet, his head snapping back to the voice of his baby brother.

The brother he'd almost lost again because he'd unsuspectingly left him alone in a motel room. Funny how life, history, seemed to run in neverending, vicious circles. *Just like in Fort Douglas – except that was a witch, not a vamp. And I shoulda known better than to defy an order from dad, kid or not.*

"You okay, Sasquatch?"

Sam blinked, unsure exactly why he wouldn't be. He rubbed at his bleary, grit-filled eyes and when his hands came away bloody his mouth opened but nothing came out. Swallowing, he followed Dean's gaze to the decapitated head that stared up at him from the carpet, fangs bared. "Vampire?" He queried, even though it was the most obvious answer in the world.

Dean nodded, wiping the smeared blood from the machete's blade with a towel from the bathroom.

Sam shook his head, for an instant wondering if Dean hadn't gone and found a hunt just to keep him in the business. It seemed like too much of a coincidence to just run into a vampire – but then, Dean wouldn't go that far, would he? "I'm so not gonna miss this when I'm done hunting," he finally offered, rubbing away some more of the creature's blood from his face with the back of his hand.

Dean's brow furrowed, but he avoided any confrontation on the subject. Now wasn't the time to browbeat his brother into remaining a hunter. "You can miss it later, 'cause right now I think we got a whole nest of these sick puppies just like in Colorado."

Dean tossed a clean towel at Sam who took it and absently continued to rub at the bloodstains all over his skin and t-shirt. "Nest? Dean, vampires are so rare even Dad thought they were extinct. What are the chances of finding a whole bunch of them right where we happen to be staying?"

Dean toed the vampire's body uncertainly. He didn't like it any more than his brother, and he sure as hell didn't like how strong the bastard had been. "I'd say the

chances are as high as me beating you every time at poker, dude. Trust me, this isn't the only *Buffy* reject I've run into tonight. I'm telling you, there's something *off* here."

Sam pushed up from the bed and toyed with the idea of heading for the bathroom to clean up properly. The fact that his brother had mentioned another vampire the only thing making him pause midway across the room to pander to his sibling's "hunting evil" obsession. "Okay," he sighed. "You got me. You ran into another one of these things?"

Dean rubbed at his bruised right hand where it had impacted on the first vampire, the memory alone making him wince. "Yeah, down at the local bar," he confessed. "Friggin' thing just walked in as brazen as a hussy and started to attack people." He clenched and unclenched his tingling fingers. "I'll tell you something else, too. The thing was strong - stronger than the Colorado vamps - hell, stronger than a pissed off wendigo with attitude. I'm telling you, Sammy, something's not right here."

Sam planted his huge frame back on the end of his bed, wash forgotten. He'd thought he was free of this, free to be normal again. Why was it always left to the Winchesters to hunt evil and save the innocent? Didn't they deserve a life too, before it was too late?

He dragged down a long breath. "You're right," he eventually admitted. "Even with what little we know about vampires, this isn't following their usual behavioral patterns..."

"We need to find the nest and finish these suckers." Dean watched the woeful expression that crossed his brother's face. "Then," he added. "you can go back and play college boy. Deal?"

Sam looked up and a small smile crossed his face. "Deal," he agreed, moving from the bed to take a look at the vampire's still-warm corpse.

"Looks like Spike was into tattoos," Dean mused, standing over his brother with a scowl. "Except that's one pretty whacked out piece of art for a vamp to have on his wrist..."

Sam squinted slightly, twisting the vampire's arm to get a better look. Taking in the intricate, almost corporate design marked out perfectly on the inside of "Spike's" right wrist, he noted that the ink had faded with age. It wasn't a colorful tattoo, either, but more like a mark of ownership or cattle brand. Beneath the emblem was a long number beginning with four zeros.

Sam looked up. "This is more like a logo than a tattoo some freak would have. I think we should check it out."

"You should check it out," Dean corrected. "'Cause I'm gonna get rid of our bloodsucker's body before he starts to stink this joint out." He took a look at the cadaver and grimaced in disgust. "Man, I gotta have that thing's creepy head in my trunk. So not cool."

"In your trunk is better than in your bed." Sam made a face, looking at the scarlet spray pattern that covered his sheets. "Just be careful, Dean. I suddenly have a bad feeling about this town."

Dean grabbed the mop of blond hair that was attached to the very dead vampire head and grimaced as he stuffed it into a black refuse sack. "Dude, I've had a bad feeling since *you* mentioned *school*." The elder hunter turned, hastening out to his car before Sam could respond.

It wasn't that Dean didn't want Sam to have a life. It wasn't that he didn't want to lose his little brother to some big city law firm – Dean just didn't want to lose Sammy, period.

\* \* \* \*

Dean glanced into the rearview mirror as the Impala cruised down a short lane on the outskirts of Mann's Choice. He didn't know why, but the town just reminded him of one of the creepy little towns from a Stephen King tale – the kind of town that always

ended up harboring some deep, dark, and mostly evil secret. Even the name had the same creeped out ring to it.

He had nothing save the vampire attacks to base his paranoia on, and yet he couldn't resist the urge to keep those hazel eyes darting to the mirror every few seconds.

So far, only the black of night or the flash of some nocturnal animal's wild orbs had greeted him back, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to keep checking.

Eying the machete that sat on the passenger seat, he felt a pang of uncertainty. He'd managed to dump the vampire's body out and burn it in some secluded field before burying any remains, but its very presence here worried the hunter.

One vampire was unusual. Two vampires were dangerous. If there were more in the nest here in Pennsylvania they had to be found and destroyed before they managed to "create" any more of their own kind.

"Man, I wish Dad was here," Dean mused out loud as he pulled into a small gas station and Kwik Mart. As much as his comment to Sam before about gas had been pure anger-fueled snark, the car really was pretty much running on empty now.

Dean sat forward in his seat and took a look through the glass of the booth for an attendant. In small towns like this, a lot of gas stations were still not self service. Surprisingly, even though the notice on the door said "open", the cash register had been left unattended.

Dean shrugged. "Small town dudes are way too trusting." He ambled to the rear of the Chevy and quickly pushed the nozzle into the filler neck. Glancing around, he realized there were no other customers on the pumps, or inside the store. In fact, there wasn't a soul in sight anywhere.

*Damn, I think I've seen this movie...*

When the pump chimed the Impala was full, Dean slid the nozzle back into its holder and sauntered over to the booth, tugging a fake MasterCard from his wallet to settle up the bill with. *These bozos are lucky I'm bothering to pay at all. I mean, what the hell? Who leaves a store unattended? Probably some teenager making out in the back with his chick because business is slow...*

Dean pushed open the glass door and looked cautiously around the Kwik Mart, every instinct telling him that maybe this was no kid shirking his duties after all. He swallowed, hearing the sound of his throat bobbing reflexively in the sheer silence of the room.

Something clattered to the floor and Dean's head jerked towards the sound of the movement, his gut screaming that he shouldn't have left the machete in the car.

Stuffing his wallet back into his pocket he edged towards the small stockroom from where the noise had come. The door was already open, and he skirted it carefully until he was able to safely bob his head around the jamb.

"Sonofabitch!"

Dean relaxed from his defensive position just a little and entered the store room. Whatever had attacked here had long gone, leaving only the very dead body of the clerk as evidence of its presence.

Dean didn't really need to check to know what kind of killer he was dealing with, but he hunkered over anyway, examining the two deep puncture wounds on the young man's neck.

"Another friggin' spike-toothed creep," he sighed. The clerk was only young – too young, and looking at his innocent, "baby" features only made the hunter regret his earlier thoughts that the kid had been in the back making out.

Dean shook his head ruefully and pushed down on his knee, starting to straighten up when the clerk's eyes suddenly flashed open. The hunter momentarily balked and at the sight of two pure white descending fangs he stumbled backwards.

The clerk's arm shot out just in time to catch the hunter's collar and hold him, but Dean's reflexes were just as fast.

Leaning against the nearest wall was a spade used to shovel sand onto gasoline spills. It wasn't exactly the perfect tool, but Dean was the master of improvisation.

Grabbing the handle, Dean struck out at the undead clerk as he yanked on the hunter's collar. The first blow landed square on the "turned" kid's forehead, making an evil-looking dint that knocked him back just enough for Dean to straighten and swing a much better aimed blow.

The second strike was perfectly on target, the spade's blade landing just under the clerk's chin and cutting straight through his windpipe, carotid, and all the tissue that went with them.

The kid's eyes rolled but didn't quite dim as his arms flailed and dark red blood seeped between the blade and his flesh.

To Dean, it was like watching a dying animal in the road writhe in agony, knowing you couldn't save it. *Better to finish it quick...*

Dean placed his boot on the bottom of the spade and looked away as he put his full weight onto it. He felt a sickening crack as the clerk's spine gave way beneath his heel and the severed head lolled away from the kid's quivering body.

For a while, even Dean couldn't force himself to look at his own handiwork. This had once been a young man with his whole life ahead of him. Maybe he was studying like Sammy. *Maybe...*

Sammy.

Dean slipped a hand to his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell. Hitting Sam's number from the speed dial he pressed the phone to his ear, holding it there with his shoulder as he tossed a sheet he'd found over the clerk's remains. He'd need to come back later to burn them, but for now there were bigger fish to fry.

"Dean, where the hell have you been? I was about ready to come look for you!" Sam's slightly agitated voice cracked across the unhealthy cell line, evoking a surge of relief in the elder Winchester.

"Yeah, well, let's just say I almost got a puncture..."

"You blew a tire?"

"Dude, I was thinking more in the area of my friggin' neck." Dean walked back through the Kwik Mart, snagging a pack of Twinkies as he headed outside and took another look around. "I just killed another *Buffy* extra and this one had been turned recently. Sammy, we got a serious infestation here..."

"Yeah, and it's not the only weird thing going on. The tattoo on Spike is a logo from a local research lab. The place is called Bastian Pharmaceuticals, and according to what I can dig up they're doing some top secret work. Dean," Sam's voice became questioning, and he almost, *almost* sounded like the hunter he used to be. "What if Bastian is turning out more than a few new drugs?"

Dean raised a brow and stuffed in a Twinkie, munching as he answered. "What? You're thinking Robovamps? Dude, that's a pretty big stretch, even for us."

"At least let's check the place out." Sam pulled up the lab's location on Google Maps and jotted it down as he continued to hold the phone to his ear. "It would explain why this place is suddenly inundated with vampires, Dean."

Dean gulped down the last of his sponge cake and looked around the empty lot. How many locals were already dead? How many were destined to be unsuspecting victims to be fed upon or turned? Did they really have time to be riding around the countryside checking out labs just because of a tattoo?

"Okay, Van Helsing, you go check out this Bastian place. I'm gonna try and find the nest before more locals get hurt. It has to be reasonably close the amount of vamps we've encountered already."

"Dean-" There was frustration in Sam's voice. "All the answers we need might be out at this lab. We might not need to go head on with these things..."

"Yeah, right, and I'm the tooth fairy. Sammy, there's only so many ways to kill these bloodsuckers, and you know it." Anger seeped into the elder hunter's tone and he didn't try to conceal it.

Sam was still trying to run from his destiny, still trying to pretend there were other ways to solve supernatural problems rather than actually “hunt” anymore.

“Listen, meet me at the Kwik Mart on the corner of Main Street. You can help me get rid of my second stiff of the day, and then you can borrow his car. It’s not like he’s gonna need it anytime soon...” Dean smirked knowingly as he looked across to the only car parked in the lot besides the Impala. It was perfect, just *perfect* for his brother.

\* \* \* \*

Sam arrived at the Kwik Mart thirty minutes later, finding Dean sitting on the floor, his back against the counter, a large bag of cheese curls open by his side. Scattered about the floor around him was an assortment of discarded candy wrappers and the occasional Twinkie crumb.

Dean looked up as Sam walked through the door, setting off the tell-tale chime. He smiled an orange-toothed grin, licking the equally orange cheese residue off his fingers before pushing up off the floor.

“What took you so long?” he asked, still chomping on the last of the junk food he’d crammed into his mouth.

Sam cast him a distasteful look, continually amazed at how his brother could subsist on the crap he insisted on shoving into his mouth on a daily basis. He was pretty sure that Dean’s entire digestive system would likely shut down if it were ever exposed to anything resembling a healthy diet for any extended period of time.

“I had to walk dude,” Sam replied. “Besides, I was looking into that Bastian place some more. Dean, there’s some seriously strange stuff going on at that there.”

Dean snorted loudly, still not convinced that the solution to their problem lie anywhere other than finding the nest and destroying it. He moved back to the storage room, leading his brother toward the most recent kill. Pushing open the door, he stopped to stand over the clerk’s decapitated body. Sam watched him, curious that his usually callous brother had gone so unusually solemn and quiet.

After several moments, even Sam couldn’t ignore Dean’s uncharacteristic silence. “You okay there bro?” he asked, reaching out and putting a hand on Dean’s shoulder.

The older hunter flinched away, but quickly looked back up at Sam, his “I’m perfectly fine” mask back in place, but not before his younger brother caught the briefest glimpse of sadness reflected in Dean’s hazel eyes.

“Yeah, I’m good, Let’s get this done, okay,” the elder sibling replied, moving around the body and grabbing a nearby green tarp.

Sam would have challenged Dean’s bullshit reply, but considering how tense his brother had acted earlier that evening he knew that there was more bothering him than a recently dead vampire. Still, Dean being Dean, Sam knew that wild horses wouldn’t get his brother to open up and admit what was truly bothering him and Sam being Sam, he couldn’t and wouldn’t stand by and wait.

“He was a vampire, Dean,” Sam said matter-of-factly. “You didn’t have any choice.”

Dean looked back up, eyes rolling at the inference in his brother’s tone. “Sam!” he droned back, his own tone warning his brother that this was not the time for a heart to heart discussion.

“I’m just saying...” Sam began, but Dean cut him off, dropping the edge of the tarp and waving a hand at him.

“Don’t start with me, Sam. You’re the one that wasn’t looking for a hunt, wanted to go all normal. Hell, I’m ecstatic to be killing some friggin’ thing. Was getting bored outta my damn skull sitting around waitin’ on your ass,” Dean snapped back.

Sam stared at him, partially startled at the abrupt lashing coming from Dean, partially angry that his brother could verbally attack him after supposedly being supportive of his decision, and finally, partially understanding, when he finally stopped to realize that after all, this was Dean, and as such, this was the only way Dean knew how to respond.

"Yeah, well okay then. Move your ass over so I can take a look," Sam demanded, kneeling down. Dean glared at Sam for another moment, but shifted his position to allow his taller brother room to get in closer to the body.

Sam flipped back the tarp that Dean had just been wrapping around the clerk and lifted the young man's hand. He turned it back and forth, scanning it carefully but finding no markings similar to those on the wrist of the vampire killed in their motel room.

"Well, he's not marked like the other," Sam observed.

"What's that mean?" Dean asked. "Maybe he was afraid of needles."

"I dunno. Maybe nothing. Maybe he isn't part of what's going on at the lab. I still think we gotta get out there."

"Well, we'll ditch this one and you can go play investigative reporter. In the meantime, I'm finding that nest," Dean reasserted, tucking the last of the tarp around the feet of the dead clerk.

Standing up, he grabbed the detached head and unceremoniously tossed it into the open end of the tarp. Sam sealed up the opposite side and between them they hoisted the body off the ground and carried it to the trunk of the Impala.

As Dean worked to put the corpse in the old car, Sam returned to the Kwik Mart. He rummaged behind the counter, looking about until he came across the security video camera. Dean returned just as his brother was pulling a tape from the recording machine. He watched as Sam pulled the brown cellulose from the cassette, tearing it apart and tossing it into the nearby trashcan.

"We have enough problems don't we?" he simply said as he finished, walking past Dean and out toward the car.

Dean watched him leave the building, sighing audibly. "Yeah, Sammy, we do," he mumbled, trailing after his brother.

As he made his way outside, Sam was just about to climb into the passenger's side of the black Chevy. Dean walked over to the trunk, about to slam it closed, when a scream pierced the stillness of the night. Both hunters immediately looked up, scanning the immediate area, senses at full alert.

Dean saw them first; a slim brunette, loose hair trailing behind her as she ran, a smaller brunette version of her clinging to a doll, in tow. The woman looked over her shoulder and screamed once more, stumbling as she tried to force more speed out of her weary legs. The little girl at her side whimpered, her hand clutching desperately at her mother's as she struggled to keep up.

The brothers rushed forward simultaneously, not sure of the problem but a sense of urgency spurring them on. As they cleared the corner of the Kwik Mart, Dean saw what harried the mother and daughter. It was the vampire from the bar, Mr. BadAss himself, fangs bared in full vamp glory.

"Sam, it's the one from the bar," Dean shouted out a warning.

"You sure?"

"No, I'm just making it up as I go along," the older sibling snapped back as he continued his dead run.

Sam reached the young woman first, taking her by the arm and drawing her to him. She didn't resist, but rather clutched at his biceps desperately; clinging to him much in the same way the small child was clinging to her. Dean skidded to a halt immediately behind his brother, placing himself between the group and the on-coming vampire.

"We can't fight him out in the open Sam. Not with the woman and kid. Get 'em inside," Dean shouted over his shoulder.

Sam didn't hesitate, he simply went into action, lifting the little girl into his arms while taking the young woman's hand and pulling her toward the entrance to the Kwik Mart. He was vaguely aware of Dean still standing rock solid and defiant on the sidewalk leading down Main Street. Once Sam had the two inside the store, he leaned back out the door to wait for his brother. In the short distance, he could see the huge vampire closing in on his brother, but still, Dean hadn't budged.

"Dean! Come on!" Sam yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Be right there honey," Dean answered raising a tire iron with one hand as he waved off Sam with the other.

As the bloodsucker charged in, Dean never wavered. Pulling the black rod back like a baseball bat, Dean waited till the vampire was nearly on top of him before he swung for the thing's head with all his might. The tire iron connected with the vamp's head right along its left jaw, spinning the creature's head around, its body obligated to follow. Dean never let up, moving in as he continued to pummel the fanged beast, delivering blows to its head and body one after another until he had the thing down on the ground. He knew he couldn't kill it, especially after the abuse he'd seen it take back at the bar. All he hoped to do was slow it down long enough to get the woman and little girl to safety. Briefly satisfied, Dean stopped his barrage, glancing down at the monster at his feet. He struck once more with the iron before trotting quickly back to join Sam at the convenience store.

Sam was waiting for him, door held open as he approached. Once inside, the younger hunter let loose with an exasperated tirade.

"What the hell were you doin', Dean?" Sam demanded. "Are you nuts? Going after a vampire with a tire iron. You got a death wish or something?"

Dean merely shrugged, breathless from the exertion. "Wasn't my plan, I'd rather have had the machete. But we dumped dead clerk dude on top of the weapons in the truck, so the tire iron was the only thing I could grab quick."

Sam stepped back, his outburst diffused and replaced by a certain amount of wry humor. Leave it to Dean to improvise. He looked back over to the brunette and little girl huddled in the far corner near the coolers. Neither had said a word since he thrust them inside the building. Leaving Dean to watch the entrance, Sam walked over to the woman.

Approaching her, he stooped down slowly, offering his hand out. "I'm Sam. That's my brother Dean. Are you both okay?" he asked.

The woman looked up, her blue eyes still wide with fright. She pulled the little girl closer to her, arms hugging the child tight to her body. She met Sam's eyes, staring at him for a long moment, and then looking at his hand as though she'd never seen one before in her life. Only after she seemed absolutely sure that he meant her no harm did she reach out her own hand to grasp his.

"Sandra, Sandra Keller. This is my daughter, Beth," she whispered meekly.

Sam took her hand gently, squeezing it, hoping to convey some sort of hope in that gesture. When he went to release it, she held on, refusing to let go, her eyes searching Sam's for reassurance. He was about to pat her on the shoulder, to say something encouraging, to offer her some word of hope when Dean's voice boomed through the quiet of the little store.

"Sam! It's coming!" his brother warned.

Sandra tensed and the little girl tucked even further between her mother and the wall. Sam rose, but before he even managed a step toward Dean, the vampire smashed through the doors to the Kwik Mart.

Shards of glass flew in every direction, driving Dean back and away from the entrance. He raised the crowbar in defense, but the vampire pushed forward undaunted.

"What are you going to do with that?" the sharp fanged behemoth asked. "You can't kill me with it."

“No, but I’ll knock out every one of your friggin’ teeth first. You’re gonna look pretty funny trying to suck blood without any damn fangs,” Dean threatened.

The vampire lunged at the hunter, tackling him at his knees and taking Dean down to the ground. Sam joined into the fray, grabbing a nearby fire extinguisher and bringing it down across the creature’s head. It barely fazed the vampire, only drawing its attention away from its attack on Dean and redirecting it towards Sam.

Easily grabbing the extinguisher away from the younger brother, the vampire tossed the useless pseudo-weapon casually away then grabbed Sam by the fabric of his shirt. Behind him, both Sandra and her daughter screamed as they watched their tall rescuer get lifted off the floor and tossed effortlessly into a nearby rack of potato chips.

Before Sam could recover the vampire was on him once more, pulling him up roughly by the throat and driving him head-first into the bottom of the counter. The young hunter collapsed to the floor in a daze, his vision doubled, his limbs weak and rubbery. He glanced around looking for Dean, not quite understanding why his brother hadn’t come to his rescue. Was Dean hurt? Had he somehow missed seeing the vampire injuring his older brother?

Sam tried to focus on the immediate area surrounding him, but his blurred vision barely allowed him to make out the hand in front of his face, much less anything else. Distantly, he heard the soft whimpers of Beth Keller and he knew that no matter what had happened to his brother, it was up to him to protect the young woman and her daughter now.

Using the counter to pull himself back to his feet, Sam rose and turned to face the huge fanged creature. Snarling, it stood just a couple feet in front of him, placing itself halfway between Sam and the Kellers.

“Come on you pathetic human! As soon as I finish you, I’m gonna feed on that little girl. Children always have the tastiest blood!” it taunted.

Sam winced as Sandra shrieked “No!” in horror, tucking the child protectively behind her. The youngest Winchester dove for the vampire, driving his shoulder into what he hoped was the beast’s soft belly. It absorbed the attack with nearly no effect, catching Sam’s shoulders and slamming his head down hard onto an upcoming knee. Not allowing the hunter to drop to the floor, the vampire was determined to finish Sam right then and there. Pulling Sam up by his hair, he held him at eye level.

“Goodbye!” it goaded him, fanged mouth bending forward towards Sam’s throat.

Disoriented, Sam couldn’t coordinate his muscles to fight back or break the creature’s hold. Dimly, his mind once again wondered what had happened to Dean. Maybe his brother had gone down in the fight. Maybe he was about to himself. Wasn’t that just their damn luck? Survive all sorts of really dangerous, demonic crap, just to get their asses kicked by some souped-up bloodsucker.

He thrashed out one final time against the vampire’s hold on his head and neck, but to no avail. As the fangs skimmed his carotid, Sam squeezed his eyes tightly closed.

Instead of the painful puncture at his neck, his head was suddenly jerked, and then let go altogether as something warm splashed across the side of the face. Sam’s eyes flew open just in time to watch the vampire’s face display a momentary look of shock before its head teetered back and forth and then toppled to the floor. He watched with a strange fascination roll across the floor until it came to a halt against the black leather of his brother’s boots.

Sam looked up from the boots to the rest of the body attached to them. Dean smiled back at him, machete still raised triumphantly in his hand.

“Where the hell have you been?” Sam demanded. “I was getting my ass handed to me in here and you decide to take a coffee break?”

“Gee, you’re welcome, Frances. Sorry, but I forgot where I put the machete,” Dean explained. “Took me a second or two to find it.”

Sam groaned, sometimes there was just no escaping his brother's strange sort of logic on the world. He turned away from Dean, focusing again on the young woman and child over in the corner. They hadn't moved at all during the battle, if anything managing to wedge themselves even further into the space between the wall and the cooler. Kneeling down to them, he offered his hand once more to Sandra to help her to her feet.

"Its okay now," he said softly. "It's dead."

The young woman slowly drew near the mutilated vampire, warily eyeing it as if it might suddenly spring back to life. She stood over it for a prolonged minute in silence before a hitched breath broke her strange reverie.

"It killed my husband. I saw it biting him. I couldn't believe it! Like some horror movie, almost surreal. I ran to the sheriff's office. But... but he was dead too, his throat ripped out," she stammered out rapidly.

Sam listened to her, encouraging her to talk, absorbing the information in between the emotion and shock.

Sam looked from her down to Dean. His brother was kneeling by the vampire, turning over the creature's arm to reveal the same strange trademark-looking tattoo as the one on the arm of the vampire from the motel room. He raised the vampire's arm up to show Sam, his eyebrows cocked up, a look of concern on his face. He dropped the lifeless limb back down and rose to whisper into his brother's ear.

"I don't like this Sam. Not one bit. We got vamps turning people right and left by the sounds of things. We got some with this mark, others that don't. This whole town might have been turned for all we know."

"I still think the answers are out at that lab, Dean," Sam insisted.

Dean nodded. "I'm not arguing that, but we can't leave these people to fend for themselves. We need to round up as many of the folks that are still, well... human, and keep them safe," he insisted. "Besides, if they have established a nest already, we're gonna have to destroy it, Sam."

Sam agreed reluctantly. He was less than pleased to split up, knowing that every time they did, things just had a habit of going south. Still, he was certain that despite Dean's insistence on finding and destroying the nest that the real nexus of the problem originated at Bastian Laboratories.

Dean headed for the now shattered door to the convenience store, stepping through the open frame. Sam followed behind him, aware that Sandra and her daughter were immediately behind him, trailing their new-found protectors. Dean stepped up to the trunk of the Impala, lifting the lid and pulling out the tarp-covered body of the clerk. He unceremoniously dumped the corpse on the ground, emotionless as he turned back to the hidden compartment beneath.

Sorting through the contents, he drew out a crossbow and another equally looking sharp-bladed machete. Handing the machete and the crossbow to Sam, Dean then pulled out a quarrel of bolts. Closing the trunk, Dean took the crossbow back off his brother, but left Sam with the long blade.

"I'm heading for the local mortuary. A little dead man's blood ought to help keep any bloodsuckers off our necks for a while," Dean suggested. "Here," he added, reaching into his pocket and tossing Sam a set of keys. "I snaked those out of Spike's pocket before we wrapped him up in the tarp," he added, toeing the dead clerk with his boot.

Sam glanced around the parking lot of the Kwik Mart. Besides the Impala the only other car was a sickening lime green Honda Civic parked over near the corner of the building. A grass-skirted Hawaiian figurine sat on the dash, waiting to hula just as soon as the first sharp turn or pothole would set her in motion. The bumper bore stickers that proudly proclaimed; "I break for Aliens" and much to Sam's chagrin, "Zeppelin Rules".

He looked back over his shoulder, not missing the broad grin on Dean's face. That his brother was enjoying this new form of punishment was not lost on Sam: somehow he knew that Dean was taking some sort of obscene pleasure in finding ways to torture him in retaliation for the perceived betrayal of Sam's leaving. Well, he wouldn't give his brother the satisfaction. Smiling back, he jingled the keys.

"I'll call you when I find something," Sam assured him, continuing over to the overgrown lime on wheels.

\* \* \* \*

Dean loaded Sandra and little Beth into the Impala, tempted in part to point the old Chevy back onto the highway and head out of Fangville, but knowing that he couldn't leave the town defenseless and wouldn't ever leave Sam behind. Instead, he pulled the car back into town and down Main Street toward the jail.

Parking in front, Sandra drew in a sharp gasp when she saw where he stopped the car. He knew she'd be reluctant, but right now, Dean couldn't think of a more defensible place.

"Stay here, leave the doors locked. I'm gonna go check it out. I'll be right back," he instructed.

Bounding from the car, Dean took the steps leading up to the door to the station two at a time. He opened the door to the jail quietly, listening intently for any signs of the nocturnal party crowd. The office showed every sign of a struggle: papers scattered, chairs overturned, desks pushed askew.

Most troubling was the large pool of blood on the floor, still glistening and wet, yet no sign of any bodies, the sheriff's or otherwise. Dean quickly canvassed the remainder of the building, but other than more disrupted housekeeping, there was no sign of life, human or vampire, which in itself was not entirely a good sign. Silently, the young hunter began to wonder just how many of the townsfolk of Mann's Choice were now sporting an extra drop-down set of fangs.

Dean returned to the Impala, inadvertently startling Sandra and a lightly dozing Beth, snuggled onto her mother's lap. The young woman pulled up the lock on the passenger's side door as Dean opened it. He slung the crossbow across his back, then reached in and gently lifted the sleeping child, hugging her closely to his chest.

"It's empty inside. Everyone's gone. We'll be safe in there. It's a fortress," he assured the brunette.

Sandra looked at him warily, but eased out of the car, following Dean up the stairs while fearfully looking about the surrounding darkness. Once inside, Dean laid the still sleeping little girl down on a nearby leather couch. He returned and bolted shut the main door and then checked all the other entrances to the building. When he returned he found Sandra sitting in a chair, her head buried in her hands, weeping softly.

Dean looked about the empty office nervously, running a sweating palm across his face. Dealing with crying women was generally not his forte. Where was Sammy when he needed him? Sam could say just the right thing, offer just the right consoling words. He knelt down beside the chair, placing a tentative hand on Sandra's knee. She lifted her head, wiping stubbornly at reddened eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

"It's gonna be alright. You and your daughter will be safe now," he attempted, knowing the words were weak and hoping that they sounded more believable than he actually felt.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she bemoaned. "You and your brother, you saved Elizabeth's and my life tonight. I don't know how... I can't ever thank you enough."

Dean was uncomfortable, never one for accepting thanks even though he frequently complained to Sam that they never received any appreciation or recognition for the things they did or the people they saved. He looked away from the woman, was prepared to actually leave altogether when she spoke once again.

"My husband, do you suppose he's dead? I mean, I know I saw that thing biting him, but I never really went back to check. Should I have checked? Is there any chance he could still be alive?" she asked, her eyes searching Dean's.

Dean forced himself to look back at her, a dozen different answers floating through his mind. *"Sure honey, he's alive and feeding... er I mean kicking."* *"No, Sandra, if you would've gone back and checked, then that vampire would've made a family meal deal out of the three of you."* *"Yeah sure, go back and check, whatever happened to 'til death do us part?"*

Shaking his head, Dean brushed aside all the inappropriate answers that teased at his tongue but thankfully for once managed to stay behind his lips. Instead, he merely shook his head, his silence conveying more than any words could. Sandra's head fell down once again as the tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She pushed Dean away from her when he attempted to console her. He took the hint and rose to walk away from the grieving woman.

Dean stood in the silent jailhouse, watching as the first rays of daybreak began to filter through the Venetian window blinds. If he was still naïve enough to believe Hollywood, sunrise would have been a welcome blessing, but events in Colorado had taught him differently. Vampires might not like sunlight, but they certainly weren't going to spontaneously combust if they were caught out in it. No, they still needed some way to protect themselves and standing here watching the sunrise wasn't going to help their situation.

The hunter looked back to Sandra; the woman had now managed to compose herself and was sitting on the end of the sofa quietly stroking the little girl's head. He looked out the nearest window and seeing that Main Street was still empty, decided to act.

"Sandra, I need to go out and get something. I won't be gone long, I promise," he assured her.

She stood up, a slight tremble in her hands, a visible panic in her face. "What'll I do, if... if one of those things comes here while you're gone?" she asked.

Dean grabbed the keys to a row of cells just beyond the open offices. "Look," he began, "if there are any problems, just grab Beth and lock yourself in one of the cells. Stay there till I get back."

He handed her the keys and smiled confidently, turning away before she had a chance to ask questions or worse yet, turn on the water-works. Dean headed for the door, unlocking the deadbolt and heading out into the burgeoning sunlight.

He spotted the funeral home two blocks down and briefly considered driving there. Considering the streets were empty, he chose to walk, figuring he could take a quick look into each building as he passed by and besides, there weren't any other cars on the streets either. As a matter of fact, his earlier reference to the town being right out of a Stephen King novel was looking to be dead on right.

"Friggin' Salem's Lot," he mumbled to himself as he started down the sidewalk.

He passed several storefronts, each silent and empty in the early morning hours. Even the local diner, which should have been opening and preparing for a breakfast crowd, was ominously still. Dean approached the mortuary, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end, warning him like a sixth sense.

Pulling the lock pick from the interior pocket of his jacket he quickly gained entry. Inside, there were more of the tell-tale bloodstain patches on the floor, but no bodies to match, making Dean worry even more about the possibility of an entire town full of "turned" vamps.

He made his way to the prep room, relieved when he found a body left behind on the cold metal table. His hand went immediately to the machete at his hip, cautious not to fall prey to another sneak attack, but a careful examination of the cadaver's throat revealed no puncture wounds at the neck or strange tattoos on the wrist.

As luck would have it, the dead man's body had apparently been embalmed before the mortician had met whatever fate had caused the large bloodstains on the

carpeting in the entryway. Dean easily located the container holding the discarded blood and as he had done so long ago in Colorado, he grabbed the jar and prepared to make his way back to the jail.

Once back outside, the sun having risen slightly more in the sky, Dean looked around the silent streets again. He couldn't help the feeling that he was being watched, wasn't sure if the eyes that he felt boring into him were human or inhuman. He pulled the cell from his jeans pocket, flipping it open and scrolling down to the Sam's stored number, seriously considering calling his brother and telling him that ...

"What? 'Sammy, come on back to town, 'cause I'm scared shitless to hunt alone without ya? Yeah, right! Get your shit together Winchester!" he chastised himself as he closed the phone and broke into a run back to the jail.

\* \* \* \*

### **Bastian Laboratories – Sunrise**

Sam pulled the lime green Honda into the parking lot just as the sun was breaking to the east. The three story building in front of him seemed empty, a few sporadic windows showing an occasional light likely left on by a careless worker from the day before. There weren't any other cars in the lot, at least not that Sam could see, and he could only assume that it was simply too early for any of the workers to arrive, although he was fairly certain a place this large likely had a security guard on duty.

Killing the engine, he struggled to pull his long legs from the tiny car and swore softly when he struck his knee on the steering wheel only to hit his head on the door frame a split second later. Cursing Dean helped take some of the bite out of the large bump he could feel already forming on the top of his head, but deep down, Sam laughed just slightly, remembering the threat he'd once voice to a nearly drowned Dean about trading the Impala in on a Honda. In retrospect, it was a good thing his brother had survived, since Sam wasn't sure his own body could have taken being crammed into the smaller car for any length of time, deathbed threat or not.

Sam slowly worked his way around the building, choosing to enter through a service entrance and avoid the more obvious main door. The metal double doors were locked and had a small keypad mounted on the right side door.

Surprisingly, it took Sam less than five minutes to manage the pass code and then pick the door lock to gain entrance. He was strangely proud of himself, but then obscurely curious if that particular talent had any useful purpose on a college application.

Once inside the facility, the first several rooms were mainly offices, non-descript in their appearance and unlocked, solidifying in Sam's mind that there was nothing of importance in any of them. Continuing down the corridor, he came upon a large lab with glass windows. From the hallway, he could see a long line of exam tables within the lab, each of them equipped with metal restraints.

Sam walked cautiously toward the lab, surprised when he found that the door was not only unlocked, but slightly ajar. Inside the lab, there was an almost sterile, hospital-like quality to the place and for a moment, Sam could even smell the disinfectant. Mayo stands beside each exam table bore a myriad of diagnostic tools and other medical instruments, leaving the room looking more like a surgical suite than a laboratory.

As he walked in further, Sam saw that not all of the exam beds were empty. The last in the long row still held a fairly large-looking man strapped into place and unmoving. Slowly and guardedly, Sam approached the still body. The man lying before him was huge, bigger than huge, gargantuan. Nearly six and a half feet tall and well over three hundred pounds, Sam knew the man on the table would easily dwarf him if he was alive, but it would seem that that the body on the table was just that, a lifeless body.

Still wary, Sam used the tip of the machete he'd brought with him to poke the massive brute in the side. When there was no response, he relaxed slightly and lowered the weapon letting it rest on the side of the table. Sam then turned over the manacled wrist, again, not shocked when it revealed the same corporate tattoo that the two other vampires in Mann's Choice had borne.

Laying the wrist back down, Sam reached up toward the thing's mouth. Just as he was about to lift up the creature's lips and peel back the gums to look for the additional set of fangs, the man's eyes flew open and it lunged for Sam, chained restraints rattling against the metal of the table.

Sam fell backwards startled, the fangs he'd been searching for missing his face by scant inches. The vampire hissed at him as it struggled against its fetters, shaking so hard that the entire exam table rocked with its movement and knocked the machete to the floor.

The hunter wasted no time in retrieving the weapon and with little remorse, Sam brought the sharp blade down across the vampire's neck severing it with one blow. Out of breath from more than exertion, Sam looked at the massive body of the dead vampire. Dean had been right, these vamps had been bigger, stronger, somehow more souped up, and now Sam knew why.

Someone was playing God or worse yet, mad scientist, and was creating some sort of jacked-up vampires, as if regular vampires weren't bad enough as it was. Heading for one of the nearby computers, Sam knew he needed information. This was way more than just a nest of vampires cutting loose on a small community, this was a plague being launched on a town that had no way to defend itself.

Sam worked feverishly on the computer, trying desperately to work past passwords and internal corporate memos to dig into the real crux of what was happening at Bastian. On the surface, the place had all the appearance of being a respectable pharmaceutical research facility, but underneath the corporate gibberish, something much more sinister was going on.

Sam was so intent on his research, he didn't see or hear the white-coated man enter the lab. Stealthily, the older man walked up behind him, closing in until he was only a hand's breadth away.

"Who the hell are you? What the hell are you doing in here?" The voice demanded so loudly that Sam nearly jumped out of his seat and across the desk. Instead he whirled around in the chair, holding the machete hidden behind his back.

"Uh, I'm an investigative reporter with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. We're doing a story on animal testing of medical products. Bastian Labs was mentioned as being on a PETA hit list," Sam fumbled out a lie.

"Bullshit! Is that the best that a hunter can come up with?" the older man shot back. "I know what you are, I can smell your kind from miles away."

Sam's grip tightened on the machete, suddenly worried that this man had so keenly identified him. Looking up, he spotted the man's name tag identifying him as one Dr. Karl Denhoff and remembered seeing that name appear on many of the internal documents. Deciding to play along for information, the young man confronted the scientist.

"Okay, so you know so much about me, then you know why I'm here and you also know that whatever you're doing here, we're gonna put a stop to."

The white-haired man laughed, shaking his head from side to side. "You have no idea what you're up against, hunter. For once, my kind will triumph over yours. You think you can drive us from the earth, well, no longer. You see, I've created a whole new breed of vampires. Ones that will be stronger, invincible!"

"Invincible?" Sam laughed. "You need to take a look around. I just killed one of your freaks over there and my brother killed two of them back in Mann's Choice"

The doctor looked briefly concerned, but readily regrouped, defiance returning to his weathered face. "It doesn't matter," he explained, "there's nothing you can do to stop what I've set in motion. Already, my special children have already begun turning



the townspeople. By tonight, there won't be a full-fledged human left in the place. By tomorrow, they'll be moving on to another larger community and like locusts they'll sweep across the countryside, creating more and more vampires until they're an unstoppable force. So, you see, we will rise to the top of the food chain again, right where we belong. I'm only here to destroy the evidence of what we've created."

"You know, my brother's back there in Mann's Choice right now and I gotta tell ya, I'll lay ten to one odds that by nightfall, he's gonna still be alive and kicking with a whole bunch of your Nosferatu wannabes lying in a pile around his feet," Sam threw back.

Denhof sneered at the young hunter as his fingers typed frantically on the nearby keyboard. When he finished, all the monitors in the room suddenly blossomed to life, data flashing across the screens as the mainframe servers began to erase all record of Denhof's clandestine activity. The scientist turned back to Sam, the mocking smile still broad across his face.

"So, just one final question for you, hunter," he began. "Are you as good as your brother?"

As the final syllable of Denhof's question landed on Sam's ears, the ceiling above his head came crashing down with a thunderous sound. The scientist ducked away leaving Sam to take cover amid the cloying dust and debris just as two massive bodies dropped through the newly created hole in the tiles.

As the debris settled and Sam coughed out the dust that threatened to choke him, he saw the two colossal vampires advance on him, tattoos in plain view, fangs bared.

\* \* \* \*

Dean dipped each arrow tip in the blood he'd retrieved, watching with a kind of strange reverence as the thick liquid adhered to each bolt. He'd only dealt with vampires once before, but after Mann's Choice, he held a new feeling of respect for the fanged creatures.

These vampires were stronger than any he'd fought out in Colorado, even if they couldn't all exactly be called smart. Stronger meant they were harder to fight, and maybe harder to destroy.

Dean plunged another bolt into the dead man's blood and could only wonder if this vampire "poison" would actually work against the creatures here in town. At best, it would knock the nocturnal feeders off their feet for a little while. At worst, it wouldn't harm them at all, leaving the Winchesters almost powerless to save the townsfolk.

"Wh...what are you doing?" Sandra's shaky voice made the hunter look up.

The mother was still sitting in a locked jail cell with her daughter – the place he'd found them both cowering upon his return from the mortuary. Both mother and child watched him now with expressions that said they feared him almost as much as the thing that had chased them both hours earlier.

Dean didn't blame them for being scared of him.

Scared, wary, suspicious – all traits that often kept the best hunters alive.

"It's dead man's blood," Dean offered, gesturing to the jar he'd brought back with him. "Vampires are kinda allergic to this juice." He picked up another arrow tip and slid it into the jar. "Hit one of those suckers with one of these and their ass is grass – at least, for a few hours."

"Vampires?" Sandra's tremulous voice evened out a little and she pulled her daughter close, placing a hand over Beth's ear to suggest she didn't want the girl hearing any more. "You...you don't expect us to believe in those things? I mean, there has to be another explanation-"

"Lady, I don't care if you believe me or not," Dean snapped a little, then regretted it instantly as tears began to well in Beth's eyes all over again.

It wasn't these people's faults they'd be exposed to some ancient, vicious evil. It wasn't even their fault they'd be brought up to believe that vampires weren't real. "I'm sorry," he offered by way of an apology. "It's just you have to understand what we're dealing with here is real."

"You expect me to just accept it? To accept that we have things like that walking around in our communities and don't know it?" Sandra huddled forward, about to tug her daughter up to leave the cell. "I'm not listening to this anymore. I have to go find my husband. He's alive, I feel it..."

Dean let the last bolt fall from his fingers as mother and child exited the protection of the jail cell and began heading for the door.

The thought occurred to him that the brunette had lost her mind. Maybe seeing her husband bitten had been too much, but then, she wasn't exactly acting like she was a few short of a six pack.

In fact, Sandra appeared the most lucid she'd been since their meeting. No, Sandra hadn't cracked, she'd hardened to what was going on, and now she was about to fight it head on.

Basically, it was going to be a nightmare to convince her to sit her ass back down – a nightmare he could do without right now.

"Sweetheart, you can stroll on out there onto the main street if you want to, but don't go thinking you're safe. This isn't friggin' *Blade*. Those suckers will tear your little girl's throat out right in front of you. Worse still, maybe they'll turn her – make her one of their nest - forever. Is that what you really want?" Dean watched as Sandra and Beth's eyes widened simultaneously, but he didn't care how blunt he sounded.

Sandra needed blunt. She needed to hear the no-frills-attached truth before she fell victim to the belief that there really wasn't anything supernatural out there in the universe.

"Beth *needs* her father. I need my husband. I won't just walk away when he might still be out there, hurt, bleeding..." Sandra reached out and let her hand touch the door handle. She hesitated, realizing that if she was wrong and the stranger was right, she may be walking into some high noon situation she couldn't win.

"Trust me." Dean shifted to block the brunette's path, placing a hand atop hers to stop her opening the door. "If your husband is out there, he's one of them now. What would you do when you found him and saw what he'd become? Would you want to join him, huh? Would you want lil' Beth to see him feed?"

Sandra swallowed, looking down at the child at her side. Beth was hugging her doll, rocking it as if it was the only thing she could latch onto in the insane world she'd suddenly been thrust into.

"Please," Sandra finally pleaded. "If those things are real...if you know how to fight them, *please* help me find my husband."

Dean bobbed his head slightly and then crouched down until he was eye-level with Beth. The little girl scrutinized him with renewed interest, neither fear nor recognition showing on her tear-stained features.

"Hey, Beth, I want you and your mom to go back over there." Dean turned and pointed to the cells, smiling assuredly even though he was telling a humongous white lie to both parent and offspring. *Gotta find the nest, not one turned vamp in the crowd of many.* "I want you two to stay here while I go look for your dad, okay?"

Beth's face brightened just a touch at the mention of her father, but she looked up for confirmation to Sandra before nodding.

"We'll wait here. Please just find him..."

Dean swaggered to the nearby Sheriff's desk and picked up one of the crossbows he'd brought from the Impala. Cocking the weapon, he slid in a blood-dipped bolt and then passed the bow to Sandra.

It looked somehow "off" in her grip, but she took it gratefully along with a handful of extra arrows.

“Anything gets in here shoot the sucker first, ask questions later.” Dean picked up Beth and carried her to the awaiting cell. Once inside, he lowered her down and then picked up the cot, placing it like a barricade around her. “Stay behind here, kiddo. No peeking,” he nodded to Sandra and then closed the cell door behind him as he exited.

Maybe the barricade was useless against the vampires. Hell, maybe even the metal bars of the cell were, but one thing they did provide was a mental barrier. It made Sandra and Beth feel safe, even if they really weren't.

It gave them hope.

Dean only wished he'd been given that kind of hope when he and Sam had been kids, instead of being shown the true horrors out there in the dark.

“Just stay in the cell,” He warned. “I'll be back as soon as I can.”

Dean plucked the second bow and its ammunition from their resting place and didn't look back. He didn't want to see Beth's face as she cowered behind the cot. He didn't want to look into those tiny, fear-filled eyes because it was too painful a reminder.

A reminder of a helpless baby's eyes as he lay in his arms while their mother burned.

\* \* \* \*

The sun had finally raised enough to shower Main Street with its full radiance when Dean stepped out onto the sidewalk.

On a normal day, the small town's epicenter would already have been a hive of activity; shoppers bustling to fill their trunks with foodstuffs, kids rushing to school before they got a slip for tardiness, hell, all the normality that Dean hated about real life.

Today, though, the street, the whole town was empty.

Spattered at random across the sidewalk were eerie, telltale smears of blood, and in some cases flaps of torn flesh and sinew that indicated a silent, unholy massacre had somehow taken place here.

Dean kneeled, crossbow held back against his shoulder as he examined more scarlet stains. Mann's Choice was under some kind of vampire siege the likes of which no hunter had ever seen before, and if he was honest, that small fact was freaking the hell out of him.

*Where's Sasquatch when you need his freaky ass?*

Dean moved on, casting wary glances as he passed various storefronts. While vampires – at least normal vampires - were not deathly adverse to sunlight, they were affected by it.

As long as he kept away from the shadows, the sun's rays would afford him some protection.

*Yeah, right, so why the hell does this suddenly feel like a scene from a bad ass Tarantino flick?*

The hunter envisioned being trapped in a bar with his brother and what seemed like a million vampires all chowing down, and he shuddered.

*George Clooney at least got some naked chick action in that movie. All I got so far is my ass tossed around as usual...*

Dean paused as he crossed the road, stopping outside a tiny store that had evidently been Mann's Choice's only grocery establishment.

The door hung open in a disturbing fashion that screamed of yet another bloody encounter. Slipping the crossbow from its elevated position, Dean swung it in an arc as he entered the building.

There was no real reason to go inside, no real basis to assume anything was going on here, and yet, Dean just felt it.

At the second aisle, Dean slowed and keeping one hand on the crossbow trigger, he reached out to the nearest shelf and snagged a huge bag of Peanut M & M's.

*Gotta get me some provisions*, he grinned at the thought, slipping the bag in his jacket pocket for later consumption.

Continuing on, he paused again as something clattered out back. It was an all-too-painful reminder of the Kwik Mart scenario.

Dean felt the hair on the nape of his neck rise and he stealthily approached the counter that led into the meat locker.

The noise repeated, like someone tapping out Morse code with a meat hook – except the sound was simply random.

Dean leveled the crossbow in front of him and shoved open the freezer door with a quick flick backwards of his elbow.

The aging metal swung easily, a short creak signaling it had eventually reached the limit of its hinges.

Dean ignored the sound, focusing on the swinging meat carcasses in front of him as he entered the cold room.

*Great, talk about deja frickin' vu. All I need now is Laura Mitchell and a few more stiffs and we got ourselves a party...*

The tapping began again and Dean instantly bore down on the sound, crossbow ready to fire. As he lunged through two sides of beef, he finally found the source of the noise.

Two teenagers were huddled in the far corner of the freezer, their features almost blue from prolonged exposure to the cold. One was shaking so hard, either from fear or the temperature, that his watch clattered randomly against a metal meat tray leaning on the wall.

"Please, mister!" The nearest teen held up a hand, yelling in fright as his eyes locked on the crossbow. "We're not...we're not..."

"Vampires?" Dean finished for the short, pudgy teen as he lowered his weapon slightly from an offensive position. When the kid nodded, he asked, "What happened here? How long you been hiding out like a pair of human popsicles?"

The bespectacled teen who still had the shakes hunched forward, whispering as if he might be heard by one of the bloodsucking creatures invading his town. "We were stocking the shelves last night. The n...night manager, we s...saw him killed!" Further babbling followed, but the words became so high pitched and incomprehensible Dean gave in.

"Dude, will you shut the hell up and let your buddy do the talking?" It wasn't that the hunter didn't care, or feel for the kids, but he needed intel, not ramblings that could get them all killed. He looked back to the pudgy teen. "Everybody else dead?"

The teen nodded, accepting a hand up when Dean offered it. "This huge freak began to tear up the store. Ripped our manager's throat right out until my friend Billy was sick. Man, it was friggin' drinking the poor guy's blood like it was a Dr. Pepper or something. I dragged Billy back here and we just hid out."

Dean nodded slowly, then gestured with the crossbow back out to the store and beyond. "You two had better come back to the Sheriff's office with me. We can use the cells for defense if all else fails. I figure Spike and his buddies will have a hard time chewing through steel."

The pudgy teen nodded, but didn't get a chance to make a move before his companion Billy pushed past him, diving out into the open store as if he had been suddenly possessed.

It was strange how different people reacted to fear, and it never ceased to amaze the experienced hunter just how wuss-assed some guys could be.

Dean shrugged. "Maybe the guy is desperate for a leak," he quipped.

Pudgy squirmed, embarrassed at his co-worker's behavior. He opened his mouth, about to make a smart comment of his own when an agonized scream filled the interior of the shop.

A male scream that could only have been made by Billy or a vampire, and Dean wasn't betting on the latter.

Crashing back out past the meat counter and into the middle aisle, Dean brought the crossbow in line with the sound of the yelp.

His senses weren't off one iota.

Standing at the end of the shop, a huge behemoth with fangs held the squirming clerk by his neck.

The vampire smiled at Dean's arrival, nodding to the hunter with some strange acknowledgement that he would be next on the menu. "Tender, young flesh first," it sneered, caressing the kid's neck with its fangs but not quite piercing the skin. "Then, you can be my main course..."

Dean rolled his neck until it clicked, his eyes never leaving the vampire. "Dude, I never do dinner on a first date." Flexing his forefinger, he pulled back on the crossbow's trigger without further snark.

The blood-tipped bolt hurtled forward, in a millisecond embedding its aluminum shaft deep in the vampire's chest.

The giant creature looked down, relaxing its grip on the teen enough for Billy to fall to the ground shocked, but the thing didn't collapse as Dean had expected.

Instead, it began to laugh a hollow, evil chortle that made the hunter's heart skip a beat. Without faltering further, the thing gripped at the shaft of metal and yanked it free from its body with such force Dean heard a sickening sucking sound as it exited the vampire's torso.

The vampire looked at the bolt bemusedly before tossing the blood-covered shaft to the ground. "Maybe you don't *do* dinner, little man." The creature bared its fangs. "But you sure as hell are going to *be* dinner..."

\* \* \* \*

## **Bastian Laboratories**

Sam wasn't sure why, but the moment his eyes landed on the vampires' tattoos, he became transfixed by them. These were man-made creatures - supernatural creatures borne of a test tube, somehow.

It wasn't right. It wasn't natural.

The lead vampire noted his fascination and looked down at the markings on its body with a look that bordered on pride.

It *knew* what it was, and still embraced its origins, baring its fangs at the hunter in a show of ultimate force.

Sam watched as the huge set of teeth dropped into position, their sudden presence galvanizing him into action. Without looking, he stretched out his arm, desperately feeling for the machete that might yet save his life.

The welcome feel of the handle slipped between his fingers and he grabbed it, stumbling onto his feet while trying to back away at the same time.

A thin white dust still filled the air from the ceiling caving in, and it tickled at his throat, making him want to cough, making him want to bark out some derogatory, Dean-style comment to his enemy.

Somehow, though, Sam just didn't have the snark in him in situations like this. Perhaps his will to live outweighed his desire to unbalance his foes with sarcastic witticisms, he just wasn't sure.

Sam spun the machete expertly in his hand, knowing the show of skill wouldn't deter his enemy, but somehow it comforted him while Dean was elsewhere.

The lead vampire watched the blade whirl over and over until it had made at least six revolutions. It was like the creature was watching Sam's timing - waiting for the most opportune moment when the hunter was least protected.

Sam didn't have long to wait.

The vampire vaulted over the desk that separated them, its huge left shoulder slamming into Sam's chest so hard he lost all balance.

Falling hard on his back, Sam struggled to hold off the rampaging bloodsucker that was attacking him, and only a swift lunge with the machete made the vampire pause and look down.

The machete protruded from its shoulder only a few inches, the remainder of the blade having exited the creature's back, but it didn't fall.

Sam scrambled backwards, managing to roll away from the vampire and jump to his feet. As he looked back, the vampire was already tugging the machete through its own flesh, the shiny metal surface reappearing from its body painted red.

In the background, an annoying klaxon began to blurt out, and Sam absently realized it reminded him all-too-much of some self-destruct alarm from a corny movie. He dared to turn enough to let his eyes search for Denhoff, and wasn't surprised when he saw the mad scientist-vamp hammering away at a keyboard.

Maybe the corny movie scenario wasn't so far off the mark after all.

Hearing a scuffle, Sam instantly spun back to face the vampires. If he couldn't escape them, an exploding lab would be the least of his worries.

"Time to die, hunter." The bleeding, but apparently very healthy vampire he'd stuck only minutes earlier advanced with its tag team partner, and Sam suddenly realized he had nowhere to go.

"Now why do I get the impression you don't like me?" Sam backed up until his spine hit something solid – the back of the lab wall.

The second vampire held a finger up mockingly, expressing fake deliberation. "Maybe because we don't," it laughed, using the moment to launch itself skywards towards its foe.

Sam could only look on in horror as the thing pounced into the air and landed back down gracefully only a hairsbreadth from his face.

Its massive left hand encircled his throat, but didn't squeeze, instead yanking him around until he was level with a huge glass window.

*Surely, it's Plexiglas?* Sam wasn't sure where the thought came from, or how it mattered. He was, however, blissfully aware only seconds later, of being dead wrong.

The vampire tossed him at the glass with its full strength, Sam's body hitting the large pane with such force it made his ears ring and his body scream. He had the briefest sensation of floating in a myriad of churning glass segments, and then he hit the adjacent wall with a crack that signaled he'd probably be suffering a concussion if he lived through the confrontation.

The second vampire moved in, taking up the fight from its brethren. It wasn't fair for one to take all the glory, after all. It stepped lithely over the broken shards of glass, its over-large frame no encumbrance.

Picking up Sam by his shirt collar, the creature examined its unconscious victim with a look that suggested an insane form of pleasure. As the hunter's head hung limp, it was tempting, oh so tempting to simply tear into his throat and be done with it. But no, dinner would need to be shared out equally.

It spun around to the nearest exam table and tossed Sam's flopping body down hard on the cold metal surface. The chill from the metal bit through Sam's jacket, making the hunter stir just enough to see something in his field of vision.

Something with sharp, elongated teeth were bearing down on him at alarming speed...

\* \* \* \*

Dean watched as the crossbow quarrel fell to the floor in agonizing slow motion. He was certain that the laws of gravity hadn't really changed for the short arrow, it just seemed that way as the vampire stood there defiantly mocking him, the dead man's blood apparently having no effect on the bloodsucker.

“Damn...” the dark-haired hunter muttered to himself, looking down at the useless weapon in his hands then back to the massive, fanged creature.

The vampire had let go of the pale-faced Billy, tossing the scared teen to the side as it advanced on Dean. It yanked down a row of shelving units as it walked past, sending dozens of cans collapsing to the floor and giving Dean a birds-eye view of its forearm and another of the Bastian tattoos.

“I’ve changed my mind,” the vampire began. “I think I’ll skip right to the main entrée.”

Dean knew he should have just turned tail, grabbed the two kids and ran like hell, especially knowing that this was not an ordinary vamp. But the “run-away” gene was sadly deficient in the Winchester DNA, replaced instead by an extra helping of defiance.

“What is it with you freaks? Do you sit around drinking blood thinking up these stupid taunts?” Dean asked, dropping the crossbow and moving forward to meet the creature.

The vampire growled and charged him, barreling into the hunter and driving him into the nearest display of cola. Towering over seven feet, the cases crashed down on top of Dean, bursting open and spraying the carbonated beverages in every direction.

Dean peeled himself out from under the mountain of cardboard and aluminum, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. He tried to push up from the floor as the vamp approached again, but his hand slipped on the slick linoleum and Dean slid back to his knees.

Before he had the chance to recover, he felt himself elevated from behind, and then launched face forward into another nearby shelving unit. Dean turned his body just before he struck the tall set of shelves, hitting them with his shoulder but managing to come down on his feet.

Despite his right arm being nearly numb from hitting the metal rack, Dean managed to pull the machete from the sheath at his hip just as the vampire closed in once again. The long blade had just barely cleared its holder when the vampire swung out its fist, catching Dean on his jaw and sending him sprawling across the waxy gloss of the grocery store floor.

He slammed into the base of a produce cooler, scattering Granny Smith apples like small tennis balls bouncing off in a multitude of directions. Rubbing his jaw and spitting out blood from where his teeth had cut into the inside of his cheek, Dean rebounded to his feet quickly, seeing the vampire rush back in, crushing apples as he closed the distance between them. The machete flashed in the relatively dim lighting of the store as Dean swung it double-handed above his head.

The blade cut through the air, whistling on its course towards the gigantic creature’s upper body. The impact registered in Dean’s hands as the edge buried into the vamp’s upper arm just below the shoulder and through the meatiest portion of the oversized bicep. He tried to pull the weapon free, prepared to swing again, but the edge had caught bone and was held firm.

That was the briefest moment when vampire and hunter’s eyes met, Dean noting only a second of shock in the creature’s face before the sadistic smile returned. With its free hand, the vampire casually tossed Dean aside and towards yet another rack of foodstuff before reaching up and yanking out the impaled blade and casually flinging the machete off into the distance with a metallic clatter.

Dean sat against the shelving, slightly dazed and more than exhausted. He knew he needed to move, get back up and fight, or at the very least, get up and move his ass out of the path of the freight train with teeth. But at the moment, as he sat among the disrupted remnants of Minute Rice and Kraft Mac and Cheese, a faint memory tickled at the back edge of his mind. He remembered a different place, a worse time, and his brother’s absolute massacre of a box of mac and cheese.

“Ah, Sammy, big brain, no common sense,” Dean mused, smiling to himself. “What the hell are you up to right now? I hope you’re doin’ a helluva lot better than me!”

Looking back up at the nearing vamp, he groaned audibly as huge hands roughly grabbed him by the neck and pulled him up from amid the mess. Suspended, feet dangling above the floor, Dean stared down into the creature’s wild eyes as it carried him a few feet toward the meat counter.

It drove his entire body onto the countertop like a side of beef ready for carving and Dean couldn’t help but recognize the irony. He spotted a large butcher knife over his shoulder and struggled to reach it, but the vampire saw it too and with a sneer, grabbed the young hunter’s arm and smashed it down onto the butcher block, trapping it while the other arm held Dean to the counter by his neck.

Completely overpowered and caught in a stranglehold, Dean could do nothing more than squirm like a small child against the unearthly strength of the bloodsucker. He kicked up once with his booted foot, catching the vamp in the groin, but not getting the expected result. Instead, the creature’s smile broadened, revealing the double row of pointed fangs.

“Dinner is served,” the vampire sneered, its head bending down closer to Dean’s throat.

Vision going hazy from the chokehold, Dean fought to stay conscious. His mind struggled to think of something sarcastic to snap back, one last cynical retort before his neck was ripped open and his blood was pouring out on the floor. Instead, a flash of metal caught his eye and he merely laughed a strangled sort of chuckle.

The vampire paused, fangs just skimming soft flesh, perplexed at the unusual reaction in the human beneath it. The look of confusion was instantly replaced by shock as the flash of metal disappeared into the creature’s own neck. The vampire staggered backwards, releasing Dean, its own hands scrambling for its throat and the machete buried there.

Dean gasped as air returned. He rolled off the counter to his feet, still holding onto the edge for support. Looking up, he spotted Pudgy standing behind the collapsed vampire looking triumphant.

“I got him, I got the bastard,” the teen shouted, his fist pumping into the air.

Dean staggered over to the prone form. “Not so fast, Van Helsing. Back away just a second,” he warned, cautiously approaching the vampire.

The teen obeyed without question, watching as Dean stooped down and tried to pull the buried blade from the thing’s neck. When it didn’t immediately release, he placed his booted foot on the vampire’s chest for leverage and using both hands, tugged the machete free.

The vampire’s eyes flew open and it rose up off the floor, its head wobbling precariously about its shoulders. Dean drew back and swung full force, completing the brutal decapitation and sending the creature’s head toppling end over end to land at Pudgy’s feet.

The teen paled as the head splattered against his white tennis shoes, but quickly recovered and reared back kicking the fanged cranium and sending it wobbling across the grocery floor like a soccer ball. It glided between two displays before thudding to a sloppy halt against a tower of stacked toilet paper.

“GOAL!” Pudgy exclaimed, his arms raised again as he jumped up and down.

Dean shook his head, trying not to laugh but admiring the kid on a certain level. From behind the cover of the meat locker door, Billy reappeared, still shaking and still looking like a deer caught in the headlights of a semi.

“Is it dead?” he asked timidly.

“Yeah, even vampires don’t get back up when their heads are lying twenty feet away from the rest of their body,” Dean answered flippantly.

“Dude, did you see that?” Pudgy asked. “I killed that thing with the machete. Well, sort of, I mean he kinda finished it off, but I put the bitch down.”

Dean looked over at the young man again, eyebrows raised. "Yeah, exactly how did you know to do that anyway? I mean, lopping off its head?"

"Dude, Romero? Corman? Craven? It might be the sticks, but we do have cable TV. Besides, I figured if you were going after that thing with the machete, then you must have had a plan," the heavyset teen answered.

"Yeah, well here's my plan. We need to get the hell out of here before any more of these freaks of nature come looking to make a meal out of us," Dean stated. "Unless of course you plan on staying here and playing Seth Gecko the rest of the day."

Billy immediately rushed to Dean's side, the scrawny teen nearly adhering himself to the hunter for fear of being left behind. Pudgy, on the other hand, darted back toward the meat locker causing Dean to roll his eyes in frustration.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted out to the boy. Just as quickly, the would-be junior hunter returned, proudly brandishing a large cleaver. "And what the hell do you think you're gonna do with that?" Dean asked.

Pudgy smiled broadly, a near sinister glint to his otherwise stark blue eyes. "I'm gonna take the friggin' head off of anything with fangs," he steadfastly replied.

Dean snorted, but it quickly turned into a generous grin. He was beginning to like this kid. Now if he could just keep him alive and preferably "unbitten" long enough for him and Sam to get to the bottom of whatever was going on in Mann's Choice.

Glancing at his watch, Dean wondered once again what Sam had found at the lab. His brother hadn't been gone all that long, but still, considering all the strangeness going on in the town, yet another super-vamp, Dean was more that just a bit concerned. He pulled the cell phone from his pocket, considered dialing his brother, but looking over at the zealous Pudgy and the terrified Billy, he tucked it back away.

"Okay, we need to head back to the jail. There's a woman and her daughter over there. The building is about as secure as any around. We'll hold out there and wait for my brother," he directed.

Heading out of the destroyed grocery store, Dean led the two boys back down the deserted sidewalk and the several blocks toward the jail. Neither young man spoke, although to his credit, Pudgy kept a careful watch in several directions as they made their hasty retreat to the makeshift sanctuary.

Once the jail was in sight, Billy all but sprinted the last hundred yards, clearing the steps to the front door before Dean had even crossed the last intersection. He thought about yelling out to the young man to wait, but then considered there was no point in advertising their position to any listening ears that might be attached to a sharp set of fangs.

Waiting for Pudgy to bring up the rear, Dean held his position at the bottom of the stairs. Once both boys were safely inside the main building, Dean looked around the empty main street area again. Still as eerily quiet as it had been since the night before, he backed his way up the steps and toed the door open.

No matter what, he still had that feeling as though he was being watched. The hair on the nape of his neck was still on end, the voice in the back of his head was still whispering intensely in his ear to just load up the four survivors and haul ass out of town.

Closing the door and resetting the locks, he shut out the odd feeling, shut out the voice and forced himself to mask the shiver that threatened to cascade over his entire body. Once he replaced the foreboding with a measure of his normal self-assurance and swagger, he turned to face the foursome.

Sandra and little Beth had come out of the cell and were listening as Pudgy recounted his exploits from the grocery store. Billy remained subdued and seated in a nearby chair, not even looking up.

Dean ignored them all and simply moved over to one of the desks, dropped down into a high-back leather chair, and propped his feet up onto the top of a blotter. He laid the recovered machete across his lap and leaned back, closing his eyes and

fervently hoping that Sandra wouldn't immediately come over and begin asking about her husband again. He was tired, literally sleepy at this point and a small part of him wondered if the week spent lying about in Connecticut, waiting on Sam to recuperate, had somehow made him just a fraction softer?

He continued to listen to Pudgy drone on excitedly about the events of the previous night, cringing slightly when the teen's descriptions became just a bit graphic for little Beth. Dean knew he should say something, knew he should get up and move around, knew he should at the very least call Sam and see what the hell his brother was up to. But in that brief moment, that last ebbs of adrenaline completely washed from his system and he could feel himself winding down.

Dean knew he hadn't really fallen asleep, but when the first pounding raps sounded on the door, he startled fully alert as though he had been out for hours. His feet dropped to the floor, the machete instantly back in his hand and poised to strike, Dean saw the panic in the eyes of the four others. He motioned them all quiet, needlessly, since even Pudgy had ceased his rampant chatter at the first knock on the door.

"Sandra, Beth, get back to one of the cells," Dean ordered, his voice low but forceful. He didn't have to look to know that the woman had obeyed his command, hearing the heavy clang of the cell door shutting.

The pounding on the main entrance became more intense, shaking even the frame of the heavy oak door. Dean glanced over his shoulder seeing Pudgy drawing up behind him, meat cleaver in hand. Beyond him, Billy remained frozen in place, staring in abject terror at the bulging door.

"Dude, take your friend and go and lock yourselves in one of the other cells. I don't think that door is gonna hold them much longer," he commanded.

"Billy can go, I'll stay and help you fight them," Pudgy declared.

"Not an option! Get your ass in there now or I'll damn well kick it myself. Besides, I'll be right behind you," Dean insisted as he drew up to the nearby window.

Peeking outside, he knew they were in a world of hurt. A half dozen townspeople stood outside the door to the jail and while Dean couldn't see their fangs, most were covered in dried blood. He knew that they were in a feeding frenzy, likely just changed and with no other non-vamps left in town, they had managed to sniff out the last remaining fresh blood supply.

"Ah, Sammy, where the hell are you?" Dean mumbled. "I could sure use your geeky ass here right now."

Dean fumbled for the phone, hoping by some miracle that if he reached his brother, Sam would be just around the corner, ready to burst back into town, machete swinging and sending vamp heads flying. Before he even managed to scroll down to hit the speed dial to Sam's cell, the hinges on the door gave way, allowing the vampires to fall through like a rushing tidal surge.

Dropping the phone to the floor, Dean rushed the oncoming melee, his own blade flying back and forth like a scythe cutting through a field of hay. He connected with the first few, putting them down quickly, but the onslaught seemed never-ending as more pushed through the breach.

Still blindly swinging the machete at whatever came near him, he then felt something slam into his back. He whirled around expecting to see a fanged attacker, but instead was face to face with Pudgy's ice blue eyes.

"You can kick my ass later if we survive this," the cocky teen snarked.

But before Dean could reply, a bloodcurdling scream filled the large office and both he and Pudgy swung around in time to see two vampires tearing at Billy's throat. The young man went down to the floor in a shower of blood as several of the other vampires descended on him like starving dogs.

Behind him he heard Sandra scream, Beth echoing her with a softer cry of "Daddy," and Dean knew the reality of what had happened to Sandra's husband had finally, albeit brutally, struck home.

All around him now, the vampires closed in on Dean and the teenager. Hampered by the close quarters, it became nearly impossible to even swing the long blade with any effect. Hands reached out and clawed at Dean's arms, threatening to drag him down. The machete was soon wrenched from his grasp and sent clattering across the floor.

He was vaguely aware of Pudgy's bulk disappearing from behind him, but there were simply too many of the creatures now for him to break and run. More hands reached out and grabbed hold of his arms, still others latched on to his neck and while he fought desperately to throw them all off, like some wild animal on the savanna, the vampires eventually dragged him down to the floor and swarmed over him.

There were so many bodies on top of his, hands tearing at his body, fangs searching for his throat, that the panic of claustrophobia nearly overwhelmed Dean. A cacophony of growls, vaguely human voices, and the soft whimper of a little girl filled his ears as his vision began to fade from the suffocating press of the horde atop him. Just as his eyes fluttered closed, his fight all but gone, he heard the faint chords of Led Zeppelin's *Black Dog* sound off on his phone.

\* \* \* \*

The shiny fangs seemed to swim in and out of focus in Sam's field of vision and the young hunter closed his eyes, bracing himself for the sensation of the elongated teeth tearing into his flesh.

Would the thing feed and then let its partner feast too, or would it simply tear him to shreds for the hell of it? He'd surely pissed it off enough, and then some.

Sam swallowed realizing it was probably the last gulp he would take, but then something changed.

A noise like a side of beef being slammed into a wall followed by several grunts made the hunter tiredly open his eyes again.

Amazingly, the vampire that had him pinned had somehow been tossed across the room and now lay headless in a heap. The second creature was in the grip of a blonde girl that had all the looks and figure of a "Bond babe."

Sam blinked.

Girls couldn't toss vampires like that, could they?

As he contemplated for a split second, the blonde raised her left hand and Sam realized she had somehow gotten a hold of his machete. With one quick, clean slice the vampire's head was almost surgically removed from his body and he slumped, body twitching like the one Dean had killed earlier.

The girl let the machete slip through her fingers as if part of her hated what she had done. It was a strange move, considering the vampires were on a hell bent rampage through Mann's Choice, but Sam brushed it off as nothing more than possibly a hatred of killing *anything*.

"Thanks." Sam rubbed at his face and could feel the bruising and swelling as he probed with his fingers. He probably looked like a matador that had been tossed by a bull one too many times.

The girl didn't answer at first, her expression changing as she crossed the room, taking in the mass of tiny cuts to his face where he'd been launched through the glass pane.

Reaching out a velvet soft hand she let her long, spidery fingers run across Sam's chin almost in apology. "I'm sorry you had to see this..."

"You know what's been going on here?" Sam's eyes watched as the blonde moved lithely across the lab, retrieving items to clean the cuts he'd sustained. "I mean, you don't seem too shocked?"

"I know," the girl answered wearily. "I was part of it. A big part." She began to swab at the worst of the cuts, making him wince as the antiseptic seeped into his

wounds. "My name is Adrianna. I was part of Denhoff's team. We were supposed to be working on a new drug to boost the immune system – at least, that was what Denhoff told our sponsors."

"But you knew different?" Sam prompted, wondering just how many humans had been taken in by the bloodsucking scientist.

"Yes, I knew. I had to know..." Adrianna looked away, bright eyes losing their spark momentarily, as if she held a secret she couldn't yet tell. "What we were doing was perverting nature. We were – well, Denhoff – was trying to create the perfect vampire. Maybe you don't know it, but there is more than one type of night creature..."

Sam nodded. He knew. Hell, he could write a book on it. *But why isn't she surprised about the existence of vampires? And how the hell did she take its head off in one swing?* "You weren't shocked by those things' existence?" He asked, brow furrowing as he considered what was happening and what he was being told.

Adrianna tossed back her hair and laughed. "I've seen Denhoff in his true vampire glory. It wasn't pretty. I've seen the things we created here. Nothing shocks me anymore."

Sam pulled away as she tried to dab more antiseptic on his wounds. Suddenly a few sore spots meant nothing when he looked at the bigger picture. They may have saved the world from Haris' demonic war, only for it to be taken over by a new breed right out of Bastian. "Just what *did* you make here?"

"Denhoff created the perfect vampire soldier by mixing bloodlines. So many different bloodlines. Upierzcyca, apierz, Moroi, Vampir..."

"Do you know how many of these things were created here?" Sam stood from the table, stretching his muscles to find more places that hurt than didn't. Flying through glass "Dean style" was definitely not his thing.

"There were twelve originally." Adrianna looked around the lab as if it disgusted her, even though it had once been called home. "Two never made it out of the labs, two I just took out-"

"And my brother killed two back in town," Sam interjected. "That means there are six more out there on the rampage. Who knows how many people they could have turned by now." *Dean...*

"There is a fail-safe." The blonde noticed the flashing on Denhoff's now discarded computer screen and it lured her to the keyboard. As she talked, she began tapping at the screen, attempting to shut down whatever the mad scientist had initiated. "I bio-engineered a virus Denhoff didn't know about. The Bastian vampires can't live outside the lab environment for more than seventy-two hours."

Sam leaned over the girl, but before he could get a glimpse of what she was working on the station shut down without warning, leaving a flashing Bastian logo whirling on the monitor. "Seventy-two hours and half the state could be infected-"

"And the virus only works on the vampires from Bastian, not the turned victims," Adrianna winced, a look of genuine apology crossing her face. "If it's any consolation, I don't think the vampires Denhoff engineered will have gone that far afield yet. They're stronger and their thirst is insatiable, but they're not all that intelligent. Denhoff still wanted to play head vamp. He wasn't out to engineer any competition."

"Denhoff wasn't as smart as he thought. I think we've already proved that."

Sam let his eyes linger on the devastation in the room. In his greed to make vampires the top of the food chain, Denhoff had unleashed a devastating creature on mankind.

Sam wasn't sure even he and Dean could win this time.

*Dean...*

Twisting around to face the exit, Sam shot Adrianna a panicked glance before fumbling in his pocket for his cell. As his fingers touched the casing he realized it was damaged, and he began to panic.

What if in the scuffle his phone had been rendered useless?

What if Dean needed him and couldn't get through?

Sam clasped the cell and yanked it from its hiding place so fast the blonde looked at him as if he'd gone insane.

Without explaining his reasons, Sam hit speed dial and watched to see if the phone would connect. There was service, and when the cell kicked into a dial tone he sighed audibly.

The dial tone didn't stop, however, not until Dean's voicemail kicked in with its usual message. That meant Dean was either busy, or...

Or...

"I have to go back in town and warn my brother. I can't fight these things alone, and someone has to stop them." Sam broke into a jog and was surprised when the girl began to follow at the exact same pace.

"You can't beat them," she warned, never breaking a sweat or losing her breath. "But maybe I can try and help."

Sam paused mid-step, torn between his brother's fate and taking a girl – albeit a kick-ass girl- back into the fray. "You need to wait here. Maybe you can cook up a virus to stop the turned townspeople. Anything that might help!"

"Denhoff already destroyed too much of the research. I checked. There's nothing I can do for you now, nothing except fight beside you till the end." Adrianna's face gave nothing away. It was abruptly like looking into the face of a hardened hunter – a hunter that had far more experience than any Winchester.

Still, Sam didn't give. "I can't..."

"You can't what? Take a girl along? Trust me, I'm not your average girl." The blonde picked up the machete from where she'd dropped it and wiped the blood from the blade with her fingertips. Once most of the congealing liquid was off, she rubbed the remainder away on the thigh of her jeans, her expression tight as if the motion was taking all of her self-control.

Sam looked at the smeared blood, wondering what it had really taken for the girl to control herself that way – to push away her fear and replace it with enough daring to return to town and fight beside him to the end.

Was it control? Or maybe guilt at what she had helped to create.

"Alright," he submitted. "If you can stand to travel in an overgrown lime then follow me..."

\* \* \* \*

He awoke with a vicious sneeze and the sensation of a stuffed-up head, the smell of fresh cut hay assailing his nostrils. Dean sneezed again, the movement tearing at his neck and shoulders and sending a wave of pain throughout his upper body.

"*Sneezing shouldn't hurt this bad,*" he thought, struggling with the confusion that blended seamlessly into the disorientation that accompanied the first waking moments following unconsciousness.

He tried to run an arm across the bottom of his nose, feeling the slight trickle there, but his right hand refused him. Coming more alert, Dean tried now to move his left hand, quickly realizing that it was as incapacitated as the other.

A third sneeze brought his head up, the side of his cheek brushing against his bicep. He followed the curve of his upper arm upward to where his wrists were tied together with a thick cord of rope. The rope was then looped around a large rafter and secured off to a support beam on his right.

Dangling several feet from the ground, he noticed that the floor beneath him was covered in hay scattered about. Empty stalls and various farm implements completed the motif. His mind quickly flashed back to a similar barn in Colorado and in an instant Dean knew where he was.

"Well, I guess I wanted to find the nest," he muttered aloud.

Hearing a soft groan to his left, Dean moved to find the source. Hanging in a similar fashion just next to him, Pudgy struggled awake. Just beyond him, Dean spotted Beth, the little girl dangling by her arms as well but still unconscious.

Looking about the dimly lit barn, Dean spotted a dozen more people hanging from the rafters. Off to one corner, strewn about in a pile of bloodstained hay lay several more unmoving bodies. Apparently this was the nest and buffet line for the recently turned vampires of Mann's Choice.

"Where are we?" The question pulled Dean's attention back around to the teen hanging beside him.

"Well it isn't Disneyland," he replied back, quickly regretting the sarcasm as he spotted the fear in the young boy's eyes.

"What are they gonna do to us?" Pudgy asked timidly. "Are they gonna turn us into vampires too?"

Dean remained ominously quiet, avoiding the question. Would it do any good to let the kid know that they were still alive and hanging like sides of beef for one purpose and one purpose only? The only thing encouraging at the present moment was the apparent lack of any active bloodsuckers in the vicinity. Recently sated from their attack on the jail, and likely the feeding on Billy and Sandra, Dean knew it was just a matter of time before the bloodlust struck again.

"We'll get out of here. I'll get us out of here somehow. Just hang on," he finally answered.

Dean tested the ropes that held his arms, twisting back and forth, feeling the skin abrade away but ignoring the pain even as he felt the wetness of blood begin to ooze down his arms. When the ropes wouldn't budge, he considered trying to reach the rafter, hoping that if he could somehow manage to pull himself up to the large timber, he might be able to work himself free.

Gaining momentum, he began to swing back and forth, slightly satisfied when he heard the hollow creak of the large wood joist. He didn't really think the huge beam would give, but if it cracked enough that his restraints could come loose or better still, if he could even manage to cut through the rope, then things might be looking up.

Using all of his bodyweight and ignoring the desperate ache in his shoulders and the now freely-flowing blood from his wrists, Dean swung up and tucked his body, waiting until the last second to jerk down hard against the rafter.

The dark beam groaned and creaked loudly but stubbornly refused to fracture. Exhausted, Dean hung limply, breathing heavily as he looked up to see if he had made any progress. Other than the now red-colored rope and the disturbance of dust and debris from atop the beam, he remained steadfastly bound.

Remembering the small knife tucked into the top of his boot, Dean considered another change in tactic. Maybe if there was a way to swing his legs all the way up to the rafter, he could get his fingers on the blade. Trying again, he got his lower body swinging once more.

Focused on his effort to free himself, Dean didn't immediately notice the movement of the vampires beyond him. It wasn't until he heard the screams of another hanging "snack" that he saw that some of the creatures had apparently awoken and decided on having a bite from the pantry.

He watched in frustrated horror as two of the vampires walked down along the line of hanging townsfolk, appraising each one like they were selecting lobsters from a tank. Each time, pulling down their choice and immediately setting about ferociously tearing into the victim's throat.

Dean stiffened as another vampire walked towards him, slowing briefly as it neared the young hunter, but then moving past. He was about to let out a breath when he heard Pudgy screech next to him and saw the young boy begin to kick and thrash about as he was lowered to the ground.

"You bastards," Dean screamed at the top of his lungs. "Why don't you come get me? Afraid I'll give you indigestion?"

Dean began to pull in desperation at the ropes, twisting his wrists back and forth, allowing the blood to act as a lubricant to help his hands slip free.

Below him, Pudgy was screaming as the vampire held the struggling teen to the ground. He looked up at Dean with wide eyes, begging and pleading both verbally and non-verbally.

Dean fought against the restraints harder, no longer cognizant of the excruciating pain or damage that was being done. He could barely feel the base of his right thumb pull free of the binding, could almost perceive the slight movement of the rope as the rest of his hand began to slide underneath it. He nearly had one hand free when he heard Pudgy's scream cut off into a gurgle and saw the vampire bury its face into the teenager's neck.

Dean's own yell echoed the young boy's: a mixture of anger, frustration and remorse. "I'm gonna rip off your friggin' head with my bare hands," he shouted down to the feasting creature.

At the height of the chaos, Beth chose that moment to wake. The little girl screamed loudly, drawing the attention of several of the vampires. Dean twisted his body around to face her, desperate to quiet the child before she ended up being next on the menu.

"Beth, Beth, look at me!" he ordered, trying to get her to focus on something other than the bloody massacre going on beneath them.

She slowly turned her gaze toward the hunter, tears pouring from her eyes, her entire body wracked with sobs.

"Mommy? Where's my mommy?" she begged.

"I don't know honey, I'm sure she's okay," Dean lied. "But, for right now, I need you to do something for me alright?"

"I saw my daddy," Beth whimpered. "He wasn't nice anymore. He grabbed Mommy and hurt her."

Inwardly Dean cringed, his anger fueled by what the little girl had been forced to witness. There were enough imaginary things in the world to frighten a small child, he hated it when someone as young as Beth was thrown headfirst into the harsh reality of the nightmarish things that truly existed.

"Beth, listen to me. I need you to be a real big girl and help me out now. I'm going to try to get down from here, but see, my brother and I sometimes have a contest to see which one of us can get out of being tied up faster."

"You mean like magicians do?" Beth asked.

*"I wish to hell I was a magician right about now!"* Dean thought to himself. "Yeah, sweetie, something like that. Do you think you could maybe just close your eyes and start counting? Count as high as you can and don't stop till I tell you to?"

"I can count to a hundred," she proudly announced.

"That'd be great!" Dean encouraged her. "I'm sure I'll be out of this before you get to a hundred, but if not - you just keep your eyes closed and start all over again. Okay?"

The small girl agreed and Dean could hear her whispered count begin. He watched her to be sure she kept her eyes closed, then immediately looked back down to the barn floor where the feeding was ongoing. He was about to begin working on the ropes once more when the door to the barn swung open casting bright light into the first few feet of the entry.

Briefly blinded by the sunlight, Dean's eyes readjusted as he spotted an older looking man step into the structure, flanked by two large vampires. Dean didn't need to see any tattoos to realize that the bodyguards were likely the "enhanced" version of the fanged creatures.

Like obedient children, the other vampires in the building ceased their activity and began to gather around the gray-haired man. He started speaking to them, his hands outstretched as they drew in nearer.

"My work has been successful. You all have been given the opportunity to reap the benefits of hundreds of years of cultivation, breeding and research. You have been given the chance to experience firsthand the ultimate power and strength that comes with being immortal," Denhoff began.

"This small town is merely the launch pad for much greater things to come my children. So feed and rest. Tomorrow we will begin to sweep out across the land and help return my bloodline to its rightful place among the denizens of this pathetic human world. Nothing will stand in our way."

Dean coughed loudly, purposely drawing the attention of the throng below him. "Dude, I bet you've just been dying to spout out that conquer the world crap. How long have you been practicing it in front of your bedroom mirror? 'Cause I gotta tell ya, as speeches go, it kinda left me a little blah."

Denhoff moved away from the assembled crowd, taking several steps towards the hunter's hanging form. "Your town is lost, you're friends and family have all either been turned or fed upon and yet you think your defiance will get you rewarded somehow?"

Dean smirked, "What can I say? There's just something about delusional, mad scientists bent on creating the perfect bloodsucking machine that brings out the best in me."

Denhoff drew closer, sizing Dean up, recognition flashing across his face.

"You're a hunter!" he exclaimed. "What a wonderful prize we've caught. Are you with the other one from the lab?"

Dean tried to hide his reaction but the vampire caught it nonetheless. "You are! Well, no matter. That one is long past being any threat. My boys at the lab made short work of him."

Furious, Dean twisted against the ropes feeling the last bit of skin scrape away from the back of his knuckles as his bloodied hand slid out of the coiled length. His left wrist still bound, his weight hung unmercifully all from one arm, the joint in his shoulder threatening to pop from the strain.

"Perhaps we should turn you? You'd be a welcome addition to the family," Denhoff considered.

"Gee, no thanks," Dean replied. "I just don't have the best dental insurance to handle all those fangs. But I'll tell you what, let me down and I promise to kick enough of your asses that you all might need false teeth. Or would that be false fangs?" he finished with a chuckle.

Denhoff grumbled, not appreciating the snark of the human before him. He motioned toward one of the massive vamps beside him. The creature pulled out a knife and slashed through the line where it was tied to the column.

Immediately slack, the rope unwound from the rafter and dropped Dean to the hay-covered floor. He didn't waste a second once he was free, driving up to his feet and bolting for the main door to the barn. Inwardly, Dean knew his chances were slim, but they were better than waiting to be pulled down and fed on. If there was any chance of getting Beth or any of the other surviving townsfolk out of this mess, then he needed to get out of the nest, find Sam and come back fully armed.

Find Sam? In the back of his mind, Denhoff's words tore at him. Dean refused to believe the crazed man that Sam had been taken down at the lab. Somehow, Dean just knew, refused to believe, that his brother was gone. Yet he knew the odds of Sam being able to go against one, much less two of the lab-created vampires were slim.

Nearly to the door, he felt something grab at the back of his shoulder and spin him around. He came face to face with one of the larger vamps, the thing stoic as it flashed its fangs with a hiss. Dean swung, burying his fist in the monster's nose, but as before, it had little effect.

He tried to kick away, struggling against the strong arms that were trying to push him down to the ground. Dean fought; throwing punches, lashing out with roundhouse kicks, connecting with some, missing with most.

He felt more hands reaching for him, once more tearing at his clothing and flesh. Just like back at the jail, the vampires swarmed him. From behind, something struck the back of his head and he folded, knees buckling as he dropped.

In a haze, he saw the second lab vamp draw in from his right, fangs glistening even in the dim light. With one on either side, they roughly grabbed his abused wrists, pulling his arms out and holding him on his knees.

Unable to move, Dean could only close his eyes and await the sharp pierce of the fangs that closed in on his throat.

\* \* \* \*

### **Back road heading into Mann's Choice**

Sam gripped the little car's wheel and wished for the hundredth time in twenty minutes that he was back in the Impala. The big old Chevy had taken many a verbal bashing from him over the years, but she was fast, and she was built like a tank.

Right now, the hunter felt like he was driving into a battlefield with nothing but a *Die Hard* style vest on – and when you were facing off against vampires that wasn't exactly a good thing – not even if you were Bruce Willis.

Sam thought about his comparison. If there was a John McClane in the family it had to be Dean, and right now he was *missing*. It wasn't that Sam thought Dean couldn't handle himself, but this was not their everyday kind of hunt. Not one vampire, but possibly a town full by now.

He dared to take his eyes from the road and look over at Adrianna. She'd barely said a word since they'd left Bastian and he was worried she was finally running out of adrenalin. Taking a girl who might freak on him into a town full of bloodsuckers might not be such a great idea, and he considered pulling over.

"There's no need-" Adrianna placed a hand over Sam's as if she'd read his mind. "You're thinking about dropping me off somewhere, aren't you?"

Sam flinched. Damn, this girl was good. He attempted a lie, anyway. "No...I..." He turned back to the road. It was a much safer place to have his eyes for fear they might betray him again. "So," he deflected. "How did you come to work at Bastian? You don't strike me as the kind of person who does anything they don't want, and I don't really think you wanted that mess back there."

Adrianna's glistening eyes followed Sam's thumb as he jerked it back towards the labs. "I really...I really didn't have a choice."

"Everybody has a choice." Sam shook his head. It was funny, but some people justified the things they did every day because of money, or career prospects, or like Denhoff, just pure damn greed. Why couldn't people just do things for the right reason? "There must have been other jobs you were qualified for?" His voice raised an octave. "Don't tell me Bastian twisted your arm behind your back, because I just don't buy it!"

The blonde looked away, her voice lowering until Sam could barely hear what she said next.

"I really had no choice. You wouldn't understand. Can't understand..."

Sam wanted to stop the car and tell the girl how wrong she was, but he couldn't. Dean needed him. "I don't buy that," he ground out instead. "You always have choices. Every day we make decisions and we don't know what the outcome will be, but in the end it all comes down to what you choose. What or who *you* decide to be..."

Adrianna smiled, and for the briefest moment Sam felt sure he heard her huff lightly under her breath. "You really think so, Sam? You really believe you can change what you were meant to be? *Born to be?*"

Sam winced. It wasn't what he'd expected to hear from such a pretty girl – even if she had had her eyes opened to just how cruel the world could be – hell, even played a part in it.

*You were born to be a hunter, Sammy. It's what we do...*

Dean's voice began to bounce around in his skull and no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on his driving, he couldn't stop thinking about his brother – about his life, and the life he might have had if things had happened differently.

*I can be something else. I had a life once away from the hunt, didn't I?*

Jess's face flashed before him like a deer in the road, and Sam had to blink to push away the momentary illusion. He rubbed at his already tired eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

This wasn't fair. None of it was.

*If Jess had lived. If Dean had never come for me at Stanford.*

*If*, it always came back down to that inescapable little word.

"You might want to pull over here." Adrianna's eyes sparked with a fleck of amusement and Sam blinked again, realizing the Honda had just entered the tiny town of Mann's Choice without him even knowing it. He'd been on autopilot thinking about his own sorry life instead of concentrating on the hunt – on Dean.

"There's not a soul anywhere..." Sam tapped the tiny car's screeching brakes and surveyed the buildings surrounding him.

The sun was setting on the horizon, a bizarre red hue enshrouding the town with its dusk radiance.

Nothing moved.

Maybe nothing *lived*.

"Kinda brings a whole new meaning to dead zone, huh?" Adrianna moved to push open the green lime's rusting passenger door, but Sam stopped her, placing one of his huge palms on her forearm.

"Wait, it's not safe out there. Not even the way you fight."

The blonde moved to shrug him off, then paused, seeing the sincerity in the hunter's eyes.

He actually cared.

"I need to call my brother again," Sam explained. "We work better together." As he spoke, he slipped his cell from his pocket and tapped the screen. After a short wait, Dean's voicemail echoed back out of the speaker.

"He's probably already dead or turned, you know that?" Adrianna watched the pain on Sam's face, but couldn't lie. She had helped create the monsters that now roamed the streets. She knew them. She knew their capabilities.

"No," Sam countered with total conviction. "He's not dead. I just have to find him." He stuffed the PDA back into his pocket, eyes warily watching as the sun sank further beyond the rooftops, dipping Mann's Choice into an unhealthy gloom.

Adrianna shrugged. It was easy to believe what you wanted, and if Sam held on to hope, she wasn't going to bother trying to convince him otherwise. Instead, she reached over and reacquainted herself with the bloody machete she'd wielded earlier.

Sam watched as she handled the blade a moment and then exited the car as lithely as a cat. When he didn't automatically follow, she turned, leaning down to the window. "Aren't you supposed to be out here fighting or protecting my butt, not sitting on your ass inside that bucket?"

"Head for the local jail. If Dean is anywhere, that's where he'll be."

Sam groaned as he struggled out of the car, his knees catching on the steering wheel at least twice as he tried to maneuver out of the confined space. If Dean hadn't been missing, several expletives involving his brother would have ensued. As it was,

he grabbed the machete back from the girl and began to jog down the main street, taking the left sidewalk towards the Sheriff's office.

When the rear end of the Impala came into view he slowed, unsure if the car's presence was a good sign or not considering Dean wasn't answering his phone.

"Your brother's wheels?" Adrianna queried, letting a hand caress the black bodywork as they passed the classic. "He has good taste. I even like the color..."

"Don't tell him, he'll be your friend for life." Sam slipped a hand up to the main glass doors, not missing the fact that two of the Plexiglas panes had been obliterated.

Something bad had gone down here.

Sam pushed, letting the metal slide inwards as he cautiously entered the building, machete held close ready to strike.

"I don't think your brother would consider me a friend, trust me-" The blonde noted the damaged door too, but shrugged it off. It was nothing she hadn't seen before back at Bastian.

Sam ignored her comment anyway, because he didn't even hear it. Fresh blood smeared the floor ahead, and as he moved closer he could see a body lying at an odd angle. Sam reflexively swallowed, erring on the side of caution as he slowed even further to approach the remains.

Even at this distance he knew it wasn't Dean, but that didn't matter. Beside the cadaver of what appeared to be a young teen, was his brother's cell and bloodied machete.

Dean had been here when this had happened, and if Dean had still been alive he wouldn't have let the kid die this way without putting up a fight.

Vampires didn't usually respond well to that particular reaction.

"Not your brother," Adrianna guessed, looking at Billy's body as if it was the most natural thing in the world to find. "It looks like they tore this one apart pretty quickly," she presumed, poking with a fingertip at the ragged remains of the kid's throat. "If your brother was here..."

"Don't," Sam snapped. "Just don't..."

The blonde eyed him, but didn't argue. She knew a feeding frenzy when she saw one. There would be more torn up corpses. More death within the building.

Adrianna pushed up from her low crouch and scrutinized the floor, following a further blood trail back into one of the cells. This time, the body was definitely that of a woman, but there was very little left of her face and neck to make any kind of identification.

"There's another one back here," she shouted, leaning over the bloody, pulp covered skull. "I think it's a woman."

Sam took in the second part of the sentence first. It felt unfair, cruel even, but he couldn't help but be relieved that his brother hadn't been a victim, even if it meant Sandra probably had.

Sandra.

The mother to a little girl who had now lost all her family.

*And if I lose Dean...*

Sam shuffled into the cell, machete dangling loosely at his side. Without even seeing a face, he knew the body belonged to Beth's mother. The clothes matched too perfectly for it to be anyone else.

"She had a daughter here. They were all with Dean."

Adrianna flicked her hair, her eyes becoming distant for a second as if she were in some kind of long distance mental conversation. Eventually, she looked back up at the tall hunter. "If they haven't been turned, there's only one other explanation..."

Sam nodded. He'd seen this before back in Colorado too. "Maybe Dean and the kid have been stored at the nest for later." He slammed back out through the cell area and past the smashed main doors onto the sidewalk.

Looking in either direction, Sam groaned. Mann's Choice would soon be in darkness, and that meant he and the girl were smack bang in the middle of a vampire playground.

Worse still, if he had any chance of saving Dean, he had to find the nest and somehow storm it. "Where the hell are you," he mouthed to himself angrily. "Where the hell would Denhoff set up his little headquarters?"

The hunter felt something brush his arm, and when he turned, Adrianna had joined him in the street. She was looking into the distance somewhere north of the town, the same strange look on her face as before.

Without giving any kind of reasoning, she pointed into the descending gloom. "They're that way..."

\* \* \* \*

Flat on his back, his arms still outstretched to the point he thought they might soon be ripped from their sockets, Dean could feel the revolting touch of warm air from the vampire as its mouth descended closer to his neck. He could hear Beth, no longer counting, calling out to him, her voice a shrill cry above the low rumble of the feeding taking place around him.

He wanted to be able to tell the little girl that everything was going to be okay, wishing that he could spare her one less nightmare to torment her young life. But then considering how things had turned out, Dean didn't think very many nightmares were likely to be in Beth's future.

*"Damn, Sammy. This is so messed up,"* he thought to himself, time slowing to an agonizing crawl as he felt the first prick at the skin on his neck. *"Killing demons, surviving poisoned bullets, and we get taken out by Dr. Vampenstein and his merry undead."*

Caught in the regret of losing his brother and failing the town, Dean waited for the pain that was soon to follow. When a second and then another went by and he didn't feel the vampire's fangs plunge any further into his neck, Dean opened his eyes.

Above him, the vampire that had just been hovering near his throat had now risen and was teetering over him. The massive creature frantically clawed at its face, its hands coming away saturated in thick gooey blood. More of the reddish fluid poured like a raging flood from its eyes, nose and mouth. As Dean watched, the vampire's clothing blossomed in crimson as it seemed the creature was hemorrhaging from every orifice in its body.

The other vampires in the place took little notice of their brethren's dilemma, still intent on their feeding. Beside him, Dean felt the second lab vamp's hold on his arm slacken as the bloodsucker mirrored the action of its brother, its face erupting in a shower of bloody gore.

Dean lay there a second longer, unsure of what was happening but recognizing that something somehow was taking the nest down. Denhoff charged back into the main area, anxiously snapping out orders as the other vampires began to move off warily.

The hunter struggled to his feet, determined to free Beth and as many of the others that he could during the confusion. As he reached the rope that held the suspended little girl, a loud crash accompanied by a barrage of flying pieces of barn door and debris made him fall flat to the floor.

He rose up slowly, coughing against the dust and shielding his eyes from the dying afternoon sun. A few feet beyond him the lime green Honda sat impaled in a mound of hay near one of the stalls.

Dean's heart pounded in his chest when he saw Sam, slightly bruised, but very much alive and apparently unbiten, climb out of the garish car. An agile-looking blonde followed him from out of the other side, and Dean couldn't help the slight grin that spread across his face.

"I'm getting my ass kicked and you're hooking up with hot lab assistants?" he yelled out to his brother, his voice not holding any amount of irritation.

Sam turned and saw Dean stagger up from the ground. His brother looked like hell, bruised and bloody and even from a few feet away, Sam could spot the faintest scratches at his brother's jugular.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't a picnic dude. Besides, I left you all safe and sound heading for the jail. What the hell happened? Are you slipping or something, you couldn't manage a whole town full of vampires all by yourself?" Sam casually threw back.

"Nah, dude! I was just saving some for you. Consider it a retirement present," Dean answered as he cut the rope holding Beth, deftly catching the little girl as she fell.

He scooted her over to a small cache in one of the stalls, tucking the little girl behind some tack and telling her to hide until he came back for her. Dean hurried back to Sam, seeing his brother firing a crossbow bolt into an on-coming Bastian vampire.

"The dead man's blood doesn't work, bro. The lab ones are immune to it or something," he warned.

Sam realized much the same as the creature yanked the bolt from its chest and continued advancing on him. The younger Winchester dropped the crossbow, reaching for the machete at his side. He was about to swing it for the vampire's head when it stalled and dropped to one knee, blood coursing from its mouth.

"It's the virus," Adrianna yelled out to Sam. "Its beginning to work on Denhof's brood."

"ADRIANNA!" Denhof's voice boomed above the melee. "You bitch, what have you done?"

"What I must," she shouted back, turning to rush the mad vampire.

Sam watched her as she disappeared after him into a darker section of the barn. He worried about the young woman, but considering how she'd handled herself with the larger of Denhof's creations, he was less reluctant to let her set after the older man.

He turned back to look for Dean, finding his brother rushing through the barn cutting down the remainder of Manns Choice's still-human population. As Dean popped around a large timber support, another of Denhof's Bastian vampires jumped out from behind a wall.

"Dean!" Sam shouted out to his brother as the creature tackled him to the ground.

Sam reached Dean's side just as the vampire drove the older sibling's head into the dirt. He heard Dean's muffled grunt of air and without pausing, Sam swung the machete with all his might, lopping off the thing's head in one thrust.

The vampire's body collapsed down onto Dean's back, its massive weight now heavily pressing the hunter into the barn floor. He struggled to roll the body off of him, managing to finally free himself and seeing Sam's hand reaching down to help him up.

Dean grabbed the proffered assistance, grimacing slightly when Sam's hand closed around his flayed wrist. Sam held his brother's hand a moment longer than necessary, unable to stop himself from assessing the damage to his brother's wrists.

"Dude, not now," Dean warned.

"You know, you really need to be more careful with your bondage fetish there Dean," Sam joked back. "Seriously, I... when we got to the jail and all that blood and ..."

Dean shook his head silencing Sam. "Let's don't go there okay? This wasn't nearly as close a call as New Jersey."

Sam smiled in return, handing Dean the machete. "Here, finish with the locals. I need to find Adrianna."

Dean took the blade and watched as Sam darted off in search of the blonde.

"Aw, Sammy. What am I gonna do without you?" he whispered after his brother.

\* \* \* \*

Sam found Adrianna in another section of the large barn. Her back to Sam, the blonde had Denholf pinned into a corner.

"Why Adrianna? Why would you do this to my work? You know what I was trying to do here," Denholf asked. "How could you betray everything you are?"

"It wasn't natural, Karl. What you were doing, what you did, it was all wrong. It was never what any of us were meant to be," Adrianna pleaded back.

"We're dying, Adrianna. All of us, all the bloodlines. Everything is slipping away. We're facing extinction,"

"You altered nature, you screwed with the balance of things. If we can't survive as a species, on our own as we had for centuries, then this isn't the way to fix things. Maybe our time is just over?" she rationalized.

"You've killed us all," Denholf whined, his fangs dropping into place as his body tensed.

"Not yet, but I soon will," Adrianna snarled back, charging toward the scientist.

Sam watched as the two vampires crashed into each other, shocked at Adrianna's appearance despite having heard her conversation. In some portion of his mind, it all made sense now, her strength, her knowledge about what was happening at Bastian, even her strange commentary on not being able to change what she was.

*"You really think so, Sam? You really believe you can change what you were meant to be? Born to be?"*

Her words haunted him as he watched her battle another of her kind. Here she was, fighting not for the survival of her kind, but rather for the principle of what she was at the very core of her being.

*"...saving people, hunting things, the family business..."* Dean's familiar mantra seeped into Sam's head.

He stood glued to the spot, a spectator to a supernatural Battle Royale. Within an instant, Adrianna had her arms wrapped around Denholf's neck. The blonde spun in a blur that Sam barely had a chance to register, her hands tearing at the older vampire's throat. With a primal scream, she ripped Denholf's head from his shoulders, stepping back as it fell to the ground.

Adrianna stood there over the dead vampire, looking down at him sadly. Behind her, Sam remained frozen, unsure whether to say something or not. He startled as Dean skidded up next to him, his brother wide-eyed as he took in the scene before him.

Adrianna turned to face the brothers, her body covered in a thick layer of gore from the decapitated vampire. She offered a weak smile towards Sam, but it quickly waned as she saw the look of shock on his face.

Dean moved in front of his brother as the blonde bloodsucker approached, the machete raised and prepared to swing.

"What the hell's going on, Sam?" he asked warily. "She's a friggin' vamp?"

Sam moved up closer, reaching out to place a gentle hand on his brother's arm and forcing him to lower the weapon.

"Yeah, she is. But she saved our asses Dean. Hell, I think she might have saved a lot more people beyond Mann's Choice," Sam answered quietly as Adrianna's face returned back to its fangless form.

She looked from Sam to Dean and back to the younger brother once again. Her eyes betrayed her, deep sadness seeping out of haunted blue orbs. She smiled weakly again, holding her hands outward non-threateningly.

"I guess I owe you an explanation!"

Dean looked to his brother and then to the girl in front of them. "Ya think?" He snarked. "Lady, you owe us way more than that." The hunter wavered, still unsure whether to lop off the blonde's head or not.

She was a vampire.

There really was no choice.

Adrianna sensed his pain, his logic, and some part of her agreed. "Our kind, my kind is dying. With each new decade our numbers dwindle. I understood Denhoff's motives...or at least, I thought I did."

"His idea went way beyond survival of the species, right?" Sam prompted, still shocked by the transformation he had seen in the girl.

Adrianna kept her distance, but nodded sadly. "Denhoff tricked some of the older bloodlines into helping him. He lied to us, used our blood, our DNA and mixed it to engineer a vampire that had the strongest traits of us all." She wiped the blood from her hands down her top, not caring about the garish smear it made. "I am *Upierzycya*. My kind originated in Poland. We are what you might consider the...thirstiest of all vampires..."

"Yeah, you're the freaky kind with the barbed tongue and weirder sleeping schedule than Lindsey Lohan. Why don't you show my brother what you're really made of?" Dean raised a brow, keeping his machete held out in front of him.

Adrianna smiled wanly as she looked at Sam. "Your brother is right." The blonde opened her mouth, letting both Winchesters see the forked edge of her tongue and huge drop down fangs that made Dracula look like a pussycat.

When Sam cringed and stepped back, she turned, ashamed of her heritage. "You have seen me as I truly am. As I told you before, it's something I cannot change. It is what I was born to be, Sam..."

Born to be

*Born to be...*

The mantra burned into Sam, eating at him because at some level he felt no better than Adrianna. He was different. He was an outcast simply by being a hunter. Most of all, he was a freak because of the strange abilities and visions he'd developed.

"If you feel the need to destroy me, I understand," Adrianna continued. "Because no matter how far I run or how hard I try to be something different, I can't."

"You saved us, that *has* to make a difference." Sam countered. "You saved hundreds, maybe the world by what you've done here."

"Yeah, but do you still drink blood? *Do* you?" Dean ignored his sibling's almost sympathetic approach, not understanding the amount of empathy Sam felt for a creature of the night.

"It is my bane," Adrianna acknowledged. "I have lived centuries with the curse. I have searched almost as long for a cure, but there is none. Only a purgatory I cannot escape...not alive, at any rate."

Sam flinched, fearing what the inflection in Adrianna's tone might mean. "You *want* us to kill you? To release you?"

"No, I would never ask that." The blonde moved closer, causing Dean to drop back into defensive mode. "In fact, let's just say my fate is already sealed. When I discovered the retrovirus that killed the lab vampires, I found I was able to adapt it to my kind's physiology." She glanced at her watch. "I'll be dead within a few hours."

"And we're supposed to trust your bloodsucking ass?" Dean wavered, his conscience fighting between his hidden compassion for the girl and his common sense that told him to kick ass first. "'Cause, lady, I'm right up there with Mulder when I say I trust no one, especially not some chick with fangs and a freakin' forked tongue."

"I trust you," Sam pulled down his brother's arm that held the machete, and when he felt very little resistance he knew that Dean had given in too.

Adrianna nodded, her way of showing thanks for their trust. "There are some things I should take care of back at the lab. I still have time..."

"Go," Dean's voice was stoic. "Just make sure there's nothing left for any more psycho bloodsuckers to make this work again. I'm kinda tired of having my jugular eyed up like its supper."

The blonde raised a brow and smiled faintly, but she didn't answer. Instead, she turned, dashing from the barn at far greater speed than any human could have mustered. In a flash, she had blurred into the night and was gone like some morphing vampire bat from the movies.

"Should we really have trusted that fang-fest, even if she was pretty hot?" Dean faced Sam, noting the deep sadness that had already seeped into his features. "I mean, she could have fed us any crap back there. I swear, we're getting soft. First that Erika chick and now this-"

"I trust her," Sam answered, audibly fazed by what had transpired. He moved away, back towards the carnage that made up the better part of his life.

Adrianna couldn't change what she was meant to be, and maybe neither could he. It was as set in stone as the sun rising each morning.

Sam was a hunter.

He couldn't escape his destiny.

And then there was Dean. Could he really have left his brother to go back to school? Could he have walked away from the only person that had ever given a damn?

"C'mon, Sammy, let's shag ass outta here. We've done all we can."

Sam nodded, but he wasn't so sure. Maybe they never could do enough. Maybe he never could after the things he'd seen.

## **Back at the Impala**

Light reflecting from the moon glinted off the Chevy, casting bizarre images across the paintwork like shadowy wraiths.

Dean never even gave the dancing silhouettes a second glance as he popped the trunk and rummaged inside. Crossbows were pretty useless against Denhoff's bunch, but they might work against the "turned" vampires. He still had a spare machete if it was needed too.

"You think we should track down the rest of the town vamps and show them our kind of hospitality? I know we killed the lab suckers, but, dude, there has to be a whole bunch of "turned" yokels out there just asking to be separated from their heads." The elder hunter half-heartedly cocked a brow towards his brother, expecting Sam to want to run from the hunt.

After all, they'd done their part. Hell, after New Jersey they would have done their fair share of killing evil if they'd never hunted again.

Sam deserved freedom – a life – and if Dean could give him that, he would, despite his own feelings on the subject.

Sam dipped his eyes, looking inside the Chevy's trunk rather than at his brother. This was it. This was what he was, just like Adrianna.

Just because Haris was gone, that wasn't going to change. To an extent the knowledge was both painful and liberating.

Sam turned away, letting his back face his brother as he looked down the main street of Mann's Choice.

A few locals that were still human had dared to come out into the open and were surveying the damage to their little haven. No doubt others still cowered in their basements, waiting to be rescued or die.

All of these people needed help.

Help the authorities wouldn't even know how to give.

"Hey, man, it's no big deal," Dean moved to Sam's side, the new, clean machete in his right hand. "I can always come back and clean this mess up once I get you out of here. There can't be that many freaks left to deal with."

The words were hard for Dean to say, but from Sam's reaction he had assumed his little brother had finally given up the hunt – finally succumbed to a life he thought

he never could have – a normal existence, two point four kids and maybe even a wife.

It wasn't wrong for Sam to want that. He'd earned it.

Sam didn't respond right away. He couldn't. Torn between his future, Adrianna's words, Dean's words, he was totally lost in the truth of his own destiny.

Eventually, he turned back to the Impala and grabbed their one remaining crossbow. It felt light in his grasp.

It felt *right*.

"Sammy, you don't have to do this. You can go to school...have a life..."

Sam shook his head, his shaggy mop of hair for once not making him look at all boyish. "No, Dean, I'm where I need to be. I'm where I *want* to be." Taking several spare bolts he slammed down the trunk and faced his brother with a small smile. Maybe the family business wasn't so bad after all.

"Dude, let's go hunting..."

The End