

Episode Four: Measure of a Man

By Thru Terry's Eyes & Tree

1995 Pine Barrens, N.J.

The first punch of pain struck her earlier in the afternoon, a hard fist to her abdomen that stole her breath away as she was washing the dishes. Fear and excitement strangely combined, she knew this was the beginning of the end, which in itself was a relief. Nine months of waiting and worrying, of cravings and nausea, and of carrying around a belly that was certainly not conducive to good posture, sleeping or even breathing was finally culminating this day.

Now, several hours later, Elaine McGregor lay on the living room sofa writhing in agony. The euphoria of labor and the promise of soon meeting her firstborn were now lost in the sheer pain that coursed through her body. The contractions tore through her in one huge wave after another, so rapid in fact that she barely had time to catch her breath before the next one threatened to drown her. That they had waited too long to leave for the hospital was an obvious fact. But more than the procrastination and imminent birth, a nagging fear chewed at Elaine's subconscious.

Stephan McGregor slammed the phone down for the third time in less than ten minutes. He also knew that they should have left for town long before his wife's water broke, but the damn Lamaze instructor had insisted that first babies always took their time and that there was no need to rush. What the hell had that old biddy known anyway? He was willing to bet that she hadn't had a baby since before the invention of electricity.

Elaine's scream stole his attention again and he rushed once more to her side. Her face was bathed in perspiration and her brows were scrunched up as she fought against the incredible pain that was emanating from inside her. Looking closer, Stephan now saw the large pool of blood beneath his wife that stained the floral print of the couch. Something was definitely wrong: Lamaze class never mentioned any of this. Another scream from Elaine interrupted her rhythmic panting as she sat forward, grabbing a handful of Stephan's shirt.

"Where are they," she managed before collapsing back against the couch.

Her husband flew to the living room window, pulling aside the curtain fervently seeking the familiar glow of flashing red lights that signaled the approach of the ambulance. When only the darkness of the night met his eyes, he strained to hopefully pick up the telltale sound of a siren. Grabbing the phone, he frantically dialed 911 once more.

"This is Stephan McGregor again. How much longer will it be? There's something wrong, the baby isn't coming and my wife is bleeding badly!"

Elaine tried to listen to the one-sided conversation, but between the knife-like contractions and the pounding of her own heart in her ears, she could only focus on the sudden fear that covered her husband's face. She watched as he came to her, dropping to his knees on the floor beside her, the phone still at his ear. She could vaguely make out a voice coming from the receiver as Stephan listened intently.

"Okay, I'm here. What do I do?" he asked anxiously. The voice responded.

Stephan followed the dispatcher's instructions, looking closely for any sign of the baby's head. A brief smile flashed across his pale face and he excitedly voiced an affirmative into the phone.

"Honey, he says to push. The baby's head is right there, but you gotta push!"

Elaine sucked in a deep breath and with more strength than she ever thought she could muster, she forced downward. Another scream, more panting and she tried again. And then again, repeating the process until her body was tingling from hyperventilation.

Stephan tried to look encouraging despite his feelings of helplessness and panic. He watched his wife with trepidation as first blood-matted hair and then a whole head finally appeared. Grabbing a nearby blanket, he held it there as Elaine pushed one final time and the baby was expelled.

Collapsing backward, exhaustion taking its toll, Elaine breathed more easily. Quickly regaining her composure, anxious to see her baby, she scooted upright, a broad smile covering her perspiration-soaked face. Short-lived, the smile rapidly faded, replaced by concern as she watched her husband. Stephan sank limply to the floor, his arms still holding the small, ominously quiet bundle. Panic gripped her, and Elaine moved to the edge of the sofa, straining to see.

“Is he okay? Why isn’t he crying?” she pleaded.

Stephan remained silent, unable to tear his eyes away from the object in his arms. Blood covered the blanket, his arms and hands and even the baby, but he was too numb to even consider cleaning it up. As he watched the little newborn wiggle within the cotton swaddling, he fought down the bile that was rising in his throat.

Elaine pushed closer to her husband, reaching out to tug at his sleeve, forcing him to turn towards her.

“What wrong?” she asked, her voice trembling with dread.

As Stephan’s body twisted towards her, she caught the first glimpse of her baby. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling the scream that threatened to escape as her mind fought to process the visage before her.

As the sound of the approaching siren drowned out the strange mewling sounds of the tiny baby, new mother and father could only stare in horror at the cruel joke nature had played on them.

* * * *

Present Day – motel room – Cincinnati

Dean reached out to turn off the weak drizzle of the shower, changing his mind at the last second and turning off only the cold. He stood there letting the hot water run over him for a moment, barely registering the burn of it against his skin. No matter the temperature, he always felt cold lately, ever since—

He made a disgusted noise and reached out again, shutting the water off with an angry jerk. Stepping out of the tub he grabbed the thin, scratchy towel off the rack and roughly dried off his body.

As he did so, his eyes roved over his skin, disturbed by the fact that despite the brutality he had experienced from Haris’ servants over what had been his nearly week long time in hell, he was remarkably recovered. The only sensation was the bullet wound he had taken through the shoulder at his father’s hands, now no more bothersome than a strained muscle. At least physically.

He yanked on his boxers and ruffed his short, ragged hair to get the excess water out of it.

Finally, reluctantly, he stretched out the towel and rubbed the fog from the mirror over the sink. He glanced at his reflection. The sudden shift of blackness that slithered over his eyes, obscuring the familiar green, was so fast it might not have happened. Dean looked away, knowing it had.

Feeling sick, his hand closed over the amulet hanging around his neck, darkened now to almost the same black as the cord it hung by.

He closed his betrayer’s eyes, not wanting to see that blackness again. Wondering how long he could keep that darkness coiled inside him under control. The battle raged constantly, the demon within him howling and clawing for release. Dean kept reinforcing the barricades but knowing that, despite his desperate efforts,

if they couldn't find a solution to this nightmare, time was against him. Slowly, but inexorably, the barriers would give way, crumbling under the relentless assault of the demon within him.

What hurt the most was the knowledge that Sam no longer trusted him. He might say he did and act like he did, but Dean was now an unknown quantity and he knew Sam couldn't afford the luxury of trust. He would deny it if asked, but Dean couldn't blame him. Hell, he wasn't sure he could trust himself.

But it still hurt.

Dean gripped the amulet tighter, lifting his eyes once more, daring himself to meet his reflection in the glass. Feeling anger boil up as blackness danced across his eyes once again, taunting him.

I'm still here...

Dean's fist smashed the mirror before he realized what he was doing. Broken mirror cut into the skin of his knuckles and blood dripped onto the dirty sink.

"Shit!" he swore, cradling the injured hand in its mate, not surprised at the sudden knocking on the door.

"Dean?" Sam called out. "You okay?" He didn't wait for Dean to reply before opening the stupidly unlocked door and coming in.

Sam took in Dean's bloody hand and the smashed mirror in one quick glance. Sam didn't need to say it for Dean to know what he was thinking and his face must have shown it because Sam quickly forced the panic from his face and replaced it with an expression of general concern.

"Your hand's bleeding," Sam said, gesturing.

Dean grimaced. "Slight difference of opinion with the mirror." He forced the grimace into a smirk. "So you never heard of knocking? So desperate to see the body all the chicks fight over, you just burst in?"

The thin humor Sam recognized for what it was, a weak attempt to divert him from his fear of Dean losing control. Of losing Dean.

"Lemme help you..." Sam said quietly, reaching out.

Dean straightened, moving away. "No," he said quickly, a flash of a smile to go with it. "It's no big deal, I got it."

They looked at each other for a long moment, then Sam nodded. "Fine, well...hurry up then. I got some stuff that might interest you. Maybe a new hunt."

Dean lifted his eyebrows and nodded back. "Oh, good." He dabbed at his cut knuckles with the towel he'd dropped on the floor. "I'll get dressed and be right out." He looked over at Sam briefly and then turned back to the smashed mirror.

Sam's tongue drifted over his lips and he nodded shortly again. "Okay."

Dean closed his eyes, dropping his head and sighing as the door closed behind Sam and the latch clicked into place.

* * * *

A Week Earlier – Pine Barrens, NJ

"Beep-beep! Watch out Davey, you're gonna hit my truck."

"No, I'm not. Move over, quit hogging all the toys. I had that one first!" the blonde-haired boy shouted back, launching a fist-full of sand at his older brother.

"I'm tellin' Mom!" the older boy cried out, blinking rapidly as he wiped the offending grit from his eyes.

A split second pause and the two boys were back to playing again, laughter filling the back yard, a sibling's transgression forgotten in the desire to have fun.

The creature observed the exchange from its position just at the edge of the woods. It had carefully crept closer and closer to the backyard, intent on the two children playing in the afternoon sunshine. Normally, it never chanced coming in so

close to humans, especially during the daylight, but ravenous hunger had driven it today.

It had watched humans before, especially enjoyed the small ones, so much more accepting of his presence than the bigger ones that usually screamed or tried to hurt it. Never before though, had it ventured so close as it had today. Hovering at the edge of the tree line, obscured by the taller grass and bushes, it maintained its position as another voice sounded.

“Boys! Come and eat. I made some cheeseburgers for you.”

“Aw mom, we’re playing” the young brothers whined in unison, reluctant to move from their sandbox and toys.

“Okay, okay, I’ll put your lunch on the picnic table, but don’t go feeding it to Shadow,” the woman instructed, a knowing smile broadening her face as the dog looked up in response to its name.

The creature lifted its head, sniffing the air as the smell of the cooked meat wafted on the afternoon breeze. It licked its chops, mimicking the large dog that was also eyeing the ignored meal. Hunger was a powerful motivation, instilling boldness that overrode caution. Stealthily, the creature edged even closer to the backyard, its dark predator’s eyes flicking back and forth between the children, the dog and the house.

The distance between the relative shelter of the forest and the plastic Little Tikes picnic table wasn’t far, but it was all in the open, no cover, and no means of escape except to turn and scuttle back into the woods. Then there was the dog, chained to a nearby doghouse, no telling how far the leash would reach. The creature hadn’t survived for so long by ignoring potential threats to its existence, and the pet was definitely a threat.

Still, in the creature’s food-centered mind, the gnawing deep inside was in overdrive, survival instinct kicking in and driving the animal brain. It inched slightly closer to exposing itself, its face expressing something that could have been a smile had it not been for the pointed and yellowed incisors that peeked out or the saliva that began to trickle from the corners of its maw.

As the small boys played, blissfully ignorant of the thing that lurked so close by, the creature stepped out of the wooded cover. Just then, the breeze shifted ever so slightly and the black lab lifted its head, testing the air for the hint of the foreign scent that had just caught its attention.

The dog’s ear’s pricked up and a low growl began in the back of its throat. Muscles tensed and bunched as its eyes caught the hint of movement at the forest edge.

The creature took another step out of its cover just as the black lab lunged from its crouched position. Snarling teeth and raised hackles rushed in a black blur towards the creature. Survival instinct kicked in and the creature twisted in mid-stride and disappeared back into the green foliage.

The dog’s second lunge was powerful enough to snap the small chain links and its momentum carried it into the woods in pursuit of the creature. From behind it, the two boys dropped their toys and had simultaneously begun yelling for their dog and their mother.

The creature tore through the underbrush, seeking nothing more than escape from the snapping jaws that were nearly upon it. As it dodged behind the trunk of a large pine, the dog anticipated its quarry and moved around from the opposite side. The animal sprung from the ground, powerful hind legs launching it at its prey. The dog’s jaws clamped onto a flailing appendage of the creature, teeth piercing its hide and locking in as the creature loosed a horrifying scream that radiated throughout the forest.

Reacting in fear and pain, the creature slammed the dog into the trunk of the nearest tree, once and then twice, until the dog’s broken body released its hold. In anger, the creature lifted the dead carcass of the family pet and threw it viciously into the backyard where it landed with a sickening thud at the feet of the little boys.

As the children screamed in horror the creature watched from its place of cover for a moment more. Hunger still gnawing, but pain now dominating that need, it turned away and moved silently back into the deeper forest, the greenery swallowing it up as though it had never been there at all.

* * * *

Present Day – Motel

Dean sat on the edge of the bed, absently massaging the knuckles of his right hand which still throbbed, reminding him of the basic law of nature that states that flesh and bone is generally not an equal of glass and drywall. He ignored the pulsating burn as he always did, focusing his attention on his brother seated across from him at the motel room's standard issue table.

Laptop open, Sam's fingers glided over the keyboard, pausing occasionally to lightly touch the built-in mouse pad. He worked the computer like a pianist would tease beautiful music from a baby grand and Dean was always impressed at how well his brother could so effortlessly tap into the limitless information contained on the Internet.

"So, you caught some story on *Unsolved Mysteries* about a woman and her kids that spotted a bear in their back yard?" Dean asked skeptically. "That's your big, 'hey, I've found a hunt' announcement?"

Sam shot his brother a scowl that also said "be patient" and then turned the laptop screen to face Dean.

"It's not just that single sighting Dean, there have been dozens around the area over the past few months. Every one of them with a similar description of a creature or something that has been rummaging through trash, killing pets, and stalking in the shadows around the homes in Pine Barrens, New Jersey."

"Pine Barrens?" Dean repeated, eyebrows raised, his interest suddenly captured.

"Yeah, Pine Barrens," Sam replied as Dean leaned closer, his eyes now intently focused on the laptop's screen.

After a moment Dean sat back shaking his head. "You're thinking the Jersey Devil aren't you? There haven't been any serious sightings in over fifty years."

"That's not true Dean, look here!" Sam said excitedly, swinging the laptop back around, his fingers flying once more over the keys. Dean rose, coming to stand behind Sam's shoulder and peering down to see what his brother's search revealed.

"See Dean, sightings in 1951, two boys in Gibbstown said they were chased for nearly a mile by a winged creature, snarling teeth, saliva dripping from its jaws. 1991, a women in Leeds says she saw a creature ripping apart her German Shepherd in the back yard. She said the creature had yellow eyes, a white face like a horse and long teeth. 2001, a pizza delivery boy breaks down on Lakehurst Road and is attacked in his car by a large winged creature. Look at the picture of the car, Dean. Seems like something clawed it up pretty good."

Dean stood upright, stepping back and sighing deeply. This was thin, even by his standards. For a moment, he considered that Sam was just trying to find some way to distract his older brother, that tempting Dean with a hunt would somehow erase the constant reminder of the demon inside him. Maybe it was even Sam's way of trying to erase how badly things had gone with Laura. Whatever his brother's motivation, Dean wasn't buying it.

Shaking his head, he strode back to the side of his bed, his hand once more caressing the tender skin of his right hand.

"I dunno Sam, the sightings are all different, the descriptions don't always match. Besides, the Jersey Devil lore goes back to the 1700's. It can't possibly be the same creature all that long and hell, other than some scattered tracks, there's never been one shred of physical evidence," Dean stated. "It's probably just some wild animal

from time to time that gets too close to some yuppies' backyard picnic. I mean, come on, supernatural creatures do not rummage through trash looking for food. They break into houses and eat little kids," Dean finished, tilting his head and forcing a sarcastic smile.

Sam looked up at his older sibling, unable to hide the look of astonishment that was plastered across his face. He couldn't believe that he was trying to 'talk' Dean into a hunt. When had his brother ever turned down the opportunity to search and destroy? Wasn't it always the other way around, Sam being the resistant voice of reason while Dean chomped at the bit to take on whatever ghost of the week life had in store for them?

But maybe that was old Dean. Dean before the possession had been dead set on destroying evil anywhere and in any form. Dean after the possession maybe didn't have the same deep-seated desire to destroy one of his own.

No! No way! Sam thought to himself, immediately forcing away any thought that his brother could have changed or been swayed by the demonic presence within him. Still, how could he not be different after everything he'd been through?

Sam quickly regrouped, determined to make his case.

"I know that the lore behind the Jersey Devil is prolific but vague, but Dean there is a bunch of documented sightings in 1909, the whole 'Week of Terror'. Night after night, the creature was seen by dozens of folks; decent, respectable people that corroborated each others stories. Besides, there's one other piece of the Devil lore you should know," Sam continued.

Dean looked up once more, the hesitation and seriousness in Sam's voice drawing his attention as surely as flames attracted moths.

"Yeah, what's that Sam?"

Sam took a deep breath before continuing, the next piece of the legend chilled him to the bone the first time he read it and its effect was not lessened now as he prepared to repeat it.

"One of the stories about the origin of the Jersey Devil says that the widow Shrouds made a wish that if she ever had another child it would be the devil. Supposedly, she did have another and it was deformed, but that wasn't the interesting part."

Dean came around the edge of the bed and plopped down into the chair opposite Sam. His deep sigh was audible and the look on his face said "go ahead, I'm bored but listening". Sam ignored him, but inwardly he was becoming exasperated by his brother's behavior.

"Well, this one website says that not long after the child was born, the widow's house caught on fire and burned to the ground. No one saw the old woman ever again or the child, but Dean, what if it somehow connects to the other kids like me? Maybe even way back then?" Sam asked, eyebrows knitted together, his green eyes clear but reflecting the pain that constantly haunted him about his ties to Haris and the demon's plans for him.

Dean shook his head, unable to believe that Sam would so easily make that huge leap in logic. He knew that his brother was preoccupied with finding out what the demon had planned for him *"and all the children like him"*, but to imply that Haris had been at work over three hundred years ago in New Jersey of all places, well that just seemed like a stretch to the older hunter.

"Sam, are you listening to yourself? Why in the hell would Haris be after kids way back then? Dude, I'm telling you there is no connection between the Jersey Devil, if the creature even exists, and that bastard or you," Dean stated. "Besides, if the damn thing does exist, its never killed anyone, at least that's ever been documented. If it's managed to survive this long, then I say leave it alone; we shouldn't hunt it down and kill it just 'cause people saw it and got scared." *"I haven't hurt anyone! Can't everyone leave me alone too?"*

Sam slammed the laptop closed while rising to his feet, his face suddenly red with frustration and near anger. "I can't believe you, Dean!" he shouted. "Why don't you want to check this out? What the hell has gotten into you?"

As the words slipped out of his mouth, Sam saw the immediate reaction in his brother as Dean visibly flinched, his head dropping down, his eyes instantly hidden.

"What a stupid bastard I am!" Sam thought to himself. *"Gee Dean! Just in case you forgot in the last five minutes that you had a demon stuck inside you, your dumb-ass brother has to go and remind you."*

"Dean, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it came out," Sam stammered, coming to stand beside his brother, his hand automatically reaching out to make contact with Dean's shoulder.

An instant before fingers touched the fabric of his shirt, Dean pushed up from the chair and deftly twisted out of Sam's reach. He moved quickly to the side of the twin bed and began tossing yesterday's dirty clothes into his duffle, eyes remaining downward, carefully obscured by long lashes and the turn of his head away from his brother.

"Dean, I'm really sorry," Sam offered again.

"No problem, Sam," Dean replied dryly.

"It is a problem Dean. Look, I understand ..."

"Understand?" Dean interrupted shouting. "How could you possibly understand Sam? Do you have a demon stuck inside you?"

"No, but ..."

"No! You don't! You don't have to listen to the damn thing scream inside your skull every waking moment. You don't go to sleep wondering if you'll wake up the next day and be yourself or something ... else. You don't spend every last drop of energy trying to keep the son-of-a-bitch locked in some remote corner inside of you. And you don't have to worry every friggin' second that if you don't control the thing that you might hurt someone!" *I might hurt you!*

Dean finished, his chest heaving from the emotion contained in his outburst. He glanced up at his brother only briefly before his head moved downward once more. *"Don't look at my eyes Sam. Please don't look!"* But the glance was long enough for Sam to see the desperation and weariness contained in the hazel eyes.

Softer now, Dean continued. "I know you don't trust me Sam. Hell, I don't even trust myself anymore. It's getting harder and harder to control this thing. I don't know how much longer I can hold out." His shoulder's sagging, Dean dropped to the bed, running a shaking open palm across his face.

Sam closed the small space between them and plopped down beside his despondent brother. He knew implicitly that anything he said at this point would be rejected by Dean as surely as the physical contact had been moments before. Still, Sam knew he had to say something. Was he worried about his brother? Hell yeah! Dean could be intimidating enough under normal circumstances, but having seen his brother in full-on demon mode take on Haris and fight Laura had truly scared Sam.

"Dean, you're my brother, and I trust you. I've trusted you all my life and I trust you with my life. You didn't hurt me in the chamber and I know you won't hurt me now, not ever," Sam said sincerely. He watched as Dean absorbed his words, hopeful that he could bring some manner of encouragement.

Dean met his gaze, studying Sam's face, looking for the hint of uncertainty and fear that he knew his brother felt. He had tried to brush off Sam's extra watchfulness over him since leaving Bobby's, he'd even overlooked the questions that always bordered on asking if he was in control or not. But the one thing Dean couldn't ignore was the apprehension in Sam's face every time he looked at his brother.

"Sammy, you never could lie worth a damn dude," he replied finally, the corners of his mouth turning upward into a smile that couldn't remotely cover the agony he felt at knowing that his baby brother was afraid of him.

"Dean ..." Sam began once more, ready to refute the implication.

“Come on Sam!” Dean interrupted again. “You want to go to New Jersey and look for some trash eating, dog mauling, pizza-delivery dude terrorizing creature, then what the hell. Let’s go! Not like there’s anything more exciting on the agenda.”

Stunned at Dean’s sudden acceptance of a hunt that he had opposed so fervently moments before, Sam sat, mouth gaping in silence as his brother shut down the conversation in true Dean Winchester fashion.

Watching his brother as he resumed packing his meager belongings, Sam inhaled sharply as the briefest flash of black cascaded over Dean’s eyes then reverted just as quickly back to green.

“I do trust you Dean, but I can’t trust the thing that’s inside you,” his mind whispered.

* * * *

Lakehurst Road – Pine Barrens

Richard Anderson reached for the knob on his stereo, twisting it clockwise to crank up the volume, Korn’s *Freak on a Leash* blaring even louder from the truck’s speakers, anything to keep him awake during the long drive home. He then reached for the handle and lowered the driver’s side window allowing the cool night air to whip into his face as he pressed the accelerator, hoping to cut any amount of time off the trip. Physically exhausted from having worked a double shift at the factory and mentally drained from fighting with his girlfriend earlier on the phone, Anderson popped the top on a can of beer and slugged back a huge gulp. He emptied the can with the next swallow and tossed the empty through the cab’s sliding rear window into the bed behind him.

Opening a second can, he sipped slower now, knowing first hand that fatigue, anger, and alcohol was not a good mix.

“Been there, done that, paid the ticket!” he mumbled aloud.

The night was particularly dark, the moon obscured by heavy cloud cover signaling another storm pulling in off the coast. In the distance, Anderson saw the flash of lightning and knew the impending rain would likely be on him before he reached home.

“Great!” he grouched. “Bet Angie left the damn windows open when she left!”

Another flash of lightning lit up the night, momentarily blinding him, but illuminating the road well ahead of the range of the truck’s headlights. In that brief instant, Anderson saw a large shape hunched over in the lane just ahead of him.

Darkness enveloped the truck once more and Anderson strained to make out the figure. He flicked on the high-beams and saw what he assumed to be a large animal feeding on road kill at the edge of the road. Reducing his speed slightly, he continued on, afraid of startling the thing and having it run towards him instead of away. Pulling closer, he nearly spilled the remnants of his beer as he caught sight of the creature ahead in the truck’s path.

The animal was large, larger than anything Anderson would have expected to see in this part of New Jersey. As the truck’s lights landed on it, the creature looked up. A chunk of dead possum hung from its jaws, blood seeping from between its teeth and matting the fur that hung from its head and upper torso.

Anderson tossed the partially emptied beer can to the passenger side floor, adding it to the heap of left-over fast food wrappers and other assorted trash. He eased his foot off the accelerator allowing the truck to slow as he pulled over to the shoulder.

Ripping another piece of meat from the carcass, the creature continued chewing, never taking its eyes off the approaching vehicle. It stood upright suddenly; rising to its full height in preparation for flight should the approaching machine pose a threat.

As the truck came to a complete stop, Anderson saw the creature rise. Never one to be accused of having more brains than balls, Anderson reached behind the seat, his hand closing around the wood Louisville Slugger that he kept there for "emergencies". He flung open the door and paused to gauge the creature's reaction. When it froze in place, Anderson moved forward, the bat held in his hands ready to swing.

At twenty five feet, the creature began snarling, teeth bared, claws possessively holding its meal. It took a slight step back, reluctant to leave the remainder of the carcass on the road yet prepared to escape the human threat.

At ten feet away, Anderson gasped, the stench coming off the creature filled his nostrils and threatened to bring back up the Qwik Mart burrito and beer. To say that the thing reeked was an understatement, the combination of rotten meat and something akin to body odor assailed him making his eyes begin to tear.

The creature dropped its meal preparing to dart to the safety of the nearby woods. In the last moment, it raised its head, sniffing the air. As it did, its eyes met Anderson's, creature staring into the soul of the man. Meeting the gaze, Anderson suddenly lowered the bat. He was close enough now to see the wild fear in the creature's eyes and expected the thing to bolt off into the darkness.

Abruptly, the creature looked up and over Anderson's head, the look of fear now replaced with a look of *relief*? Anderson sensed the mass behind him long before the unearthly howl assaulted his ears. He spun around, the baseball bat raised defensively.

Towering above him, glowing yellow eyes looked down on the man. Featherless wings, each tipped with a curved claw on the end, spread open like a giant pterodactyl as an elongated head dipped down revealing a mouth full of long jagged teeth.

The thing howled once more and Anderson drew back the bat preparing to swing. Before he could release, the large wings enveloped him, wrapping him in a leather-like cocoon. His scream broke through the darkness as the thing's claws pierced his chest and back. Anderson screamed again and again, but his cries were muffled within the thing's winged embrace. Blood coursing down his chest and dribbling from his mouth, Anderson could do nothing more than wait to die. Fortunately for him, the monster that held him alleviated his agony as it lowered its head and ripped out the man's throat.

Thunder echoed in the distance as more lightning flashed like a strobe in the darkness. As the rain began to fall, Anderson's dead eyes stared up into the starless sky, his body left on the road like litter tossed from a car as the two creatures disappeared into the night.

* * * *

The Next Day

Dean looked away from the road, twisting his head sharply to the left and then the right, working out the kinks in his neck that nearly ten straight hours of driving had put there. Ten hours of being held in the hard steel embrace of his beloved Impala was never a problem for Dean, but ten hours of trying to ignore Sam's occasional looks of concern or the dead silence that hung oppressively within the old car was more than he could take. Thankfully, most of the drive was spent in darkness. Dean decided that driving at night served several purposes: It got them to New Jersey faster, saved paying for a night's hotel room, and most importantly, provided him a way to hide his eyes away from Sam in the darkness.

Now, as the sun broke through the remnants of last night's rainstorm, Dean's cover was lost. He nonchalantly reached for the dark sunglasses that were tucked

into the visor and casually slid them onto his face. It wasn't *that* sunny out yet and he hoped that Sam wouldn't call him on the move.

Internally, the all-too-familiar tingling fluttered within his abdomen, insidiously rising up into his chest. He inhaled sharply and swallowed hard, "*Back down you bastard*", then carefully let the breath out slowly and quietly, fearing his brother would notice.

Stealing a glance to his right, he breathed more easily seeing that Sam's face was turned toward the passenger side window, apparently watching the passing scenery. He considered for a moment saying something, anything, to break the overwhelming quiet inside the car, but as Dean's mouth opened, the demon inside him stirred viciously, again sending a tremor throughout his body and forcing him to bite back the first syllables.

It was enough however to capture Sam's attention and he turned away from the window to look at Dean. Having feigned sleep for most of the night, Sam was struggling to keep his eyes open and restrain the yawn that was threatening. Despite having grown accustomed to interrupted sleep, the recent weeks since Dean's rescue had given him more insomnia than he had in his entire life. He spent nearly every waking moment scouring the web for any information on how to help Dean and when Dean slept, Sam kept a watchful guard, fearful that his brother's prediction of waking up "*something else*" might come to pass.

"You say something?" Sam asked finally.

Dean paused before speaking, his mind scrambling for a source of deflection; a convincing lie that would keep his brother from recognizing the slip of control. *Demons lie!* The thought barged into his head, reminding him, accusing him, and condemning him in two tiny but powerful words.

Luck was finally on his side as the large road sign loomed up in the distance.

"Atlantic City, dude! Up for a little detour? I mean, come on, can't get you to Vegas, so this is the next best thing, right?" Dean blurted, eyebrows wagging above the rim of the sunglasses.

"Can we just focus on the job at hand?" Sam replied, not amused.

"Sammy, Sammy, Sammy! You're psychic, I'm possessed, we could make a killing there! Get rich, go to Tahiti, sit on the beach with naked chicks hanging off us all the time."

Dean's attempt at humor missed its mark and instead of the usual Sam smirk he found an angry brother glaring at him from across the seat.

"That's not funny, Dean. Neither one of us can afford to give in or lose control, not even for a split second. Or ..." Sam's voice trailed off but his mind finished the statement silently. *Or I might lose you forever.*

Dean shrugged, there was no winning with Sam lately. Despite his best effort to hide the internal struggle and maintain his usual snarky humor, his brother's seriousness had reached an all-time high. All his life, Dean had been able to reassure his younger sibling with a confident smile and a simple "It'll be alright, Sam," but lately those tactics were ineffective. Not only was Sam's trust in Dean gone, but apparently his faith in his older brother was wavering too.

As the Impala continued speeding down the highway, the heavy silence returned once more. Sam flipped open his laptop and powered the computer on, time for his daily research routine. Dean in turn reached forward and twisted on the knob to the radio. The antenna immediately picked up a local rock station and it took only a moment for both young men to register the words to the song that was blaring from the speakers.

*Here come the world
With the look in its eye
Future uncertain but certainly slight
Look at the faces*

*Listen to the bells
Its hard to believe we need a place called hell
The devil inside
The devil inside
Every single one of us the devil inside
The devil inside
The devil inside
Every single one of us the devil inside*

Both Sam and Dean reached for the knob at the same time, the INXS lyrics striking closer to home than either of them cared to admit. Dean's hand grasped the dial first, and he quickly spun it until the next clear station came in, not caring if the music was Black Sabbath or the Black Eyed Peas so long as whatever was playing didn't stick another imaginary knife into his heart.

Instantly, the deep baritone of a DJ boomed from the speakers, his voice devoid of emotion as he began reporting the local news. Dean was just about to twist the dial again when Sam's hand snaked out and caught him on the wrist.

"Dean, wait," he commanded, tilting his head to concentrate.

"... the brutalized body of thirty-seven year old Richard Anderson was found not far from his truck on Lakehurst Road late last night. Authorities say that Mr. Anderson may have been killed as a result of a car-jacking that went wrong. The victim sustained numerous stab wounds which led to his death. In other local news, many in the Pine Barrens community are concerned that a black bear in the area may be responsible for the deaths of some local pets. New Jersey Game and Fish Commission officials are investigating, but state that there is no need for public alarm. The forecast for today ..."

Sam turned the volume down as the DJ continued to drone on about the weather. He shifted his attention back to the laptop, quickly pulling up the local newspaper online. As he scrolled down the article, more details than what the radio announcer had divulged appeared in the newspaper report. Excitedly, Sam turned to his brother.

"Dean, I think the Jersey Devil killed this Richard Anderson dude," he announced enthusiastically.

"Yeah, and how's that Sammy? The radio said that the police think it was a car-jacking or something," Dean replied, not hiding his disinterest.

"Because," Sam continued, "the newspaper article says that Anderson's body was ripped to shreds by what appeared to be the claws of an animal, his throat was torn out as well. There isn't any mention of a stabbing."

"So, maybe it's the bear that they're talking about," Dean countered. "Or maybe somebody got a little carried away with a knife when the guy didn't give up the car. People can do some pretty crazy things, Sammy."

"No way, Dean. It wasn't a car-jacking 'cause they never took the truck. Besides, look at the picture of the truck: who car-jacks a piece of crap like that? Plus, no way does a bear get a guy out of his vehicle, maul him and then just take off again not leaving a single sign behind. I'm telling you Dean, this was the Devil," Sam insisted.

"Okay Sam, but in three hundred years, this thing has never killed a single person. Why is it stepping up its game now?"

"I don't know, but with all the sightings and now this? Something's up. I can just feel it. How much further is it?" Sam asked, his brow furrowed anxiously as he continued to stare at the image on the computer. In the back of his mind, something told him that this really was more than a sadistic slaying or an animal attack. Now, he just had to convince Dean.

* * * *

Outside Pemberton Library

They arrived in Pemberton, New Jersey around 10am, having stopped for breakfast and after checking into the only motel the small town offered. They decided to split up, Sam suggesting that there might be more information at the library and Dean more than happy to talk with the locals if it meant that he had time away from Sam.

Just a tad after noon, Dean walked back to the library and took up a post outside, waiting on his brother. Sam trotted down the steps a short while later to find Dean leaning against the front fender of the Impala, arms crossed, his face covered in a scowl. Coming up to his brother's side, Sam raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"So, what did ya find out?" Sam asked.

"Well," Dean began, "the diner has decent coffee and one of the ugliest waitresses I've ever seen in a short skirt, yeesh! There outta' be a law or something."

"Dean!" Sam's voice warned, his patience with his brother's obvious avoidance of anything to do with the hunt was beginning to frazzle.

"Okay, okay. Well, everyone around here seems to have an opinion about the Devil, but I actually found one old-timer over at the gas station, hey, can you believe that the place is still full service? The old dude still pumps the gas, checks the oil, the whole works."

"DEAN!" Sam shouted. "What did you find out about the Jersey Devil?"

"Calm down Samantha, before you have a stroke or something. The old guy at the station says he actually saw the Jersey Devil back when he was younger. Said that he saw it in the woods behind his house when he was a teenager, not ten feet from him."

"What else did he say, Dean?" Sam asked excitedly.

"Well," Dean continued, barely able to stifle the laugh in the back of his throat. "The old geezer said that the thing has a head that sorta looks like a horse, huge wings with claws on the ends, long, sharp teeth and ..." The older hunter stopped, outright laughter breaking through.

"And what Dean? This is good, a confirmed sighting." Sam paused as his brother's laughter subsided. "Why the hell are you laughing?" he then asked, suddenly feeling like he not only missed the punchline but the whole joke as well.

"Dude." Hazel eyes feigned seriousness. "He said the thing was like four foot tall. Our killer creature is four friggin' feet tall. I'm telling ya Sammy, you better keep a low profile, cause if the locals are terrified by a midget monster, then your freakish height will probably have the villagers lighting torches and coming after your ass." Laughter began again and Dean did nothing to contain it, amused as much by his teasing of his brother as he was about the old man's description of their quarry.

Sam rolled his eyes. As tempted as he was to retaliate and toss back some comment about his brother's vertical shortcomings, Sam was briefly pleased to hear the easy laughter coming from Dean, considering everything the man had been through lately.

"Okay Dean, you had your laughs. Now try and use those few working brain cells you have and listen to what I've found," Sam began as Dean shot back a glaring look.

"There was a ton of information on the Jersey Devil in there, some of it going back a hundred years or more. Hell, they have a whole section of the library devoted to the thing, local lore and all. Most of it was stuff we already knew, but I did find one reference that talks about the Devil being a portent of war."

"And that matters to us why?" Dean interrupted.

"The appearances, Dean. The Jersey Devil was sighted right before the Civil War in the mid 1800's, and again before the Spanish American War. The 'week of terror' during 1909 was right before World War I, and how about the documented appearance on December 7th in 1941. Even you should know the significance of that

date. It goes on and on Dean. Almost every cluster of sightings occurs right before any serious conflict, even right before September 11th,” Sam finished solemnly.

Dean absorbed his brother’s information quietly. He was still skeptical about even being here to begin with, but Sam was so determined, almost strangely eager to go on this particular hunt. He was certain that there was more to Sam’s fixation than his brother was letting on, but as he’d done nearly all his life, he decided to humor his baby brother.

“Okay Sam, so what is it warning about now?” Dean asked.

“Think about it,” Sam continued on. “If this thing really is evil incarnate and with Haris and his legions running rampant lately, maybe it’s all tied together. We keep hearing that there’s a war coming, more and more demons are all around. Maybe this time it isn’t about guns and bombs, maybe this time it’s about good and evil. Maybe the Jersey Devil appearing now is a foreshadowing of that war.”

Dean sighed deeply; unsettled by the mention of Haris or his troops and suddenly, albeit reluctantly, admitting that just perhaps Sam was on to something.

“Alright, Sammy, the old guy at the gas station also told me about this deserted house outside of town. He said that many of the recent sightings have been out near there on Lakehurst Road, same place that the Anderson guy was found. There’s plenty of daylight left, let’s go check it out,” he suggested. The broad smile that spread across Sam’s face was answer enough as the two moved toward the waiting car.

* * * *

Old McGregor House – later that afternoon

“Shit,” Dean commented, squinting up at the rundown two story structure, squatting in rot and decay at the top of a shallow set of stairs that doubled back on themselves and led up to a sagging front porch. “Dude, I thought they tore down the set for Psycho.” He brought the car to a stop and got out, closing the door behind him with its familiar screech.

He slid the sunglasses off his face. They didn’t obscure his vision in the slightest but he knew they bothered Sam, especially on an overcast day like today, late afternoon, when it was just too dark to wear them. Another added twist to the list of things he knew Sam was subconsciously creating in his mind.

Another change...

Every time Dean acknowledged something beneficial in this bizarre parasitic existence he felt a thrill of seduction that scared him. It was like swimming at the edge of a whirlpool and trying not to get sucked in. The anticipation of the power that lay so easily within his reach was so intense sometimes that he almost shuddered at its relentless pull.

Sam joined him in studying the broken down building. It did look something like the house from Alfred Hitchcock’s thriller. He couldn’t stop a glance at the upper floor windows where torn curtains fluttered through the broken glass, just in case Norman Bates’ mother might be watching. *So much for a peaceful shower when they got back to the motel that night.*

“So where do you want to start?” Sam asked, glancing around at the overgrown, trash-filled yard. The house had obviously been empty for a long time. The ground around the house was wet and he could feel his feet squishing into the mud.

“I dunno,” Dean replied with a shrug. “The old man just said that this place was a pretty popular spot for sightings of your Devil.” *Your Devil Sam, not mine!*

Sam gave him a dirty look which Dean actually seemed happy to get and smirked back in return. “Let’s look around outside first, I guess.” He started off toward the rear of the house, mostly just scanning the surrounding area.

The grass under the windows was trampled flat and the windows themselves had been used for target practice judging from the broken shards littering the ground. Windowsills revealed air gun pellets embedded within the frames and the wood casements bore the scars of small caliber bullets.

Poison oak, honeysuckle and ivy intermingled indifferently across the ground, climbing the walls and tumbling through the shattered windows to continue the relentless overtaking of the property.

Sam could smell the damp rot of the wood, mildew and moss thickly patching the walls, it was a sickening smell. The smell of desolation and loss.

He made a face and backed away from the window, being careful to keep away from the vines.

"See anything?" Dean asked, watching from the side. He stood with his arms hugging his chest in the cool air, trying not to shiver.

Sam glanced at him. "You cold?" he asked, wiping his hands on the denim covering his legs.

"No," Dean said shortly, dropping his arms. "Let's get going." He moved quickly up the narrow front steps, overgrown weeds pushing through the cracks brushing his legs, and across the rickety porch to the sagging front door, also bereft of glass. Torn, dirty curtains spilled through the jagged opening and moved sluggishly with the cool breeze.

Sam joined him, standing to one side as Dean shoved the door, which opened reluctantly, and stepped inside.

They both coughed as the smell of mildew and rot rolled over them, much worse than it had been standing outside.

Sam gagged. "God, what is that?" he covered his mouth and nose.

Dean turned his head, unconsciously scenting the air like an animal. Rain, rotten wood, wet fur, neglect, death...

He shook his head to rid it of the images that floated unbidden into his head at the rank odor. "I dunno. C'mon."

There wasn't much to see in the dark room, even with Sam's flashlight bouncing around to illuminate the interior.

A few pieces of broken, moldy furniture, some crates and miscellaneous bits of junk littered the space.

Sam stumbled suddenly as his foot hit a wet cardboard box, knocking the meager contents across the floor. Several colorful objects went sliding over the dirty wood.

Sam knelt down and held the light on them for a better look.

"What's that?" Dean asked, coming over at the sound of Sam tripping.

Sam fingered a filthy brown object he finally recognized as a teddy bear missing one arm and an eye. A battered red toy truck and a handful of stubby broken crayons were scattered among a few other toys.

"Toys," Sam replied, poking the truck and moving it slightly forward. He made a face. "Kinda creepy."

Dean had just knelt to have a look for himself, when a crash from below them spun him back to his feet, gun drawn, eyes fastened on a door at the end of the hall.

Sam, also at ready, moved forward at Dean's nod. Standing at the closed door, they could hear clumsy shuffling sounds, as though something were being moved around in the basement.

Sam carefully grasped the knob and slowly pulled the door open. The first telltale creak brought the sounds from below to an instant halt and silence fell over the black hole of the basement stairs. A fetid odor that made the first smell pleasant by comparison hit them like a physical blow.

Dirt, sweat, hair, blood... Dean's mind sorted the different strands without thought, nostrils flaring, unaware he was doing so, missing the fact that he could.

Dean stared into the blackness below them and then entered quickly, vanishing down into the darkness.

Sam grabbed the flashlight from his pocket and thumbed it on, frowning after Dean and following more slowly down the old steps, his light trailing Dean's boots as he moved across the floor with seeming indifference to the lack of light.

"Dean!" he hissed. "Be careful!"

As Sam's feet touched the floor, the words barely out of his mouth, an earsplitting screech deafened him. A blow shot out from the darkness and ripped into his shoulder, sending him sprawling into a broken-down pile of furniture and slamming his temple against a jutting corner. Sam dropped with a limp thud to the floor.

Even as Dean whirled to meet this unexpected foe, gun lifted, he clearly saw the blood stained ball bat sailing at him but couldn't move fast enough to avoid the explosion of pain as it smashed into his skull sending him crashing into deeper blackness.

The smell grew even stronger as shuffling footsteps paused between both men. The ball bat dragged along the ground, fresh blood slicking its surface. It was lifted, the blood sniffed by a wet, exaggerated snort, then allowed to fall with an echoing bang as it bounced across the floor.

The darkness was shattered once more by a screaming howl as Dean's body was suddenly kicked across the floor, coming to rest silently against the cold, wet bricks of the basement wall.

* * * *

Basement of the House

Dean came awake with a start, his hand instinctively reaching for the weapon that had remained tucked into his waistband when pain and darkness had harshly introduced themselves to his skull. He rolled quickly to his knees, vertigo briefly making him pause, but his senses on full alert.

"Sammy!" he shouted out. Dean strained to listen for a reply in the blackness of the basement, but his brother's voice was absent.

He took a couple uncertain steps, his eyes seeking the form of his likely-injured brother. He sucked in a sharp breath when his shin rammed into a hidden obstacle.

"Sammy!" Dean shouted once more, desperation and panic beginning to seep into his voice. When there was no response, Dean stopped his movement, closed his eyes and held his breath. Reaching deep inside, he debated for a split second what he was about to do. *But this is for Sam ...* He felt the all-too familiar sensation of heat creeping up from within him, like a slow burn, threatening to engulf him if he lost control for even an instant.

"I own you, you sonofabitch! Time for you to earn your keep," Dean snarled quietly to himself.

"Live in that illusion, Dean. You're getting weaker. Each and every single day that passes, I'm taking a little bit more of you!" the voice replied.

Focused on locating Sam, Dean stubbornly ignored the demon's taunt and opened black eyes, his vision suddenly piercing through the darkness of the cellar and quickly locating his brother.

Rushing to Sam's side, Dean rolled him over and began checking him for wounds. A slow trickle of blood trailed from a small cut at Sam's hairline accompanied by a trio of cuts on his right shoulder left behind by the creature's sharp claws. Neither of the wounds were critical and as Dean continued to run his hands over his brother, Sam came around with a muffled groan.

"Dean? I sure hope those are your hands, and if they are, get off me dude," Sam mumbled, swatting his brother's fingers away from exploring the wound on his shoulder.

"Sammy? You okay?" Dean anxiously asked as Sam pushed off the floor with Dean's arm immediately there to steady him.

Swaying slightly, Sam struggled to see in the dark. He could feel rather than see Dean moving about the basement. In the back of his mind, Sam knew that there was no humanly way possible that Dean could make his way around without the benefit of a flashlight. *Humanly, no.*

The sudden glare of afternoon sunlight blinded Sam as Dean threw open the outer door to the basement. Sam wasn't surprised that Dean immediately turned away from him once the room was illuminated. Sam wasn't stupid either, he'd been watching his brother carefully enough over the past weeks to know when Dean was hiding his eyes, hiding the fact that he had yet again called up the evil resources of the demon.

"What the hell was that thing?" Sam asked, following Dean outside.

Dean squatted down, his fingers touching the damp ground as he brushed away stray pieces of leaves. The barest sign of some sort of track was pressed into the soft soil, but it was distorted and not like anything Dean had ever seen before.

Curiosity biting at him, Sam knelt down beside his brother. He too saw the fragment of a print in the dirt and like Dean, there was nothing familiar about it.

"Do you think that belongs to the Devil?" he questioned as Dean rose and began to scan the woods beyond the overgrown lawn.

"I dunno Sam. That track is like nothing I've ever seen before, but since when does something supernatural play Barry Bonds with my head?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the darkening forest.

"Dean, there are more tracks over here. They lead into the woods!" Sam stated, pointing off into the tree line.

Dean shivered visibly. He was having a hard time believing that the Jersey Devil had just randomly attacked them in the basement of a deserted house, using a baseball bat no less. Still, there were the claw marks on Sam's shoulder and the trail on the ground. What to make of those? As he stood there nearly frozen in place, he couldn't help but feel as though they were being watched. Like prey being observed by the predator, Dean could sense the malevolence that hung on the air emanating from the thick greenery.

Movement to his left stirred Dean from his suspicions and he turned to see Sam heading towards the forest edge. He didn't want to follow, not sure if the nagging at the back of his mind was his hunter's instinct or rather simply his subconscious trying to justify a reason to avoid hunting down this creature. Still, there was no way he was letting Sam's strange crusade get the better of him, no way he was going to let his brother mistake his reluctance for fear.

They entered the woods carefully, Dean with the .45 drawn and ready. It was eerily quiet, only the sound of their boots crunching down on the occasional twig. Now and again, a bird would suddenly take flight, startling the two hunters, but not diverting them from the trail. A few hundred yards in and Sam pulled up sharply, Dean nearly running into the back of him.

"What the hell, Sam," Dean exclaimed. "You need brake lights installed or something." As the last of his complaint trailed off, Dean peered around Sam's side and spotted what had halted his brother dead in his tracks.

A large assortment of animal carcasses lay strewn across the pine needle carpet of the forest floor. In various states of dismemberment and decay, each appeared as though they had been half-eaten then discarded. Sam grabbed a nearby stick and began poking at the carrion. He exposed several sun-bleached bones laying half submerged under the fresh loam indicating that this area had been a dinner table for much longer than the fresher kills initially led the hunters to believe.

While Sam concentrated on the ground, a swift breeze coursing through the treetops diverted Dean's attention upward. As his eyes squinted against the fading afternoon sun, Dean noticed the jagged scars carved into the bark of the surrounding

pinetrees. Dozens of claw marks scored the standing wood nearly a foot above his head. He reached inquisitive fingers up, straining to touch the marks.

Sam drew up next to him, easily reaching past Dean's tiptoe stance and running his own fingers along the carved out trenches.

"Freak!" Dean muttered, offended by his taller brother's ability to reach the high spot. He turned away and busied himself with examining a duplicate set, lower down than the first, when a flash of movement ahead of him drew his eye.

He stood immediately, his hand bringing up the automatic and pointing it in the direction of the passing shadow. Sam heard the quiet click of the safety being thumbed off of the .45 and he shifted to see what had suddenly caused Dean to go into defensive auto-pilot.

Both hunters remained frozen for a palpable moment. Highly honed senses on full alert, they both scanned the forest surrounding them. Another quick blur, more birds startled into the air, and Dean charged off deeper into the woods with Sam a step behind him.

As his feet carried him haphazardly forward, Dean thought he could just make out the outline of the creature. Not as imposing as the claw marks and bizarre tracks might have led him to believe, he raced ahead trying to catch a full glimpse of the thing. A fast twist then turn around a large cluster of trees and just as quickly, the creature had vanished.

Dean skidded to a halt, his head turning rapidly from side to side as he hunted for another sign of their prey. Sam stopped next to him, his chest heaving breathlessly. He hadn't seen whatever Dean had been chasing after, instinctively following his brother and trusting his adept hunting skills.

"Dean, what did you see?" Sam asked, but before his brother could reply, an unearthly scream ripped through the silent forest.

Both hunters spun around, unable to pinpoint the origin of the horrific noise. It sounded again, sending an involuntary chill down Dean's spine as he twisted, his gun seeking a viable target.

One last screech echoed between the trees and then just as suddenly the woods returned to the deafening silence. Dean's arm remained rigid, his weapon at ready for a few moments more. When there was no further noise or movement, he relaxed and returned the automatic to the inside of his jacket. Turning to Sam, he finally answered his brother's earlier question.

"I don't know what I saw, not for sure, but that howl was definitely not human and definitely not a bear," he admitted. Looking quickly about them, Dean noticed that the afternoon sun was slowly giving way to the twilight of early evening. The sensation of being watched had returned and there was no way that he wanted them to be out in the woods after dark with whatever had just made that noise.

Turning to face his brother, Dean continued. "Let's get out of here Sam. It's getting dark and we aren't prepared for a night hunt. I'm not looking for a repeat of Blackwater Ridge."

"Dean, we've got the trail ... " Sam began.

"And it'll be here in the morning. We'll come back first thing Sam. If that thing has been around over three hundred years, one more day won't make a difference," Dean ordered as he started back the way they came.

Sam trudged along behind him, irritated that they were walking away when it seemed as though they were so close to discovering the creature. But he had to admit that his brother was right: one more day wouldn't make a difference. Truth be told, he was exhausted, as much from the cuts and bruises as from the recent lack of sleep.

As they neared the outer edge of the pines, the old house looming in the foreground, Dean turned back to look at the darkening forest. He knew the shadows were nothing more than the waning light of day reflecting off the tall trees, but he felt like ethereal eyes were watching them again. Just as he placed an arm behind Sam

to usher his sibling further away from the woodland's edge, out of the corner of his eye he spotted the creature, a misshapen head peeking from around the side of a large pine, staring back at him.

From that distance, the thing seemed human, almost sad, but definitely not threatening and for a moment, Dean again found himself disbelieving the legend and lore. In the split second it took for Dean to blink, just as mysteriously, it was gone. The unseen flutter of flapping wings rose above the hunters' heads and a final screech from the treetops spurred the brothers on toward the waiting security of the Impala.

* * * *

Motel – Later that night

Sam lay staring up at the popcorn ceiling; the occasional flash of a car headlight from the street out front pierced the partially drawn curtains and illuminated the darkened motel room. To his left, Dean lay on a duplicate twin bed, covers twisted about his body as he was consumed in fitful slumber. As Sam listened, he could hear the occasional groan escape his brother as Dean tossed and turned.

Usually one that slept dead to the world, ever since returning from Haris' clutches, Sam had noticed that Dean's sleep was now marked by disturbing shouts and screams. He could only imagine what was haunting his brother's dreams and deep down he knew that the demon inside Dean was likely the culprit as much as the horrors of being held by Haris.

Sam considered waking his brother to help stop whatever nightmare was currently playing in High Def in his head. He could always use the excuse that he was checking Dean for a concussion; after all, head versus baseball bat certainly warranted it. Except, Sam knew better and he knew that Dean would know the real motivation as well. In the wake of Dean's confession the previous morning, Sam could tell how much the demon possession was weighing both mentally and physically on his older brother. The sheer fact that his usually stoic sibling had voiced his fears spoke volumes about his state of mind.

Sam also knew that the one thing he could attempt to do for him, in light of his unsuccessful search for a permanent fix, was to try and act like nothing had changed between them. The problem was that Sam just couldn't force himself to look past the nearly healed bruise that marked where the Jersey Devil had attacked Dean or the barely injured knuckles that had been open and oozing just twenty four hours before. He couldn't help but remember Meg, falling several stories to the ground only to turn back up like the Energizer Bunny. He also couldn't erase the memory of the real Meg dying on Bobby's floor once the power of the demon inside her was taken away leaving her broken and bleeding body to fend for itself.

Considering Dean's penchant for finding danger, giving it a stiff middle finger and taunting it to do its best, Sam worried that his brother would end up like Meg. Or worse, if Dean kept tapping into the power of the damn thing, how long would it be before the temptation was just too great, the need too extreme to ignore? Either way, Dean would be lost.

His mind caught in the whirlpool of "what-if's" Sam didn't notice that his own breathing was evening out, exhaustion and his own injuries threatening to draw him under the cloak of sleep. He was nearly out, his lids drooping heavily, his muscles relaxing as he unconsciously shifted to a more comfortable position. As his body turned to the left facing his brother's bed, Sam's eyes snapped open, instantly wide awake as he saw Dean sit straight up in bed. Even in the near pitch black of the room, Sam could see the blank stare on Dean's face.

"Dean?" he called out softly. "Are you alright dude?" Dean remained silent, his eyes fixated on some unknown target across the room.

Sam rose up now, turning on the bedside lamp and tossing aside his own blanket. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he paused, waiting for some sort of awareness in his brother, but Dean held rigidly still.

"Dean? You okay?" he asked once again, his bare feet hitting the floor and closing the short distance between the beds. "Is your head alright?" No answer and Sam's worry increased tenfold.

"Is it a nightmare?" Sam chanced the subject as he drew near enough to see his brother's wide eyes.

His brain processed the absence of hazel irises and the appearance of jet black a split second too late as Dean grabbed him by his t-shirt and threw Sam effortlessly, yet viciously, across the room. His body slammed into the far wall with a loud crash, the force of the impact crumbling the aged drywall, knocking the air from his lungs and opening the small cut on his forehead once more.

Dazed, Sam struggled to rise, but Dean was faster and pounced on his brother's prone form like a tiger. Only his training saved him from what happened next as Dean's hand flashed, Bowie knife glinting, removed from its nightly resting place and heading straight for Sam's chest. Sam reacted, his hands closing around Dean's right wrist, the tip of the knife mere inches from tasting his flesh and plunging into his heart.

Dean's face was so close to Sam's that the younger man could feel his brother's warm breath as Dean huffed with exertion, fighting to drive the weapon home. Muscles bulged in Sam's arms as he fought desperately to push his brother back, but he was fighting against stacked odds. Sam against Dean in a physical contest was never a sure bet, but Sam going up against a demon-possessed brother was no contest at all.

Looking up into his brother's dark eyes, nothing familiar remained in Dean's features. Sure, the short cropped brown hair and old scar below his right brow greeted him like always, but now, the animosity contained in the narrowed eyes and the hard, determined stare reflected nothing of the brother that Sam had known all his life. His heart leaped into his throat as he considered that his nightmare and Dean's voiced fears had finally come to pass.

Sam's arms began to shake as his biceps succumbed to the greater strength, the knife inching closer as a sadistic smile of victory spread across Dean's face. Sam tried to get his knee in-between their bodies in an effort to throw his brother off, but Dean shifted his weight, his own leg burrowing into Sam's gut and driving a whoosh of air from him. As Sam struggled to divide his energy between holding off his possessed brother and taking a breath, the knife in Dean's hand nipped the edge of his t-shirt.

Panic drove the younger Winchester as he could feel his own strength failing him. In a last ditch effort to save his own life, Sam screamed out his brother's name, hoping to break through the demon's control and reach that place he prayed some part of his brother remained.

"DEAN!"

The pressure on the blade lessened just slightly but Dean's eyes remained glaring and black.

"Dean, please, fight it!" Sam begged, his hands, still gripping Dean's wrists, visibly shaking as the last bit of strength ebbed out of his forearms. "You can do this Dean. You're stronger than the thing inside you." *You have to be!*

Sam's caught Dean's quick hitch of breath as the hand holding the knife began to tremble. "Fight it Dean! Push it down!" Sam pleaded.

The tremor in Dean's hand increased, moving up his arm to his shoulder then enveloping his entire upper body. His black eyes never fluttered but Sam could detect the inner struggle taking place.

"That's it!" he encouraged, "Keep fighting." *Please, I can't lose you!*

Dean's body began to shake uncontrollably, every muscle twitching spastically as his hand dropped the huge blade to the carpet. Limply, he fell backwards, arms wrapping around his chest as he continued the internal battle.

Sam's arms fell heavily to his sides as he slowly let out the breath that he'd been unconsciously holding during the struggle. He sat there, his mind still stunned by what had happened, the adrenaline rush draining from him.

"NO!" The scream from his brother grabbed Sam's attention and he scrambled over to Dean's side. Tossing the discarded knife across the floor just to be safe, Sam pulled his brother to a seated position as Dean continued to rock back and forth in obvious pain.

His rhythmic movement continued for several minutes more before Dean's hazel eyes flew open and he found himself staring up into the concerned face of his brother. In that instant, there was no place for Dean to hide, no way to mask the pain, confusion and guilt that was being broadcast across his face and was present in the slump of his shoulders.

Forced to look at Sam's eyes, Dean absorbed the concern and the fear present there. He absorbed it until he couldn't bear it anymore, until the only thing he could think about was escaping the shame and condemnation that had begun to eat at his soul. Shrugging off Sam's arm, Dean pushed himself up off the floor and literally bolted like a scared animal into the bathroom.

Sam remained sitting there, hearing the door lock immediately after it slammed shut. He debated his next action. He couldn't blame Dean for what had happened; the situation didn't demand assertion of blame. Still, in the back of his mind, this had been inevitable. How could they all have been so gullible to think that amulet would have kept Dean safe or that Dean could have held out as long as he had? After all, it was only logical that Haris' spawn would have continued its parent's game-plan in pursuing Sam. What better way than to use his own brother to get him?

"Dammit," Sam grumbled. "What the hell am I thinking? This isn't about me, not right now."

His long legs pushed off from the avocado green carpet and he quickly covered the short distance to the bathroom in three long strides. Hovering by the jamb, Sam carefully listened for any sounds coming from behind the locked door.

The silence that emanated was deafening and Sam became even more concerned when he didn't hear even the barest sound of his brother moving about the small space.

"Dean?" he called out quietly, a single tap of his knuckles on the door. "Dean, are you alright?"

"Go away Sam!" The reply came as a whisper and Sam was certain he could detect a hint of quiver to his brother's voice.

In his mind's eye, Sam could picture Dean sitting on the cold tile of the floor, back against the wall, arms wrapped around his knees, as he mentally beat himself up over what had just happened. Sam knew his brother well enough to feel certain that no other single act could shake Dean as much as the thought that he might have hurt his younger sibling.

"Dean, I'm okay. Do you hear me? I'm alright and you're alright now too!" Sam stressed, hoping the words would bring some comfort.

"GO AWAY!" Dean shouted. After a short pause he softly added, "Please Sam, just give me some time, okay?"

"Alright," Sam reluctantly agreed, as he heard the water in the shower begin to fall. Knowing that his brother was going to hide out for a while longer as he attempted to wash away all of the evidence of emotion before reappearing, Sam decided to get some coffee. No way either of them was going back to sleep anytime soon and in light of what had happened, he felt compelled to spend the remainder of the night surfing for some sort of help for Dean.

Pulling on his jeans and shirt from earlier, Sam quickly donned his boots and jacket and stepped outside. As he headed toward the Impala, keys jingling in his hand, a scuffle of noise over his shoulder startled Sam.

Drawing the Glock from the interior pocket of the Carhart, Sam moved carefully in the direction of the sound. As he rounded the edge of the motel, the gun flew up instinctively as Sam nearly ran head first into the night clerk. The barrel of the handgun mere inches from his face, the young man's eyes widened in fear as his arms flew skyward in submission.

Sam immediately lowered the weapon, instantly sorry for scaring the crap out of the innocent man. He quickly stammered out an apology and was about to turn back toward the car when the man's eyes suddenly swirled yellow.

"Gonna shoot an old friend eh' Sammy?" It was the young man's voice, but no mistaking that the tone was pure demon.

"Haris!" Sam exclaimed, his hand holding the weapon swinging back up.

"Please. Put that down. Not like it would do you any good and besides, I've just come to talk to you, nothing more."

"What could you possibly have to say that I give a damn about?" Sam replied, his voice filled with hate and suspicion.

"Oh Sammy, there's so many topics that we could discuss, but how 'bout we start with the little wrestling exhibition you and your brother put on in there tonight?" the demon suggested snidely.

"Get to the point, what do you want? Come to admire your handiwork?" Sam snapped back.

Haris/clerk sighed deeply before replying. "I've come to offer you the deal of a lifetime, Sam, one that you cannot afford to pass up."

"A deal? With you? Do I look that stupid?" Sam asked incredulously.

"No Sam, you look THAT desperate. How long do you think its going to be before that amulet doesn't protect Dean at all? Before that little episode tonight becomes a daily occurrence?"

When Sam didn't respond, Haris continued. "He's losing control Sam. Each and every day that passes, my child is growing stronger in him. Each and every time that Dean uses the power inside him, he gives over that much more control. You know this, you've seen it."

"Tonight was ..." Sam began then halted. What had tonight been other than the obvious? What excuse could Sam offer to Haris that could possibly justify what had happened between the brothers?

"Sam, this has never been about your brother, but before long, it will be the end of him, one way or another. Sooner or later, he'll either submit to my child or worse yet, what happens when Dean is mortally injured?" Haris suggested as if he had somehow tapped into Sam's brain and read the worse fears that had been festering there. "You know that Dean will never stand by and watch you get hurt. He's spent the better part of his life throwing himself in harm's way just so his baby brother would be safe. Do you think for a minute that he's gonna stop that any time soon?"

Sam stared blankly at the clerk's yellow eyes. The face might have seemed innocent, but the words were all demon and they cut into him like sharp daggers made of ice. There was no denying that the spoken words reflected everything that Sam had already thought about, but that didn't lessen their impact.

"How much more does big brother have to sacrifice for his family? For you, Sam? When will enough ever be enough? When he's dead or when he belongs to me forever?" Haris questioned.

Sam remained sullen and silent, absorbing the words and knowing that they weren't threats but actual facts. Demons might lie, but in this case, Haris spoke the truth.

"So what do you want?" Sam finally asked.

The clerk smiled, yellow eyes dancing with excitement. "What I've always wanted Sam, you! You and your gifts in exchange for your brother back; whole, free of my child forever. It's a pretty fair deal to be honest. You never wanted any of this and Dean never should have had to pay for his family's transgressions, never had to suffer to keep you safe from what's inevitable."

"How can I trust you?"

"You can't, but what choice do you have Sam?"

The young man stood there in the cool night breeze contemplating what he was hearing. *Dean never should have had to pay for his family's transgressions, never had to suffer to keep you safe from what's inevitable. Inevitable?* The word hung in Sam's head, sticking to his subconscious like Velcro. If it was true, then why should Dean suffer for no reason? Hadn't he already sacrificed enough? What had Sam ever done that could begin to repay his older brother for all the years of care he had provided and blood that Dean had shed for him?

Still, this was Haris, a demon, not to be trusted. Right?

Sensing the young hunter's reluctance, the demon pulled closer. "The clock's ticking Sam. The offer will expire and in the end I will have both of you. Think about it. You can both be free of me forever and Dean will be safe. You have my word!"

Before Sam could reply, the clerk suddenly dropped to the ground, a scream tearing from his throat as the thick black mist shot from his mouth like a whirlwind and vanished into the surrounding darkness.

Sam waited a minute longer, checked on the now recovering clerk then silently returned to the motel room where the sound of the water falling from the shower could still be heard from behind the closed bathroom door.

* * * *

Motel – Next Morning

How long they both lay in the darkness of the room, both awake, morning light leaking around the edges of the cheap motel curtains, neither knew. Both afraid to acknowledge their own consciousness because that meant they had to face each other, look each other in the eyes and remember the events of the night.

Dean had emerged from the bathroom long after Sam had returned to the room, slipped silently under the covers of his bed and turned to face the wall, his only response to Sam's intake of breath before speaking, a hoarsely whispered, "Don't."

Sleep had finally claimed Sam despite the thoughts wreaking havoc in his mind, racing through corridors of hope only to blunder into dead ends like rats in a maze. He came awake more exhausted than he'd gone to bed, the twinges and aches in his body from their encounter in the basement and his later scuffle with...Dean...making their presence known.

Just as he thought he could lay there no longer, there was a sudden rush of movement from Dean's bed as his older brother rolled to his feet and disappeared into the bathroom without a word. Sighing, Sam hauled himself upright, biting back a groan at the pull from the gashes in his shoulder.

He glanced up as the bathroom door opened and Dean stepped out, pausing, swallowing hard, his eyes flicking once over Sam and then sinking to the floor.

"You okay, Sam?" he asked softly.

Sam stared at him, more to the point, at the place on his forehead that yesterday evening had displayed a large, swollen, bloody bruise, evidence of the bat wielded with great accuracy at Dean's head, and where now there was nothing as a reminder but smooth unmarked skin.

Sam's heart sped up as his eyes dropped to the amulet hanging from Dean's neck, its horned features blacker than coal against Dean's chest. Whatever its ability

to help Dean keep the demon within him at bay, its power was obviously weakening, as evidenced by last night's loss of control.

"The clock's ticking Sam. The offer will expire and in the end I will have both of you. Think about it. You can both be free of me forever and Dean will be safe. You have my word!" The clerk smiled, yellow eyes dancing with excitement.

"How can I trust you?"

"You can't, but what choice do you have Sam?"

"Sam?" Dean asked again, more sharply, eyes on him this time.

"I'm fine, Dean. Really. You...you didn't hurt me." Sam tried to put conviction in his voice that he wasn't afraid; a nonchalance that would make it clear what had happened a few hours ago was nothing. Hardly worth mentioning.

*What choice **did** he have...?*

Sam got up and took Dean's place in the bathroom, showering and changing clothes. When he emerged a short time later, Dean was sitting quietly on the bed staring at the floor, hands clasped between his knees. An inadvertent "good boy" posture.

He looked up as Sam came back in the room. "So, I thought we should maybe go back and talk to a few people before we go back out there," he began as though picking up the thread of an ongoing conversation.

Sam stopped dead, mind skidding and stared at him. "Huh?"

"We need to know more about that house, the people who lived there. Maybe that old guy at the gas station knows more about it. I think we should talk to him again."

Dean's look was so earnest Sam couldn't help but nod. "Sure, just...let me finish getting dressed and we can go." The relief in Dean's face was painful to see and Sam busied himself struggling into a t-shirt to get away from it.

* * * *

"Yeah, I remember the McGregors," Mr. Siddons, (just call me Sid!) smacked his lips over the gaps in his teeth and sucked reflectively on the two remaining front ones as he talked.

Watching him, Dean felt slightly ill and looked away.

"They was nice enough. Little odd, but I guess that's just the way of them arty people." Sid, seated in a broken down dining room chair rocked against the cane gripped in both hands.

"Arty?" Sam asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah! The woman, she was some kind of artist. Strange stuff, but she sold some of her paintin's at some of the shops back then. Tourists bought 'em. Husband was a writer, so he said. Don't know what kinda stuff he wrote. Always seemed upset about stuff. Real nervous sort." Sid snorted. "Especially after the wife got pregnant. Treated her like she'd break if he bumped her too hard. Doted on her he did."

"What happened to them?" Sam glanced at Dean who was staring over Sid's ball capped head. "The house looks like it was deserted."

Sid scratched vigorously and readjusted something at his waist. "They hardly ever come to town after that. Then mostly just him for food and such."

Dean frowned. "What about the baby?"

Sid shrugged. "Heard it died at birth. Really tore the woman up, became a recluse." He leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "Heard she went nuts afterwards, so rumor has it. Husband had to keep her locked up." He looked around. "I know no one ever saw her after that. Later on the sheriff was called out there, heard the wife had committed suicide."

Sam and Dean exchanged grimaces.

Sid leaned back and had a good long suck before he spoke again. "Guy showed up one morning with the car loaded up, filled it with gas and drove off. Just abandoned the house and everything in it. Was months before we realized. Never

sold it, just left it to rot." Sid gazed up at them with the satisfied air of one who has told a story well and awaits his audience's reaction.

Dean turned on his heel and went back to the car.

Sam stared after him and then turned back to Sid, proffering a bill. "Thanks," he said. "We appreciate the information."

Sid made a face and waved the money away. "Boy, don't you know you don't have to pay an old man to talk?" He made a disgusted noise and shook his head.

Sam grinned at him. "Thanks again, then." He pocketed the money and followed after Dean who was leaning on the top of the Impala.

"Sam, something weird is going on around here," he said, obviously agitated.

"I know," Sam replied, opening his side of the car. "We need to go back out to the house." Sam got into the car.

Dean's mouth tightened into a thin line and he blew out a breath before sliding under the wheel. Gravel sprayed as he gunned the big car out of the gas station and back toward the McGregor house.

* * * *

McGregor House

They reached the abandoned house a short time later, the trip out from Pemberton traveled in nearly complete silence. Dean couldn't stop the never-ending replay of last night from screaming through his head. Worse still, Sam was trying to pretend like everything was normal, emphasis on "trying". *"Love ya lil' brother, but you're a crappy actor."*

The house remained much the same as it had been the day before, the smells still as pungent, the warped floor boards still groaning under their weight. Dean immediately pulled his .45 upon entering the front living room. He paused, lifting a hand to signal Sam to stop, while he listened intently for any indication of their baseball-loving attacker.

When his ears picked up nothing more than the mid-morning breeze or the normal sounds of the decrepit house, Dean lowered both his hand and his weapon. Even still, he chose not to replace the gun into his waistband as he trailed behind Sam through the first floor.

A ten minute search of the main level revealed nothing beyond the previous day's finds, so Sam began the climb up the open staircase to the second floor with Dean closely behind him. From the top of the stairs, Sam could see that the upper story consisted of three bedrooms and a solitary bath extending off a single hall. The brothers split up, Sam going into the first bedroom to the right and Dean heading to the left.

Upon entering the room, Sam could instantly tell that the space had been used for something other than a place to sleep. Pieces of untouched canvas rested against a wall, a painter's easel lay collapsed on the floor. He realized that this must have been the woman's studio and as the morning sunlight blazoned through the broken glass, he understood why. The view out into the woods was beautiful, the multihued greens of the tree tops blending seamlessly into the azure of the sky.

As he moved about the room, Sam turned his investigation to include the closet. Within the small, dark confines, he spotted several yellowed canvases tucked carefully into the recesses. He pulled them out as a group, simultaneously shouting for Dean to join him.

With Dean just behind his shoulder, Sam knelt down on the floor and began leafing through the first several paintings. The subject matter was consistently the same; the shape of a little boy, one with a small, brown teddy bear held protectively in its arms, another of a child perched on the lap of a young woman, still others of a

toddler holding a blue blanket. Each of the paintings seemed abstract, unfinished, the facial features of the child purposely left void.

Dean snorted derisively, breaking the silence. "Weird," he muttered. "No wonder they call them starving artists, who the hell buys something like that?"

"I dunno Dean. These have to belong to Elaine McGregor, but why would she paint the pictures that way?" Sam queried, gently laying the prints back onto the floor.

"Well, if the baby was stillborn, maybe she just went nuts dude? Maybe she was just painting what she wished was there. Who knows?"

"Yeah, maybe," Sam responded unconvinced, something suspicious about the paintings tickled the back of his mind, but he couldn't seem to pin it down.

"There's nothing else up here, lets go check out that basement again," Dean suggested as he quickly turned for the door.

* * * *

Dean reached the doorway to the basement first and was intently examining the casing when Sam caught up to him. As his brother pulled away, Sam could see the remnants of a lock hasp attached to the door. Dean held up a rusted padlock, tossing it repeatedly into the air, his eyebrows rose questioningly.

"What do ya think this was for?" he asked, but Sam shrugged, the thoughts going through his mind becoming dark and ugly as he considered the find.

The door creaked eerily as Dean pulled it open, a dim amount of light seeping up the stairwell from the basement door that had been left open the day before. With the .45 in hand again, the elder Winchester led the way cautiously down the stairs.

As his boots struck the bottom step, the repugnant odor assailed Dean's nostrils once more. His free hand went to his nose as the smell of rotting meat filled it. Behind him, Sam groaned as well, as he swallowed hard against the breakfast that was threatening to make a return appearance.

Now in the sunlit basement, the brothers could see the source of the disgusting odor. Like the feeding ground they found in the forest yesterday, the collection of dead animals here in the basement was in various stages of rotting, some obviously fresh and maggot-infested while others were cleaned to the bone. The sheer number of carcasses indicated that the creature had been bringing its kills to the basement for several years.

Moving past the scattered piles of decay, Dean carefully ventured over into a darker corner of the cellar. What he stumbled upon next brought an immediate growl of disgust and Sam rushed to see what his brother had found. In the far corner, half tucked underneath the stairs, a large metal dog kennel sat silently empty.

"What the hell is that?" Dean asked, pointing at the object lying at the bottom of the dog crate, his face curled in disgust. "Please tell me that isn't what I think it is!"

Sam stooped down and lifted the fabric from the floor of the kennel. Soiled and tattered, there was no mistaking what the object was or rather had once been.

"It's a baby blanket, Dean," Sam stated, the suspicions of earlier popping back into his mind.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," Dean threw back sarcastically as he pushed aside another object in the cage with the muzzle of the pistol. Underneath the remnants of yellowed newspaper that had lined the bottom of the cage, several more toys were revealed.

"Dean, the McGregor's baby wasn't stillborn," Sam said, his face scrunching in revulsion as he realized that the cage had not been used to contain an animal.

The older Winchester looked over to his brother, his own brain trying to wrap itself around the physical evidence and deciding that it was too sick for even his jaded psyche to comprehend.

"This is just wrong Sammy. Who does this to a kid?" he asked, imploring his brother to help him make some sense of it. "I mean, our childhoods were screwed, but this..." he paused, his head shaking. "This is just a whole other level of sick."

"I think the paintings are the key Dean. They aren't unfinished; Elaine McGregor just couldn't bear to paint her little boy. There must have been something wrong with him when he was born."

Dean rose to his feet, slamming the cage door shut with as much anger and disgust as he could muster. He watched as Sam reverently laid the blue blanket back on top the kennel.

"Dean, I think you've been right all along," Sam admitted finally.

"I have?" Dean asked surprised. "About what?"

"I don't think our creature is the Jersey Devil. I think it's the ..."

Sam's words were muffled as a loud, angry screech sounded from behind them. Both hunters whirled around, eyes seeking the source. In the dimness of the cellar, Sam could not make out the details of the shape that hovered several feet away, but Dean's vision immediately, unconsciously, switched into demon-mode.

He saw the thing just briefly as it growled at the intruders once more then quickly spun and bolted out of the cellar door. Pushing around his brother, Dean charged after it into the back yard, following the blur towards the woods.

Sam took off after his brother, but despite his long legs, Dean had a head-start and was tearing through the forest in pursuit of the creature. Sam could hear the dry snap of twigs as both the creature and his brother ripped through the thick underbrush. He sped on behind them, stray branches reaching out to snag at his clothing, biting into exposed skin. As he vaulted over a fallen tree trunk, Sam spotted the flash of Dean's dark blue jacket several yards up ahead.

Breathing heavily, he finally caught up to Dean who had stopped and was cautiously peeking from out around a large pine.

"What is it? Where?" Sam asked in between gulps of air. Quietly, Dean lifted his hand, one finger pointing off into the distance ahead of them while the index of his other hand was lifted to his lips in a familiar gesture of silence. Sam noticed in that moment that Dean's .45 had been tucked away, no longer visible in his brother's hand.

As he focused into the distance, he immediately understood why. The creature, by poor definition, was trapped against a sharp hillside; it's only escape to return back the way it had run and into its pursuers. Sam watched as it frantically tried to scramble up the muddy slope, its deformed appendages not equipped for such a task. Exhausted, the creature turned back toward the hunters. Panting heavily, it pushed its back against the hill and began to snarl.

Its spine was so deformed that the creature listed forward at a contorted angle, its arms reaching out defensively, claw-like fingernails slashing pathetically at the air as it attempted to look threatening. Covered in layers of dried mud, long matted hair clung to its naked frame, partially obscuring its face. As it continued to thrash about, the hair flew away briefly and both Sam and Dean simultaneously inhaled sharply.

The creature's misshapen head revealed a twisted mouth with long teeth that looked like they belonged to a predator. Ears hung low on either side of the skull and the thing's nose was more snout than anything else. But as the brothers continued to look, it was the creature's eyes that caught their attention. Sky blue, as crystal clear as any that ever graced a human face; eyes that showed fear and implored mercy at the same time.

"Dean," Sam gasped, the stark reality sinking in. "It's a just a kid!"

* * * *

The Pine Barrens

It watched the backyard as it had been doing for some time, curiosity blending with boredom and driving it closer to the edge of the woods than it usually dared. It was a sunny summer day, the earth warmed by a week's worth of heat and humidity, and the occupants of the house had ventured outside the familiar confines.

As it watched intently from the safety of the dense cover, the female gently spread a blanket on the ground and placed a small one carefully on the center of it. She sat down beside the squealing bundle and began to shake a small object in front of it. The female smiled at the little one, her face glowing as she played with her offspring.

The creature watched a little longer before hunger beckoned it away.

It returned occasionally as the years passed, watching as the female led the offspring out into the sanctuary of the yard. The small one had grown, but moved about in play as though its body had not been designed for normal movement. As always, the female watched, her smiles always encouraging, her presence ever ready to assist.

Some time later, the creature happened by the forest edge. The yard was overgrown, the house as well beginning to show signs of neglect.

It heard the offspring as it played, adapting to its physical limitations, the small one ambling around the yard chasing a yellow ball. Oblivious to its surroundings, the offspring seemed content in its game until the door to the structure swung open with a loud crash. The male stormed out of the house, bellowing at the offspring as it cowered in fear. The male reached the offspring and grabbed it ferociously around its arm, dragging it back towards the confines of the building as the small one cried out in pain.

Even after both humans disappeared into the house, the creature could still hear the cries of the small one as the commotion continued and the male still shouted. Eventually, the cries gave way to sobs and the creature watched for a long time after silence returned to the dwelling.

After that, the offspring was never outside, not even on the warmest days. More years passed and the creature sporadically ventured close again. The sounds of violence, of harsh words incomprehensible to the creature, emanated from the house. As the creature listened, all too often it was followed by the softer cries and whimpers of the offspring coming from the basement of the structure.

Days and then weeks pass and only the sounds of the offspring are heard. The creature watched and waited, carefully considering its action until one night, in the cover of the moonless dark, it tore its way into the building.

With acute night vision, the creature could see the offspring cowering behind the wire confines of a pen. It moved cautiously towards the human, not entirely sure why it was risking its own survival after all these years.

It pulled open the cage door with an effortless yank, then stepped back as the offspring cried out in fear. Moving slowly toward the door, it waited to see if the offspring would follow. Slowly, the small one struggled to follow but its deformed feet and starvation-induced weakness dropped it to the ground. Turning back, the creature stooped over and gathered the offspring into the soft folds of its leathered wings.

Tucked safely into the embrace of the Jersey Devil, Elaine McGregor's son knew the warmth of a compassionate touch for the first time in years as he was carried out into the darkness of the Pine Barrens.

* * * *

Back to the Present

Sam and Dean stood in open mouthed disbelief as the "kid" pressed further back against the hillside, cowering, yes, but more like a cornered rat than a frightened child.

Wide blue eyes peered through a tangled mass of golden brown ropes that obscured most of his features and hung halfway down his thin chest. Jagged, uneven teeth, like a jumble of jackstraws were visible in the twisted mouth as the boy cawed at them, making noises that were obviously intended to be threatening, jumping back and forth to swipe the air between them with hands that had fingers fused together into misshapen claws ending in long curved nails.

He stayed hunched to one side and as he turned to scabble once again at the unyielding rock behind him, Sam could see the cruel curve of his spine that produced a hump at his left shoulder and kept him from ever standing straight. Ragged shorts hung precariously around his narrow hips, and even though his visible skin was crisscrossed with old scars and new scrapes he was surprisingly clean. His right foot terminated in a slightly twisted form that only vaguely resembled a foot, but knowing how swiftly the boy could move, apparently it did little to hamper his movements.

Sam's heart twisted and he felt physically ill. Not at the pathetic child before him but at the circumstance that had thrown this innocent into such a life.

"God, Dean..." he choked. "We need to help this kid."

Dean stared at him and then back at the chattering boy. "I'm with you in spirit, dude, but how do you suggest we do that? He doesn't seem real receptive right now." Even as he spoke though, he was moving closer to the kid, crouching down slightly and extending a hand.

"It's okay," he said as softly as he could and still be heard over the incessant noise. "We won't hurt you..." He doubted that the words themselves mattered as much as the tone in which they were spoken. Each step closer he came, the boy pressed further back into the rock face.

Dean could feel Sam moving up behind him. "Stop, man," he snapped. "It's too much."

He went down on one knee and fumbled in his jacket pocket, coming up with a slightly melted candy bar which he carefully peeled from the wrapper and held out.

The boy instantly stopped keening and cocked his head, sniffing audibly, watching Dean's hand suspiciously.

Dean wagged the candy bar back and forth. "It's okay," he murmured. "It's good..." he took a small bite and chewed it with exaggerated pleasure, holding it back out. "Mmmm," he said, watching as the boy crept forward, hand preceding him. Dean grimaced at the sight of the fused fingers as they extended toward him. Just as they closed clumsily on the candy, Dean's other hand clamped on the boy's wrist.

At that point all hell broke loose.

Shrill screaming filled the clearing, making their eardrums ring. Dean tried to get the kid in a stronger hold, Sam rushing to help him.

"For God's sake shut him up!!!" Dean yelled, trying to hold the pin wheeling arms and legs of the kid as he threw himself about wildly trying to break Dean's hold and effectively keeping Sam at bay.

Dean howled as broken teeth sank into his forearm. "*Son of a bitch!!!*"

All three froze as a screech unlike anything they had ever heard came from overhead and a large, dark form hurtled out of the trees above them striking the three and sending them all sprawling.

The boy scrambled into the underbrush on his hands and knees, peering out from the foliage as the new player in the game knocked Dean aside as he struggled to his feet, throwing him into the rocky outcropping.

Sam barely registered what had hit them as it turned from Dean's slumped body and swooped down on him again, a flurry of wide leathery wings, fur and teeth in a long horse-like face. He rolled frantically, feeling claws re-split the skin of his barely healing shoulder, the warmth of blood soaking his shirt instantly. The unearthly shrieking went on and on as the creature attacked relentlessly, making it impossible for Sam to do more than try to protect his face and midsection as talons ripped at him

and the heavy wings battered him back and forth. He was dimly aware of Dean staggering upright only to be knocked aside once again by the leathery appendages of the beast.

Dean fell back, head ringing. The wings slashing through the air over Sam's writhing body made it impossible for Dean to get to him. Watching in impotent horror as the creature slashed repeatedly at Sam, blood blossoming on his brother's shirt, Dean felt fury overwhelm him ---

I'm here, use me! We can save him!

--- and with that came a surge of power that felt so right, so necessary, that he embraced it wholeheartedly without thought, welcoming it ... *wanting it ...*

Eyes midnight black, he launched himself at the creature with a scream of primal anger, his sudden speed allowing him to get under the sweeping wings and slam into its body knocking it away from Sam.

They rolled across the clearing kicking and clawing, enveloped in the cocoon of wings that had wrapped around them both.

Sam dragged himself back out of the way, aching and clawed bloody. He had no weapon and could only watch as Dean and the Jersey Devil came at each other. His heart clutched as he got a good look at Dean's face and saw the obsidian of his eyes.

No God, Dean, No!

Insane and out of control by now, powered by a strength not even close to human, Dean was more than a match for the rapidly weakening creature and from his actions it was obvious he fully intended to kill it.

There was a loud snap as one of the creature's wings was broken and it fell back to the ground with an agonized cry, to lie there with the uninjured wing flopping against the ground.

Dean stood over it, chest heaving, hands fisted, a sadistic smile playing at his lips as he studied his prey. Slowly he reached down and withdrew a blade from his boot sheath and crept forward to kneel on the wing membranes that grew from the creature's sides, effectively holding it down.

Its own chest rising and falling, it watched him with dark, liquid eyes, its head slightly to one side, blood matting the soft light gray fur that covered it. The creature lifted an appendage slightly but let it thump back to the ground, its strength gone.

Dean's smile widened as he raised his blade. The eyes staring at him softened and then the long equine head rolled to the side where the boy crouched in the underbrush, a soft, burbling noise coming from its throat.

Sam was shocked to hear an answering sound from the boy.

Before he could move, the boy suddenly burst from his hiding place and threw himself at Dean, doing his best to stay the arm holding the blade, jabbering incoherently. Dean shoved him away with a hoarse growl but the boy immediately returned, this time throwing himself across the creature's chest, hands clasping around its neck repeating one desperate word over and over.

"Nonononononono!"

Sam saw the blade rise again and struggled to get to his feet. "Dean, no!!!"

The knife halted halfway home as the creature's good wing folded over the boy's body protectively, the soft crooning continuing as the dark eyes stared into Dean's.

From his vantage point, Sam watched as his brother's blade-wielding right arm began to tremble, starting as the slightest tremor to build into a full-on body engulfing spasm. The knife fell to the ground as Dean fell to his knees, hands clutched to his head, groaning deeply as he struggled with himself.

Taking swift advantage of the moment, the Jersey Devil pulled itself away from Dean, dragging itself and the boy as far as it could before what little strength it had left gave out. It crouched over the child, watching Dean with fearful eyes.

After a long moment Dean fell back to the ground, just to lie there, his chest heaving, jagged respirations breaking what, otherwise, was silence. Sam stayed

where he was watching until Dean finally pushed to his feet. Blood trickled down his face and he was scratched but otherwise not worse for wear. He glanced over at the Devil and its charge, his look causing it to pull back again, wing closing more tightly over the boy in a gesture of protection.

Dean turned and moved toward Sam, extending a hand.

Sam couldn't help and would forever regret the flinch as Dean reached for him. Tired hazel eyes reflecting a wound deeper than any the Devil might have inflicted. Dean's mouth tightened and he swallowed, stretching his hand back out, inadvertently having pulled it back at Sam's reaction.

"You okay?"

Sam grabbed Dean's hand and struggled to his feet. "I'll live. It's not as bad as it looks." He cast Dean a sideways look. "Are you all right?"

Dean scrubbed his face. "No," he answered tersely, his eyes studying the cowering creature and boy just a few yards away.

Sam gestured at the Devil. "What are we gonna do about the kid? We can't just leave him with that thing."

Dean sighed. "Why not?" he finally said, turning to look Sam straight in the eye.

Sam stared at him. "Why not? Dean he's human, he needs help, to be with his own kind!"

Dean looked back at the creature, hovering over the boy, making soft noises at each other. His experience with such things was limited but even he recognized the sounds for what they were. Sounds of comfort. Sounds of love.

"Sam, look at that kid, all he's ever gonna be is a freak. If we take him back, what's he gonna have waiting for him? An institution? People who take care of him because they have to, not because they give a damn."

"Dean..."

Dean rubbed his eyes, drawing a deep breath. "Sam, I don't know what that kid's life was like, what it's been like. But we do know that his bastard father drove off and left him to die. For whatever reason, that ...thing...took him in. Protected him. Maybe loves him, or as close to it as it can come. It's all that kid knows, all he has. We can't take that away from him."

He slowly walked over to where his knife lay and retrieved it, holding out his hand placatingly as the Devil hissed and pulled itself and the boy further away.

Sam gaped at him, unable to believe Dean was willing to walk out of here and leave a child in the hands of such a creature.

Dean watched him for a moment, reading his thoughts as clearly as if he had heard them. "Sam, it's not evil. I don't care how it looks, what it's done." He shrugged. "Maybe just because the action seems evil doesn't mean the intentions behind it weren't good."

Sam's mind played a quick rewind of Dean fighting the creature to save Sam, black eyed, insane with power, willing to do anything to protect him. A good intention backed with an evil action.

He dropped his eyes to the ground, then back to the Devil and her child as they clutched each other in want and need. He nodded reluctantly, grimacing as the gashes in his shoulder throbbed.

"Let's go," he said softly.

* * * *

Motel – Later That Evening

Sam towed the remaining water from his shaggy hair as he limped painfully from the steamy bathroom. Dean was waiting, perched on the edge of the bed with their first aid kit in hand. He glanced up as the squeak of the door's hinge signaled Sam's

entrance, taking in the patchwork quilt of bruises across his brother's upper body as well as the strained gait.

He waited until Sam slid into the vinyl chair before rising and moving over to him. With the skill of a surgeon, he began to clean and prep the small laceration on Sam's left shoulder, mindful of his brother's quick intake of air as his fingers touched the wound.

Dean continued on, the needle in his hand carefully weaving in and out of the tissue as he pulled the jagged edges together. He could tell that Sam was enduring the pain, teeth clenched together to prevent any sound from escaping.

Dean relished the silence of the moment, knowing full well that Sam was just dying to break into a discussion about what had happened out in the woods today. If he could only finish suturing, maybe he could then quickly escape to the sanctuary of the bathroom before Sam had the chance to badger him.

"So, we did the right thing? Right, Dean?" Sam asked as his brother visibly cringed. So much for the quick escape! "I mean, leaving that kid out there, that was the right thing to do?"

Dean tried to ignore the question as he knotted the final stitch, purposely pulling hard enough to cause Sam to groan loudly. Regretting it immediately, he softly apologized.

"So, are you deaf or just ignoring me?" Sam queried looking back over his shoulder at Dean and sucking in another breath as his brother finished his repairs by taping down a bandage over his handiwork.

Dean sighed audibly, moving away as he gathered up the remainder of the supplies. He didn't want to think about it, didn't want to consider the right or wrong of the decision, the good or evil of the Devil. *Or the good and evil inside himself.* Mostly, Dean wanted a shower, as hot a one as he could stand, followed by a bottle of whiskey: anything that could banish the bone-numbing chill that had gripped him for days.

Looking back at Sam, he knew he wasn't going to get any of that, not right at the moment at least. Sam was a talker and he wanted to talk right now. Dean knew that he might as well get it over with.

"Sam, I don't know what you want to hear from me. Should we have left the kid out there in the wild? Yes, no, maybe? He's been surviving this long, so he's obviously adapted."

"But Dean, to leave him with that ..." Sam's voice trailed off as he shook his head, but Dean reacted to the unfinished sentence.

"What Sam? You were gonna say to leave the boy with the monster, something so innocent with something so evil, right?" Dean demanded, his face suddenly taut as he challenged his brother. "I mean, after all, how can something so inherently evil possibly have any redeeming qualities? Or were you thinking that maybe good will eventually get turned to evil if it hangs out with it long enough?"

Sam caught the twist to the conversation and he also didn't miss that as Dean tinkered with his belongings he swiftly tossed his sheathed Bowie into his duffel instead of under his pillow as was the norm.

"Dean," Sam began calmly, "that's not what I meant. I get that the Devil has been taking care of the boy, probably better than the kid's own dad ever did. I'm just saying that shouldn't we have brought him back, to civilization, to where he could get some help?"

"Help? Sure, bring him back to where people can laugh at him, point fingers at him, hell, maybe even put him in some sort of freak show. I'm sure that'd be just a ton of help for him, Sam!" Dean shouted back, accenting his derision by slamming clean clothes down on the bed. "Might as well put a bullet in his head and save the poor kid the pain of people treating him like he's an animal." he added under his breath.

Sam rose from the chair, unable to bite back the words that had been threatening for the past couple days.

"Let's cut to the chase Dean. What are we really talking about here? That kid or you?"

"Hey, you started this conversation ..." Dean began, but Sam moved right up in his face, uncomfortably close and intentionally barring his brother from any escape.

"Yeah, I started it and I'm gonna continue it. So let me begin by making this perfectly clear, I DO NOT think you're evil. I don't blame you for what's happened to you. But Dean," he paused, running a nervous hand through the still-damp hair on his head. "I know what you've been doing. I know that you've been tapping into the demon's power. And it scares me Dean"

"Dude, that thing was killing you, I didn't have a choice!"

"I'm not talking about just today Dean. I know that you think that you're doing it for all the right reasons, but every time you do, I think you give over a little bit of control, a little bit of yourself."

"Sam ..."

"No Dean, I can see it, I can tell how hard it was for you to push it back down the last time, not to mention last night," Sam continued, instantly regretting bringing up his brother's attack on him as he saw the haunted agony glaze over Dean's face.

Dean eyes, painfully hazel, flashed up at his brother. No amount of alcohol was ever going to erase the memory of last night, not if he lived to be a hundred and took up residence in Lynchburg, Tennessee.

Unable to hide the shame a minute longer, knowing that to stand there one second more was going to make him break apart into pieces that he might not ever be able to reassemble, he resorted to the time tested and true tactic of avoidance. Peeling off his t-shirt and tossing it angrily on the bed, he snatched up the clean jeans and boxers and pushed roughly past Sam towards the bathroom. He could hear, but chose to ignore, Sam's plea for forgiveness as he closed the door and turned the lock.

Sam watched his brother's hasty retreat, tried to call him back even though he knew that it wouldn't happen. But even as Dean walked away, Sam couldn't help but notice that his brother's upper body was now unmarred despite the physical beating he had suffered earlier in the afternoon. There should have been bruises, claw marks like the ones that covered Sam's own body, but instead, only smooth, tanned skin, lined with the white-raised scars of past hunts.

"You know that Dean will never stand by and watch you get hurt. Sooner or later, he'll either submit to my child or worse yet, what happens when Dean is mortally injured?"

Sam moved to his own bed and yanked on a clean t-shirt. He tied his boots in a huff and pulled on a long-sleeved flannel. Rising, he listened as the water continued to cascade from the shower and having made up his mind, he walked out of the room and into the waiting darkness.

Once outside, Sam silently chastised himself for coming out unarmed, but then considering what he was about to do, weapons wouldn't really matter. He moved to the edge of the building, not entirely sure how he was going to make contact with the demon, never having needed to summon one before. Clearing the corner, he was surprised to see the night clerk waiting there, casually propped against the brick of the building.

"Haris?" Sam questioned.

The clerk's eyes closed slowly, opening to reveal the tell-tale yellow irises.

"Hello again, Sammy. Figured I might see you tonight. How's Dean?"

"You sonofabitch, let's just get done with this. What do I have to do to get my brother free?" Sam asked, trying to force the bravado into his voice.

"Straight to the point huh? No time for pleasantries? Gee, Sam, I was so hoping to be able to chat about world affairs and politics with you. I so rarely enjoy such

stimulating conversation.” The demon paused, sighing audibly. “Okay then, down to business it is. One brother, demon free and clear, in exchange for you.”

“How’s this going to work?” Sam chanced, his hands moving nervously in the pockets of his jeans.

“Very simple, Sam. I’ll remove my child from your brother in exchange for you, body and soul. And you know what the best part is?” As Sam remained silent, Haris continued, “I won’t even collect on your half of the deal until your birthday. How generous is that of me?”

“My birthday, why wait? Why not just take me now?” the young man asked, a mixture of suspicion and fear in his voice.

“Because it’s all part of a greater design, Sammy. You’ll just have to trust me on this. Besides, I’d think you’d be happy to have a little more time with big brother. Maybe get together with Daddy, one last Winchester family reunion. Consider it a buy now, pay later plan.”

Sam fumbled, his mind battling self-preservation against sacrifice. There really wasn’t a question about it, hadn’t he already admitted that when he left the room seeking the demon? *“How much more does big brother have to sacrifice for his family? For you, Sam?”*

Sensing the reluctance, Haris moved closer, sulfur-tainted breath sickeningly close to the young man’s face.

“Second thoughts? Cold feet? Not quite as brave as your big brother are you? I bet Dean would have already shook hands on the deal by now. Shame you don’t give a damn about him as much as he does you. Too bad for Dean I guess,” the demon taunted, turning away.

“Screw you, you bastard!” Sam shouted back, spit flying from his mouth as he reached out to grab the demon/clerk’s arm. “It’s a deal!”

Haris spun back around, a smug smile covering his face. He held out his hand, clawed fingers so closely resembling the hands of the McGregor boy that Sam was taken aback. Slowly, he held out his own, trying to contain the chill that worked over him as the demon snugly clasped his hand.

“Deal, then,” Haris agreed, pumping Sam’s hand rapidly before slowly letting go.

As Sam turned to walk away, his heart thumping wildly in his chest as he sought to distance himself from the demon, Haris called out to him one last time.

“Oh Sam! One more thing.”

The youngest Winchester looked back at the yellow eyes, suspicion returning.

“What?” he asked angrily.

“You must first remove the amulet from around your brother’s neck. I’ll take out my son once it’s off,” Haris instructed. “Then, once it’s removed, you will bring it to me as part of the deal.”

Sam started to refuse, wanting to question why Haris was so interested in the talisman, remembering the special link the strange piece of jewelry held on his brother. He nearly rescinded his agreement, remembering the last time that Dean had been separated from the golden horned figure. What good was it to save his brother from demon possession to turn around and lose him to the broken bond of the amulet?

Instead, he nodded quietly, his mind already formulating a plan. Two could play at a demon’s game.

He walked back to the door of the motel room, pausing briefly as he heard Dean rumbling around the space, apparently out of the safe haven of the shower. Sam took a deep breath, forcing a smile on his face, and opened the door.

* * * *

Dean woke, groaning loudly as an errant sunbeam pierced through the curtains and burned unmercifully into his eyes. He tugged the pillow over his head, praying

that the soft filling would stifle the drum line that was beating out a cadence in his skull.

He lay there unmoving, attempting to force his brain into recalling why he felt like shit. There was usually only one excuse for his current condition and that was most often too much alcohol. Still, he didn't remember drinking that much last night. For that matter, he didn't really remember that much at all.

As the percussion in his head continued to play, he forced himself to retrace last evening's events, if for no other reason than it was less painful to lay there thinking than it was to consider any sort of physical movement.

Dinner. He and Sam had gone to eat at a nearby café, the one with the hideous waitress in the all-too-short skirt. Yeah, he remembered that. With clarity, he recalled his brother suggesting they go for beers at the next door bar. Strange! How many times had Sam ever suggested going out for beer and at a biker-bar no less?

Still, guilt was laying heavily on both Winchester boys and Dean knew that it was his brother's way of trying to play peacemaker over their conversation earlier that evening. In his mind, he could remember Sam buying the first round and then shortly after, the next and then the next. *The boy must've been feeling mighty guilty*, he thought to himself.

Funny though, he couldn't remember how long they'd been there or how many beers he'd drank or even coming back to the motel. He must have downed a whole lot of alcohol for him to be feeling this way, for him to have forgotten the remainder of the evening. He hadn't been that drunk in a long time. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd ever been drunk to the point of completely blacking out. Sam was sure to give him hell over that.

His bladder moaned in protest and Dean realized that the pounding in his skull was no match for the need to get rid of the previous night's excessive booze. Groaning again, he rolled to the edge letting gravity drop his feet to the floor. Pushing up, one hand flying up to grab his head while the other reached for the headboard to steady him, the vertigo was another unfamiliar response to "over-indulging."

Fortunately, the dizziness passed and he stumbled as quietly as possible into the nearby bathroom, pausing as he noticed the still sleeping form of his brother.

"Haha, tied one on too did ya Sammy?"

Inside the familiar quiet of the bathroom, Dean leaned heavily forward on the edge of the sink, head down as he tried to find the daily courage to look in the mirror. Staring down his chest, his eyes widened as he spotted the amulet. His hands reached shakily toward the golden charm, perplexed as he noticed that the brown leather thong was hanging loosely around his neck. Fumbling, he reached behind his head and without thinking, retied the worn string securely.

Still sleep-fogged, he took a deep breath and forced his head up despite the nagging fear. Bloodshot hazel eyes stared back at him from out of the mirror as a wave of relief washed over him.

Dean stared at his reflection for several long minutes when it struck him. Grasping the amulet between the fingers of his right hand, his left rubbed frantically at his eyes.

Gold! Untarnished, unblemished gold gleamed back at him. His breathing increased as he reached deep inside, seeking out the familiar voice that had plagued him for weeks.

"Where are you, you bastard?" he called out, waiting for the gut-wrenching twist that signaled the presence of the demon within him.

Several more minutes passed as Dean continued to wait for the internal reply. When neither the demon's voice nor black eyes reflected back at him, Dean reached a shaking hand out to the mirror, touching it as though he were afraid that it was merely an illusion. Completely awake and alert, no longer concerned by the missing memories of the night before, a broad smile widened across Dean's face.

The demon was gone!

The End