

Episode Seven: Shades of Gray

By Thru Terry's Eyes

Dean leaned back in the stiff, uncomfortable chair and closed his eyes. His head was splitting, his eyes burned, he was sick to his stomach, he couldn't stop coughing, he was filthy and his clothes reeked of smoke. His face and arms were peppered with tiny cuts from flying glass and bits of debris, but after his third and violent refusal of assistance he had been left to his own devices as he waited, yet again, for someone to come tell him if Sam was gonna be okay. No matter how crappy he felt he was still doing better than Sam.

The emergency room wasn't crowded at three am, but the few people and staff bustling about now cast him nervous looks and wisely gave him a wide berth.

Finally, he pushed to his feet, muscles protesting, the smell of himself just becoming too much for his stomach to deal with. He coughed into his hands, clearing his throat and wheezing. Moving slowly to the front desk he rolled his eyes when the young girl behind the desk flinched back at the sight of him. A far cry from the reaction he usually got from pretty girls.

"Listen," he began hoarsely. "I'm gonna go to the men's room and clean up a little, if the doctor comes out."

"You're Mr. Winstead, right?" she consulted a clipboard in front of her. Her face softened as looked at him "Are you sure you don't want to have one of the doctors take a look at you?"

He shook his head, tired of the argument, coughing into his fist. "I'm fine. I just need to get some of this off of me."

She nodded. "If the doctor comes before you get back, I'll page you. You can hear the speakers in the bathroom." She smiled uncertainly at him.

"I'll just be a few minutes, thanks." He would have smiled back but his face refused to cooperate.

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The bathroom was too bright and made his temples throb when the light hit his eyes which in turn made his nausea worse. He swore and turned off one bank of lights, preferring the semi-gloom.

Holding his fist against his mouth until he got himself under control, he finally leaned over the sink and studied his blood flecked face with disgust. His eyes were totally bloodshot, blinking felt like his lids were dragging over cardboard.

But he could still see.

It was just a simple salt and burn. This shouldn't have happened. Sam shouldn't be here.

Pulling off his burnt over shirt and the t-shirt underneath, he jerked the handle to the cold water and roughly started to scrub the dirt and blood from his arm's and face.

* * * *

Earlier that evening

The coffin was under the floorboards of the old house, not really much more than a pine box.

Dean couldn't get a good swing from his position and dropped down next to the box, swinging the pickaxe with enthusiasm, enjoying the crunch as the blade bit into the dry old wood.

Dean gagged as the coffin lid broke open, a thick, eye stinging odor billowing out of the box, so strong it was almost visible. He coughed helplessly, almost doubling over, pulling back from the rank smell, eyes watering. He stared into the casket in surprise.

What the...?

The withered corpse had a bizarre greenish glow that even he found creepy. He'd never seen anything like it in his not inconsiderable experience.

Across from him Sam also started coughing. "Holy crap!" he exclaimed, pawing at his eyes. "Man, that stings! Jeez, what the hell would make it glow like that?"

"Hell, who cares?!" Dean replied, unnerved by the eerie sight. "Let's burn the mother and get outta here! Where's the salt?"

Sam's eyes were streaming and he couldn't see a damned thing. He could smell gasoline and hear it as Dean poured it into the coffin. Rubbing roughly at his eyes, he made out the canister of salt on the floor to the side of his foot. He reached down to retrieve it, the burn in his eyes getting stronger as he got closer to the corpse. He shook out a large amount of salt over the body, as Dean pulled himself out of the hole.

Sam stepped back. Dean lit a match, pausing briefly as he always did for reasons he could not have explained, then flicked the flame into the makeshift grave, fascinated by the green hued flames as they danced upwards.

Dean turned away as the body was rapidly consumed, reaching for the bag of tools. There was an odd, crackling pop and he was thrown sideways by the force of the unexpected explosion of heat and fury from the body lying in its burning casket. A light brighter than the biggest road flare ever burst outward from the hole, turning the entire room a sick green-white.

Slumped against the wall where he had been tossed by the blast, deafened and stunned, arms instinctively covering his head, he was dimly aware of Sam yelling over the ringing in his ears and the sting of numerous cuts peppering his exposed skin. He could smell smoke and hear the crackle of flames.

"Sam!" He rolled to a crouching position and squinted against the waning green glow and the rising flames that were eating at the old wood of the floor. "SAM!"

"Here!" Sam croaked and Dean saw him then, lying on his side, coughing, his arm over his eyes. Dean was horrified to see Sam's jacket was burning. He stumbled over to Sam and roughly rolled him over, beating out the flames. Luckily Sam's multiple layers of clothing protected him from any serious damage.

"We gotta get outta here!" Dean exclaimed, trying to drag Sam to his feet and pull him to the door, kicking the tool bag ahead of him and off the porch.

Sam tried to help and between the two of them they managed to stagger through the heavy smoke and out the door where they literally fell down the steps and into the dark yard, ending up tangled together on the cold ground.

Dean groaned, coughing, laying there for a moment before pulling himself free of Sam's legs. He looked back at the blazing building, the flames sporting a greenish tinge. "What the hell was on that body?"

Behind him Sam was still coughing, rubbing at his burning, watery eyes, his face smudged with soot and trickles of blood. He groaned and swore. "Agh...my eyes..."

Dean turned back and squinted at Sam's hunched form in the shifting light. He pulled himself closer and clasped Sam's arm. "Sam, you okay?" he demanded, trying to see in the flickering shadows. "Sam...what is it? What's wrong?" Dean's already thudding heart began to race.

"I was looking right at it when it blew up..."

“Sam, for God’s sake...what?!” Dean forced Sam’s hands away from his face and caught his chin in his hand, his breath stopping as Sam’s face was turned toward the unsteady light from the flames.

The skin of Sam’s face was red and scorched looking, especially around his scrunched closed eyes. The tears that ran freely down his face left bloody tracks in their wake.

“Open your eyes!” Dean barked.

“I can’t!” he cried. He did his best but Dean finally used his own fingers to pry Sam lids open, unable to stop the sound he made as he got a good look at the milky clouds that covered Sam’s normally dark, blue- green irises, swimming in pools of watery blood. *Aw, shit!!!*

Sam cried out, clapping his hands back over his eyes. “Dean...I can’t see! God, it hurts!!!”

Dean grabbed him and hauled Sam to his feet. “C’mon! It’ll be okay, but we gotta get you some help!” He pulled Sam along to the car and pushed him into the passenger side.

He knew they had no saline in the first aid kit so he jerked up a half-drunk bottle of water and used it to soak one of the motel towels they were always stealing and throwing into the back seat to use as rags or bandages as the occasion warranted.

“Look at me!” he ordered, pulling Sam’s head back and pouring the rest of the water into his eyes. Sam yelled and tried to pull away but Dean’s fingers were locked into Sam’s hair like iron. “Hold still!” Dean snarled. He pressed the wet towel over Sam’s eyes. “Hold that there!” he helped Sam pull his legs into the car.

Moaning, Sam complied, leaning forward, water dripping on the legs of his jeans.

Dean slammed the passenger door and ran to his side, leaping under the wheel and had the engine going before the door had shut.

The ride to hospital in town was a nightmare. Dean’s own eyes were burning and watering, making it difficult to see and he was starting to feel sick, he knew whatever the hell had been on that body was affecting him but compared to Sam, who was twisting in pain, rocking back and forth with the wet towel gripped to his face, making soft sounds of pain, his own discomfort was nothing.

“I’m gonna be sick, Dean...” Sam groaned.

Dean pulled over while Sam vomited helplessly, almost overcome himself, trying not to listen or see, helped Sam back into the car and gunned it forward.

“Hang on, Sam!” He said, “Just hang on.”

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Another twenty minutes oozed by after he returned from the men’s room. He’d left his scorched shirt in the trash and wore only the dark gray tee that had been underneath. His jeans were still dirty and he still smelled of smoke but it wasn’t as bad now. His face and arms stung from the multitude of tiny cuts but they were no big deal. He’d washed out his eyes and that had helped a lot, they were still very bloodshot but the sting had lessened considerably. The pounding in his head, however, was almost overwhelming, but he refused to acknowledge it. He took uneasy sips of a coke he had gotten from the machine, trying to settle his stomach.

Shifting impatiently, he squinted at the newspaper left in pieces on the chair next to him, a local rag, called the Riverside Daily News. Even worried and exhausted he shook his head. Where the hell did people get the names for their towns? He knew for a fact the closest thing to a river within a hundred miles was the stream of water from the old leaking water tower they’d seen at the edge of town.

Despite himself, one headline caught his eye and he turned the paper so he could read it better.

“Sudden upsurge in violence puzzles police and city officials—”

"Mr. Winstead?" A soft voice beside him jerked Dean to his feet.

"Yeah, how's my brother? Can I see him? Is he okay?" The words tumbled from his mouth unchecked and the woman watching him smiled tolerantly and held up her hand.

"Hello, Mr. Winstead, I'm Dr. Curtis. I just finished examining your brother—"

"Please," Dean broke in, "Can I see him? I need to see him."

Dr. Curtis paused as she started to speak, but then nodded in the face of Dean's obvious agitation. "Were you caught in this explosion too? Has anyone had a look at you?"

Dean shook his head impatiently; mistake. "I'm fine, I just need to see Sam!"

She nodded. "Of course, we can talk in the exam room. He's right down here." She moved down the hall with Dean hot on her heels.

Dean took a breath as he followed her into the dimly lit exam room. A nurse was taking some notes, talking softly to Sam, patting him on the arm.

As she looked up and moved aside, Dean stopped and bit his lip, his mouth going dry. Sam was lying on the exam bed, partially raised up, bare-chested with a light blanket pulled over him. An IV ran to one arm and he was hooked to some kind of monitor. His face was turned toward Dean, his eyes and upper face covered with gauze bandages, large pads over his eyes visible under the wrappings. The skin Dean could see of his face and chest was blotched red and white and dotted with butterfly closures and antiseptic.

Guilt washed over him a flood. This was so his fault...

"Can my brother come in now?" Sam was saying in a hoarse, slightly slurred voice. The mark of a good pain killer.

That released Dean from his freeze and he immediately crossed the room and touched Sam's arm.

"I'm right here, Sam. Sorry, they wouldn't let me in before. I tried."

Sam laughed softly, ending in a grimacing cough. "Yeah, I heard." He visibly relaxed now that Dean was with him. His hand fell on Dean's arm and tightened. "Are...you okay?"

Dean forced a laugh. "Dude, I'm always okay." Even under bandages, Dean could recognize Sam's searching stare and it was worse bandaged than the puppy dog eyes were uncovered.

"I'm not...kidding, Dean," he replied as sharply as he could under the circumstances.

"Sam, I'm fine, really. Not a scratch. What about you, man?" Dean turned back to Dr. Curtis who waited with surprising patience. "So what's the story? He's gonna be okay, right?" he gestured across his own eyes.

"It's a chemical flash burn. I'd say phosphorus based, although it's different from the ones I've seen before. He couldn't tell us what happened in any real detail, he said it happened too fast. The burns on his skin are superficial and should heal without any problems. His eyes are another matter, we explained the situation to Sam. His corneas were burned."

Dean looked horrified and turned to stare at Sam who lay still facing the ceiling, his hand still clasped on Dean's arm.

"Burned? But, they'll heal right?" he tried to keep his voice even.

Dr. Curtis gave him a small smile. "It's not unlike what happens to people who damage their eyes by staring at the sun for too long. Up to a point their eyes can recover, but if the damage is too great..."

"So what are you saying?" Dean demanded. "Sam's gonna be blind?! Like hell!" As though he could control it by saying the words. Dean sank down on the edge of Sam's bed, his legs suddenly weak. "Just cut to the chase, for God's sake."

"Dean, s'okay..." Sam broke in softly.

"That's not what I'm saying, Mr. Winstead," Dr. Curtis replied gently. "We don't know what he was burned with for sure, and we can only assess the damage up to a

point. We need to give his eyes time to recover, get a better idea of what kind of damage was actually done. It's a flash burn, chances are he'll recover without problems, but I wouldn't be doing you a service by not being honest." She picked up the clipboard the nurse had been writing on.

"We've given Sam a hefty antibiotic, treated the burns and given him something for the pain and nausea he's experiencing. We'd like to keep him overnight for observation, see how he's doing tomorrow. His treatment requires drops and ointment in his eyes every few hours, and rest. He needs to stay out of bright lights. I'll arrange for his admittance and a room—"

"Dean..." Sam pulled at Dean's arm "Dean, I do' wanna stay here..." He floundered clumsily on the bed.

Dean pressed a hand against his chest and pushed him back. "Sam, it's okay, calm down, it's just one night, I'll stay with you. It'll be okay--"

Sam huffed out an unhappy sigh, released Dean's arm and turned toward the wall, sinking back into the bed.

Dr. Curtis smiled sympathetically. "The nurse will be back in a minute and get him ready to move to a room. It shouldn't be long."

Dean waited until the door closed behind her and then kicked a stool over by Sam's bed and sank into it. He reached out and laid a hand on Sam's arm. "Sam..." he began, stopped, jaw muscles working. He cleared his throat and tried again. "God, Sam, I'm so sorry." He rubbed a hand over his own eyes, scrubbing it through his raggedly cut hair.

Sam's head rolled back toward Dean. "Whafor?" He raised one hand to the bandages but Dean caught it and moved it away.

"For this...I should have waited...figured out what that stuff was. This didn't have to happen--"

Dean ducked his head, voice faltering, as realization that Sammy could be blinded for life sank in with a bang. ...because of him.

"Crap, Dean..." Even drowsy with drugs Sam still managed to sound disgusted. "S'not your fault, dude. Shit happens. Jus' happens...some...times..." Slowly, Sam's head drifted to the side and his breathing evened out. The fingers Dean still held in his hand, relaxed and slipped through his grip to fall softly on the bed.

Dean sighed and reached out to brush Sam's slightly singed hair out of his face. He leaned forward on his elbows, resting his aching head on a forearm, fingers of one hand stroking Sam's hair gently and sat like that until the nurse came to take Sam to his room.

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Dean jerked when the door to Sam's room opened and the lights flicked on overhead, the stab of light sending fresh pulses of pain through his head. The nurse who entered with a tray, paused when she heard Dean groan and lean forward with his hands over his eyes.

"Are you alright?" She asked, concerned, setting her tray down on the table by Sam's bed.

"Yeah..." Dean ground out, rubbing his neck. "Headache I can't shake..." He pushed wearily to his feet, blinking. The clock on the wall read 6 am.

"Let me take care of your brother and I'll see if I can get you something for your head." She smiled and turned back to Sam, who was starting to stir, moaning softly.

Dean rubbed his forehead, grimacing. "Thanks, but I'm more concerned about Sam than me. What are you gonna do?"

"I need to change the dressing and put the drops in his eyes. You need to watch what I do and I'll explain, you'll need to help him with this when he's released." She reached out and gave Sam's shoulder a gentle shake.

"Sam? Wake up for me..."

Sam jerked up with a gasp, hand flying to his face. "No--Dean!"

Dean quickly stepped up and caught Sam's arm. "I'm right here, Sam. It's okay, it's okay. She just wants to fix your bandages, show me how to put in the drops and stuff."

Sam allowed Dean to push him back, breathing slowing. "O-okay, he murmured, hand brushing absently at his chest.

"How you feelin'?" Dean asked.

Sam shrugged. "Head hurts. My eyes..." his voice was still raw. He cleared his throat, leaning his head back. "Thirsty..."

Dean grabbed the insulated mug of water and held the straw to Sam's lips. "Here you go." He waited while Sam drank several swallows.

"Just lie still Sam and this won't take long." The nurse, her nametag read Julie, began to unwrap the bandages on his eyes until only the pads were left. The skin around his eyes was still red and raw looking. "I have some drops for the pain in your eyes. I'm going to turn the lights down so they won't bother you so much, so don't worry if the room seems dim." Julie flipped all the lights off except a small one over the bed.

Dean looked down as Sam's hand felt across the bed until it encountered Dean's, fingers curling through his. Instead of pulling away he tightened his grip. "S'okay, Sammy," he said softly.

"I'm gonna take the pads off now, you ready?"

His fingers jerked in Dean's grip. He swallowed and nodded. "Go ahead."

Dean watched intently as Julie slowly removed the pads from Sam's eyes, grimacing at the red, swollen flesh.

"Don't try and open them yet," she said, gently wiping his eyes with a saline soaked cotton ball. "Can you open them now?"

His eyelids twitched as he tried to lift them, she carefully helped him and after a moment he could open them a crack, but snapped them shut again with a soft cry, his hands coming up instinctively to block the light. "Burns-" he hissed.

"Give yourself a second to adjust to the light. Try again."

Tears ran from the corners of his eyes as he blinked against even the small but still intrusive, amount of light in the room, but he managed to open them a bit more and keep them open. It hurt like hell but he felt a small thrill of relief as he dimly made out dark and light areas. It was like watching terrible black and white TV but at least it was something other than the blackness he'd been expecting. He turned his head and made out shifting blackness around a slightly lighter form that he associated with the death grip on his hand.

"Dean?"

Dean released the breath he'd been holding and sucked in a fresh one, breaking into a smile. "Yeah, it's me Sam." His voice caught. "Whadaya see, man?"

"Dark, its all shadows, but I can kind of make out light areas." He closed his eyes again, covering them with one hand. "Makes me kind of dizzy."

Julie smiled at Dean's look. "Some of that is from the medicine, if you've ever had your eyes dilated it's a little like that. Makes it hard to focus. The doctor will be in for rounds shortly. I'm going to put these drops and ointment in your eyes. I'm not going to rewrap them, just tape them lightly in place but you need to leave the pads alone, okay? They'll help block the light."

Sam nodded and lay back as still as he could while she ran a line of ointment along his lids and followed with three drops from a small bottle. It stung at first but then a blissful numbness overcame it. She laid fresh pads on his eyes and taped them in place, checked his IV and patted his shoulder again.

"There, all done. That wasn't so bad, now was it?"

Sam moved his mouth in a slight smile.

"I'll get you something for your headache," Julie said to Dean as she picked up her tray and left the room.

"Thanks," Dean replied.

"What's wrong with your head?" Sam murmured.

"Nothin', it's just a headache. I think from whatever the hell was all over that body." He settled back into the chair next to Sam's bed. "How you feel, otherwise?"

Sam's shoulders moved in a slight shrug. "Head hurts. Kinda sick to my stomach, but not so bad overall." He sighed. "I wanta leave."

"We will, dude. We will. Let's just let the doc have a look at you. Besides breakfast'll be here soon, never turn down a free meal."

Sam made a face. "You can have it. I'm not sure I could find my mouth right now, even if I was hungry."

Dean laughed.

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Sam had been released despite Dr. Curtis' desire to keep him for another day, but after admitting that there really wasn't anything they could do at the hospital for Sam that Dean wasn't capable of doing other than just observe him, he was adamant that he be released.

Dean agreed to set up an appointment at the hospital clinic for Sam to be checked in a couple of days and that if anything changed he would bring Sam back immediately. He made sure he understood Sam's treatment schedule and what to watch for.

Sam had been awarded a pair of wraparound sunglasses and a free ride in a wheelchair down to the Impala. Sliding into the leather seats was almost like going home, even if he couldn't see it. He could feel it and he could smell it and a part of him finally understood what it was about the car that meant so much to Dean.

Dean settled in the driver's side and glanced at Sam who was resting his head on a bunched up jacket pressed against the window. "You okay?"

"Fine," Sam replied. "Let's go."

A new sensation manifested itself on the drive back to the motel as Sam discovered that sleeping in a car was one thing, but, for him at least, riding in it with his eyes closed but aware of the movement produced car sickness with a vengeance. By the time they reached the motel, he was so dizzy and sick he almost couldn't keep his feet as Dean helped him out of the car.

"Man, what's wrong?" Dean asked anxiously, as Sam clutched at him, knees almost buckling.

"I gotta lie down," Sam groaned. "I gotta stop moving or I'm gonna be sick-"

"Well, hang on for just minute-" Dean managed to maneuver Sam towards the door of their room, fumble the key into the lock and get the door open in a minimum of time. He got Sam over to the bed and down with relief.

Sam rolled to his side and pulled his legs up, hands over his face, moaning softly.

Feeling a little helpless, Dean knelt down next to the bed. "Are you in pain? Can I do anything? Getcha anything?"

Sam moved his head in a tiny negative. "I just wanta lie still for a while. I'm okay. Really."

"Okay," Dean replied reluctantly. He pushed himself up and back onto the other bed. He glanced at his watch. "I gotta put drops and stuff in your eyes in an hour, man. Get some rest. If you need anything let me know. I'll be right here."

Sam made a soft sound Dean took as assent and lay still, save his breathing.

Glancing around, Dean spotted the remote for the TV. He was desperately tired and his muscles ached from the collision with the wall yesterday. Maybe he could just rest for a bit and quietly watch some TV, then help Sam with his meds.

He toed off his sneakers and scooted up to the headboard, stuffing the two pillows behind him. He quickly set the alarm on his watch, just in case, and flipped on the

TV, annoyed to discover the only channel was the local station, currently running midday news.

He lay his head back and gazed at the screen for a few minutes before his eyes started to drift closed, his brain absorbing the last few sentences the newscaster spoke before shutting down completely.

“Local authorities are still looking into the sudden increases of domestic violence in the last few weeks, cases of road rage and crime have also been on the rise recently...”

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Sam found waking up without being able to open your eyes a strange experience indeed. Dean had faithfully administered the prescribed medication exactly on time throughout the remainder of the day. He had tried to be gentle but there was no getting around it, it hurt and that was all there was to it until the drops took affect. If Sam moved his head too much, pain would spear him behind his eyes and he would become nauseous.

Sam had managed a few bites of the meal Dean had brought in then had fallen back asleep. He had noticed, each time the pads had come off, the light had been less irritating but when he tried to look at his surroundings it was still nothing but shifting light and dark without detail. Especially around Dean, whom he could identify because he was the only thing in the room that moved and the darkness followed in his wake, hovering around him like a bizarre after image. Most odd was the small red dots he could see drifting in the morass of blackness.

He lay quietly for a few minutes, able to tell it was time for his drops, because his eyes burned. The sticky sensation of the ointment was annoying in its own right and he was tired of having his eyelids pried apart by Dean’s willing, but ,despite his best efforts, rough , fingers.

Experimentally, he slowly pushed himself upright, pleased when he didn’t immediately want to throw up. Giving himself time to acclimate, he listened intently, stunned at how quickly his other senses had stepped in to take up the slack left by his eyes.

He could hear Dean breathing in the next bed, smell the fact that they both needed a shower, nothing so special there, but he could also hear the soft rustle of cloth as Dean shifted ever so slightly in his sleep and he was pretty sure the sound he heard in the wall was the soft scritch of a mouse.

It was interesting, definitely, but not the way he wanted to spend the rest of his life experiencing things.

He very slowly got to his feet, using the wall for support. He forgot the pads on his eyes but felt them as they dropped away. Managing to get his eyes open a crack he looked at the floor to try to make sure he didn’t fall over anything.

He frowned. On one hand his vision was definitely clearer, but everything was darker or lighter tones of gray, like grainy black and white film. He remembered the bedspreads being a red color with blue and yellow swirls. He could see the differences in the pattern but it was bereft of any color at all. More startling was the fact that it took three tries before he could get his hands on the spread at all to bring it up to his face. What the hell was that all about?

He dropped the spread and tried to take a step but somehow the floor wasn’t where it looked like it was and he shifted his weight to the other leg too soon, falling forward with a dull thump to his hands and knees.

Dean was instantly awake and beside him almost before his brain registered the sound of Sam falling. “What the hell! Sam what are you doing? Are you alright?” Dean grabbed Sam and helped him back onto the bed.

“I’m fine, Dean!” Sam said, annoyed. “I was just going into the bathroom-“ he grimaced and held his head, his headache back to vibrant life.

"You shoulda woke me up, man! You can't even see where you're going! Are you sure you're okay?" Dean sat opposite him, leaning forward.

"I'm fine," Sam repeated but with less irritation. "I can see better today, I'm having trouble judging distance, like my depth perception is off." He blinked at Dean. "I misjudged my step is all."

"You can see better?" Dean asked anxiously. "Really? That's great!"

"Yeah, but nothing has any color, it's all black and white. Or gray." Sam gently rubbed his eyelids.

Dean frowned. "No color? Whadaya mean no color? Like black and white? Sam?"

Sam shrugged, "More like different shades of gray, everything is still so dark, but I can kinda make out the shapes and stuff."

"Do you wanta go back to the doctor's? Check it out?"

Sam shook his head slightly. "No, let's see if it clears up on its own. It's probably just a side effect."

Dean opened his mouth to comment, starting as his watch alarm went off. "Dude, we gotta do your eyes." He got up and went into the bathroom.

Sam lifted his face and watched Dean, very blurry, but he could definitely tell it was Dean this time, move into the next room. Puzzled and slightly disconcerted by the shadows that swirled around Dean's form as he moved. Everywhere he moved they expanded and contracted around him, draped themselves over him and danced around him when he stood still.

Sam was staring at him when Dean returned with the drops, ointment, saline and a wet, warm washcloth to bathe Sam's eyes with before medicating him again.

"This won't take long," Dean began, stopping as he noticed Sam frowning at him. "What?" He watched as Sam stretched out a hand and brushed it against Dean's arm.

To Sam, his fingers sank into the blackness that was wrapped around Dean's arm. It actually dissolved away from his touch. Even though he felt nothing, he pulled his hand away. The shadow returned, slithering up Dean's arm and vanishing around his neck where the major darkness that hovered around Dean seemed to be congregating.

Dean looked down at his arm and turned it this way and that. "Sam? What the hell's with you?"

Sam scrunched up his eyes and opened them as widely as he could, ending in a squint.

Undulating around Dean, the shifting shadows lifted themselves over him, joining together into a large mass and then separating into smaller shapes that fell over Dean like a black shawl, only to rise and melt together again in a slow motion frenzy of excited movement. Here and there, always moving, red glowing dots appeared in pairs, winking in and out of existence like a faulty Christmas tree light, going out here, only to reappear there. Blinking.

Like eyes.

"Are you okay? 'Cause if you aren't, for God's sake say so --" Dean began in a slightly panicked voice.

"No! No, I'm alright..." Sam carefully rubbed his eyes and opened them again blinking. "I keep seeing these...after images, I guess." Sam ended with a pained grunt, covering his face with his hands. "Man, my eyes *burn*..."

"Dude, don't scare me like that!" Dean put down the items he was holding. "You just need these drops and you'll feel better. Lie back." He pushed on Sam's arm.

Sam resisted. "Can I at least go to the bathroom first?" he groaned, grimacing.

"Oh," Dean replied. "Sorry." He assisted Sam to his feet and would have accompanied him but Sam shook him off.

"I got it, Dean. I'm blind, not helpless."

He didn't realize how the words sounded and couldn't see the look they put on Dean's face, but the darkness surrounding Dean grew darker still and began to writhe madly about him as Sam felt his way in the direction of the bathroom.

Dean's mouth tightened as he watched Sam feeling the walls and he closed his eyes, sighing heavily. He sank down on the bed and rested his elbows on his knees, rubbing his forehead with both hands. It hurt him to watch Sam feeling his way through the room; every glimpse of Sam's red skin and scrunched up eyes as he tried to focus was like a physical blow.

The thought that Sam might be like this--or some version of this, not totally helpless but incapable of retaining his former freedom—was almost too much to contemplate and Dean twisted internally at the thought of his own carelessness being the cause of it.

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Sam automatically flipped on the lights as he walked into the bathroom, then bit back a cry as the light blasted his eyes. Covering his eyes with his hand, he fumbled the lights off again.

"Crap!" he gasped, feeling tears run down his face as his eyes watered. He made a face, blinking, the blurry, shadowed darkness he had been seeing now replaced with an aurora borealis of white spots and shimmers.

As they gradually faded, he leaned close to the mirror and tried to see his reflection but his nose bumped the glass and he could see nothing but indistinct light and darks, two black holes where his eyes should have reflected.

He couldn't imagine going through life like this, even though common sense told him it was a real possibility. This flat, colorless, unfamiliar world was frightening. He knew there were thousands of individuals whose vision was many times worse than his or non-existent.

He knew that he could learn to function like this, but the idea that he would only see indistinct shadows... never really see another sunrise, his brother's smile, or even his own face clearly again... was almost worse than the thought of being totally blind. This way he would always harbor the hope that his vision would return and suffer the renewed disappointment every time he opened his eyes and the blurred grayness was all there ever was. At least totally blind he might be able to accept it and move on.

He made a disgusted noise and wiped his face, pressing his fingers between his eyebrows, the brief exposure to the harsh bath lights starting a headache slicing through his skull right behind his eye sockets.

"Damn," he muttered. *This was not going to be fun.*

* * * *

Dean jumped up when the door opened and Sam came out, hands fluttering in front of him in search of the indistinct objects he could just make out, to keep from falling over them. He glanced at Dean as he made his way back to the bed and sat down.

"There," Sam said with a false sense of satisfaction. "Not so hard." He frowned as he looked up at Dean, almost enveloped in a haze of darkness.

"Why do you keep looking at me so weird?" Dean exclaimed, more harshly than he meant to. He grabbed the bottle of drops.

"I'm sorry," Sam replied, surprised by Dean's sharp question and distracted by the cause of it. He lay back and allowed Dean to administer the drops. "I don't mean to."

Dean sighed, delicately opening Sam's eyes wider with the blunt tips of his fingers. Sam gasped as the icy drops stung his eyes. "No, I'm sorry. You can't help it, I know that. I shouldn't yell at you." He dosed the other eye and handed Sam a tissue

to blot the excess running down the side of his face. He lowered himself to the side of the bed. "So, how you feelin' otherwise?"

The skin around Sam's eyes was still red and swollen, his face scattered with small, half healing cuts. Dean almost couldn't stand to look at him, feeling fresh guilt pour through him at his stupid recklessness. *If I had just waited...*

"Better, I think," Sam replied. "The light really hurts. But at least I can make out shapes and stuff better." He shifted on the bed. "How are you? What did the doctor say about you?"

Dean looked away, not that Sam could see him. "I'm fine, just a few cuts and stuff. No big deal." He'd thrown up during the night, but Sam didn't need to know that, and other than some sore muscles from his bash into the wall, he really did feel better. "Listen, I was gonna go get us some breakfast. You hungry?"

Sam took mental inventory and was surprised to find he was. Not starving but definitely hungry.

"Yeah, I am, kinda."

The darkness surrounding Dean retreated somewhat as his face lit up with a smile. "Great! Whadaya want and I'll go get it?" He stood and reached out to grab his jacket. He turned back to Sam expectantly, only to have the smile melt into a scowl. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

Sam had pushed himself back up and was feeling over the top of the bedside table. "I'm going with you, what did you think? Where are those sunglasses?" he automatically looked around but unless they fell on him from the ceiling he would never find them.

"The hell you are!" Dean snapped. "Are you nuts? You can't see!"

Sam frowned at him, Dean's form becoming noticeably darker to his eyes. "Yes, I can." In a lower voice, feeling on the bed for the glasses, "Just not very well right now."

"No, Sam! Give it a few days," Dean protested. "Wait 'til we go back for your appointment." He stepped over to the dresser where the glasses lay and curled his hand over them. "What if something happens-"

Sam snorted and got to his feet, stretching a hand out. "Dean, I'm blind already, what could happen? Besides you'll be there." He fumbled over the end of the bed until he was rummaging in the duffel bag lying there. "Help me find some clothes and let's go."

When Dean didn't move Sam stared up at the swirling blackness where he was standing, more disturbed by what he could see than what he couldn't. Everything was dead gray and black except the sparkling red dots that popped around Dean like tiny camera flashes. He looked away, bothered by the bizarre "after images."

"Dean, I can't hide in here until my eyes are better, that could take a while, I may as well get used to getting around like this for the time being." Sam dropped his bag in frustration, "Are you gonna help me with my clothes or am I going out with whatever I can find? I'd hate to have you be seen with someone wearing mismatched clothes."

Dean sighed again and shook his head. He didn't like this, but even blind Sam was stubborn as hell. Dean just didn't have it in him to carry on the argument, especially as the cold thought settled over him that Sam might *really* have to get used to this. He wiped his hand over his face.

"Fine. Have it your way."

So saying he went over to the bag and jerked out a shirt and some jeans and socks for Sam. "Here," he said, thrusting them into Sam's hands. "Can you dress yourself or do I need to fasten your jeans for you?"

* * * *

They had driven the short distance downtown but Dean couldn't find a close parking spot to the diner so they had to park two blocks away. Since it was Saturday there were quite a lot of people around.

Exiting the car, there had been a brief skirmish when Dean tried to take Sam's arm to pull him, but Sam had insisted on holding Dean's elbow, allowing himself to be led. Dean had to admit it worked pretty well that way, even though Sam walked with less confidence than usual, head down slightly, eyes covered by the wrap-around sunglasses. People tended to move out of their way when they spotted Sam, a fact that was both annoying and helpful. Dean knew it was stupid and illogical to be offended because passersby were identifying Sam as blind. He was blind, but it pissed him off nonetheless.

"You doin' okay?" Dean asked nervously, trying to keep his eyes out for anything that might trip Sam up.

"Yeah, Dean, I'm fine," Sam replied. There was very little conversation going on around them as they walked. Most of the words exchanged seemed to be impatient and unpleasant.

"Why do I feel like everyone is mad about something?" Sam asked quietly. He kept his eyes down. Every time he looked up the twisting shadows would appear around the people they walked past and it was becoming more and more disconcerting.

Dean nodded, "I know." He had been noticing almost everyone was scowling. "It's like everyone's dog just died."

He watched as a girl almost blundered into another woman with an armload of sacks. Instead of the usual laugh and, "Sorry about that," he would have expected, the girl had snarled "Watch where you're going!" and shoved past the woman, who had responded with a heart warming, "Screw you!"

"Man," Dean commented, "friendly place they have here." Grateful they had made it to the diner, he opened the door and walked in.

Despite being fairly full, there wasn't a word of conversation going on. No sound at all but the clink of dishes and cutlery and a few sullen words from the waitress as she took an order.

Dean paused in the entry, looking around. The room crackled with negative energy and Dean almost turned around and walked back out. Sam waited patiently on his arm.

"Sit anywhere!" The waitress spat as she walked past, ignoring Dean's offered smile.

Dean blinked. "Good morning to you to," he murmured, guiding Sam to an empty booth. The eyes of every patron followed them.

Two menus were slapped down and water spilled on the table as two glasses banged down next to the menus.

"Coffee?" the waitress barked, grimacing at them, her nametag was on upside down but Dean made out her name to be Danielle.

Dean nodded. Anything to make her leave.

"Sounds like you made an impression," Sam commented.

Sam leaned back in the booth, looking around them. The tension in the air was so solid he felt like he would see it if he squinted just right. He could certainly feel it.

He was surprised that with the sunglasses he had more clarity than without, they filtered out the excess light and made differentiating his surroundings easier. Still dull grays and shadows, but better.

"You want me to order for you?" Dean asked, thumbing open the menu.

"Just order whatever you're having." Sam watched in puzzlement as several dark forms moved across his limited vision and vanished among the various diners scattered through the restaurant.

Dean and Sam both jerked back as two cups of coffee hit the table, not quite thrown there, but almost.

"You ready to order?" The frazzled looking waitress snapped, holding her pad.

"You the only waitress?" Dean asked conversationally, noting he hadn't seen anyone else waiting tables.

She shoved straggles of hair behind her ear. "I'm it, sweetheart. That other bitch didn't show up today so if I won't work for you, I guess you better go someplace else." *And I wish you would*, came through very clearly.

"No," Dean hastened to reply. "You just seemed a little overworked, that's all."

"Yeah, whatever," she growled, "So are you gonna order or what? I can't stand here all day."

"Two specials, I guess," Dean responded out of desperation.

She scribbled it down and jerked the menus out of his hand, stalking away.

Dean looked over at Sam. "Did I say anything to piss her off?"

Sam was frowning, feeling uncomfortable. "I think she was pissed off before you got here. Along with everyone else, apparently." He reached under the glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"You all right?" Dean asked, leaning forward.

"Dean, stop asking me that. I'll tell you if I'm not, okay?"

Dean frowned, but he shut up. He couldn't keep his hands still, feeling very on edge but not exactly sure why. He began restlessly tapping his knife on the table until Sam fumbled a hand over it to stop him.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked. "You seem kinda jumpy."

"The atmosphere in here is freaking me out," Dean confessed candidly. "I feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop." He looked around at the other sullen patrons.

"Here!" Danielle said, slapping their plates down gracelessly. "You need anything else?" Daring them.

"No, we're good." Dean replied. He grabbed her wrist as she turned. "What's the deal with everyone?" he asked warily. "Why's everyone so pissed?"

Her look should have killed him on the spot and it certainly made him release her wrist.

"If you got a problem take it up with the manager!" She stomped away, responding to the gestures of a heavy set man at another booth.

Sam followed her hazy progress, a growing darkness stretching along behind her like some bizarre kind of elastic smear. As she reached the other booth her shadow was joined by another one that slithered from the man seated there.

Growing increasingly uneasy himself in the tense mood of the diner, he glanced down at the blotchy gray items on his plate. He could identify some of it by shape but appetizing it was not.

"Does this actually look like what I'm seeing?" he asked weakly, lifting the glasses for a better look. Not an improvement.

A crash turned everyone's heads in the direction of Danielle and the male customer who was standing now with her arm gripped in his fist. His plate was broken on the floor, food splattered everywhere.

"I said this isn't what I ordered!" he yelled, pulling her forward.

"I said I was sorry!" she yelled back. "I'll get it fixed!" She didn't cower back even though the man towered over her and weighed three times what she did, but got right in his face.

"I have to get to work! I don't have time now!" he jerked her again.

"So what do you want *me* to do about it?" She hollered.

Dean was out of the booth and half way across the room before the sound of the slap the man laid across her face had died away. She fell sideways into the booth and slid to the floor, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

"Hey!" Dean barked. "What the hell are you doing?"

Sam yanked off the sunglasses, staring as shadows converged on Dean and the angry customer like swirling black curtains broken only by the eerie red dots. They

came from every corner of the room and even slid in through the door. Not being able to see clearly made the menace of that encroaching darkness even worse.

"Dean!" he called out. Dean ignored him.

As Dean approached, the man jerked a gun out of his jacket and pointed it at Dean and then in a general sweeping threat to everyone in the diner. "Stay back!"

Dean stopped dead, his fury over the treatment of the waitress held in momentary check by the sight of the weapon in the man's shaking hands. "Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Take it easy!"

"Stay away from me. I've had it with everyone pushing me around! Just stay back!" The man's sweating face twisted in a grimace, his eyes puzzled, but his actions obvious.

The waitress struggled to her feet and faster than Dean could move, the man shot her point blank in the chest, sending her flying backwards. Screams erupted throughout the restaurant as the blast echoed around the walls.

Totally out of control, the man continued to fire, raining bullets randomly throughout the room. Shattering the front window in an explosion of glass.

Dean turned, making a frantic dive for Sam as the gun went off, managing to throw his brother sideways in the booth as a shell plowed into the wall where Sam had been sitting.

"Are you okay?" Dean cried, lying across Sam.

"Yeah, I'm okay-" Sam replied. And then Dean was up.

"*Dean!!*" Sam yelled as Dean charged across the short distance between him and the shooter who was pointing the gun straight at Dean, finger spasming on the trigger, but getting only empty clicks. Blackness gathered around the two men so thickly, both were virtually obscured.

"You son of a bitch!" Dean shouted, tackling the man. "You almost killed my brother!"

Unable to make out what was going on, Sam floundered out of the booth, trying to get through the people fleeing the diner, stumbling and falling as he was hit from the side.

"Dean!! Stop!" Sam exclaimed, literally crawling to where the roiling cloud hid his brother.

Sirens began to sound in the distance. Sam clawed at the blurry form on top, pulling on the muscular arms he knew without seeing. He knew what those arms were doing. Dean was strangling the man beneath him.

"Dean, let go!!! *You're killing him!!*" Sam tugged fruitlessly at Dean's arms.

"Good!" Dean snarled, tightening his grip.

Sam heaved with all his might, hearing the object of Dean's efforts choking out his life. Suddenly overwhelmed with the desperate need to end this, Sam pulled back a fist and punched Dean in the side of the head. At least it felt like his head.

It wasn't enough to knock Dean out, which wasn't what Sam wanted, but it was enough to break Dean's death grip. Sam pulled him bodily away, struggling to stand.

Dean staggered to his feet, holding a hand to his head. "Sam, what the hell?" he yelled in outrage.

"Dean, we gotta go! I can't find the way out!" His sunglasses had been lost in the scuffle; all he could see around them was the cloudy blackness, almost vibrating with bits of red. Tires screeched as police cars roared up to the curb.

Dean suddenly seemed to come to his senses and he grabbed Sam's arm. "This way!" he did his best to guide Sam through the melee, into the kitchen and out the back door. Together they stumbled down the alley and into the next block.

"Stop, please-" Sam begged, doubling over with his hands over his eyes. The light was sending blasts of pain through his skull. "My eyes-"

Dean put an arm around Sam's hunched shoulders. "C'mon Sam. Keep your eyes closed, we just need to get to the car. I'll help you."

Dean paused at the end of the next block making sure no one gathered at the diner was watching but all the attention seemed fixed on the diner and its inhabitants. A gurney was rushed in by two EMTs. Dean figured they were for Danielle, not knowing if anyone else had been hurt, with the possible exception of the man he had been trying so hard to choke for endangering Sam.

"Stand up straighter, Sam. We're almost there; we don't want to attract attention."

Sam held himself as upright as he could but kept one hand cupped over his eyes as Dean led him to the car and helped him slide inside.

"I told you, you shoulda stayed at the motel," Dean grumbled as he got under the wheel.

* * * *

"Dean, something's wrong here." Sam said. He was sitting on the side of the bed, elbows on his knees, holding an ice-filled towel over his eyes. Water was gathering in a small puddle between his boots as the ice melted and dripped from a corner of the towel. A bottle of pain killers stood open on the bedside table along with a half empty glass of water. The TV was on with the sound down low.

Dean came out of the bathroom carrying Sam's medicine. "Tell me about it," he replied. "That guy was a damned psycho. He almost killed you, Sam." Dean plunked down on the other bed. "You sure you're okay?" he asked for what seemed the millionth time since the diner.

Sam dropped the towel between his knees and squinted at Dean. "Dean, for the last time, *I'm* fine. What the hell happened to *you* back there?"

Sam could almost hear Dean's brows draw together in confusion. "Me? Whadaya mean me? I know you can't see for shit right now, but that wasn't me that damn near got shot!" He threw the med bottle on the bed and got to his feet pacing across the room, a hand hooked around his neck.

"No," Sam said quietly, "but it was you choking that guy to death." Sam's face turned in Dean's direction. "You can't tell me that felt right. His gun was empty, you got him down, why did you try to kill him?"

Dean opened his mouth to retort but closed it again, looking back at Sam. He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes dulling to remembrance of that moment, when it had suddenly escalated from a sudden, random act of crude stupidity to a life and death moment. He remembered throwing himself at Sam to shove him out of harms way, the sound and sight of the bullet hitting the wall where Sam had been sitting...

Everything after that was a blur of mad fury until Sam had pried him off the other man. It was like he'd gone insane. He couldn't help himself.

And no, it hadn't felt right, even though at the moment, it had felt... *right*.

"Dean?" Sam said, cocking his head.

Dean glanced at Sam's burned features, his eyes barely open, trying to see, a sick feeling running through him. He turned away.

Sam went cold as the air around where Dean stood grew darker and began to circle around him.

"Dean, this isn't your fault," he said, taking a not-so-random shot in the dark. "It was an accident that happened because of whatever was on that corpse, not because of something you did. How could you have known?"

Dean stiffened, shooting a look back at Sam. "Sam, I should have stopped and checked it out. I shouldn't have rushed it-" Dean turned away again.

Sam got to his feet and moved toward where he knew Dean was standing but unable to judge the distance. His stretched out hand hit Dean's shoulder, causing him to jerk back around. The twisting shapes around Dean retreated once again at Sam's touch. Sam's hand worked its way to Dean's chest and pressed there.

"This," Sam said, gesturing to his eyes with his other hand, "is not your fault. Despite what you think, every time something happens to me, it's not your fault. No

matter how hard you try, Dean, you can't control everything that happens in our lives. Not your life and not my life."

Dean was actually grateful Sam couldn't make out his features in that moment as he stepped away from Sam's touch. "Sure, Sam, whatever..."

Sam pulled back with a gasp as the gray shadow that suddenly slid over Dean's face and upper body lunged out at him, the fiery red spots so near he could actually see them as sharply as broken scarlet glass.

Sam stumbled back with a cry, falling onto the bed.

Dean lurched forward, unsuccessfully trying to catch him, his elbow hitting the sound button on the TV, raising the volume.

"Sam! What's wrong?" The shadow hovered over Dean, pulsing larger and smaller, almost like it was...laughing.

Sam swallowed, breath shaking. "Dean...something's really-" he broke off as he heard what the local news commentator was saying on the TV.

"What, Sam-"

"Sh!" Sam said, holding up his hand. "I want to hear this!"

"- and emergency crews responded earlier today to a shooting at a local restaurant. Witnesses say when an unidentified patron intervened in an altercation between a waitress and a customer. The customer, Joe Magnussen, pulled a gun, shot and critically wounded the waitress, Danielle Spencer, then began shooting wildly around the restaurant. One other person was injured, but was treated and released by emergency personnel.

Danielle Spencer was pronounced dead at the scene.

Police have no explanation from Magnussen as to what brought on the unexpected violence. He claims things suddenly got out of hand and has no idea why he was carrying a weapon in the first place. He was arrested on reckless endangerment, carrying a concealed weapon and assault with intent to kill charges and remains in custody at this time.

This is another act of random violence such as we have been experiencing over the last few weeks for which police and investigators have no explanation. Many citizens are reported to be carrying weapons and police state that this will only make the situation worse..."

"Dean, something weird is going on here," Sam said in a slightly shaky voice.

Dean reached out and turned the sound back, sitting down next to Sam, looking from him to the TV. "I can tell that, Sam," he said. "But why do I feel like you know more about it than I do? What the hell was that a second ago?"

Sam squinted at Dean for a moment, then took a deep breath. "Dean, I'm seeing things." He rubbed a hand carefully over his eyes. "I have been since we left the hospital."

Dean scowled. "You said it was after-images or something... Do you need to go back to the docs? 'Cause we-"

Sam shook his head. "No, I thought they were some kind of side-effect, but, I'm not so sure anymore. Everything I see is just grays, shadows... and it's all blurry. But I can see these things clearly. I can see the red of their..."

"Their what, Sam? Tell me what you're seeing."

Sam made a frustrated noise, his hands jumping in his lap. "They're like these shadows that are moving all the time. Dark and wispy, sometimes almost solid black. I saw them all around the people in the street this morning, hanging over everyone, moving around through them."

Dean sat back slightly as Sam tried to describe what he was seeing.

"The thing is, they seemed to get thicker around the people who were angry or upset. Dean, in the diner, right before that guy pulled his gun, they were everywhere. Coming through the windows and walls, surrounding you and that guy. Like some kind of...I don't know...storm cloud or something. The more out of hand it got, the

more there were. I only managed to get through the people to pull you off that guy through dumb luck, it was all black around you both.”

Sam was getting worked up and Dean laid a calming hand on his shoulder. “Why didn’t you say something sooner? You think these shadows have something to do with what’s going on in town?”

“Dean, I can barely make you out when I look right at you. I couldn’t tell if what I was seeing was real, I’m still not sure.”

“What about the red shit? What’s that?” Dean demanded, trying to make sense of it.

“I think its eyes, Dean.” Sam replied. He shrugged his shoulder. “A second ago, the one around you lunged at me—”

“Around me?” Dean exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “What the hell? You mean they’re here in the room following us both?” He couldn’t help looking around in consternation. He saw nothing in the dim room.

Sam looked blankly up at Dean, watching the flickering red in the black mass around Dean contract and expand as it moved slowly over him. He shook his head.

“Not us, Dean. You. They’re following you.”

When Dean didn’t respond to Sam’s flat statement, Sam went on. “I would have said something sooner but I really thought it was a hallucination or something.” He spread his hands. “After today, though, after what I saw...” Sam shook his head. “Dean, there’s some kind of pattern or something here. I think it’s affecting everyone in town. I think it’s affecting you.”

Dean fought the urge to brush himself down to get rid of whatever the hell it was Sam thought he was seeing. He had an unbearable sensation of crawling skin. The fact that he could see nothing and his eyes were working fine and Sam, for all intents and purposes, was blind and could see it, was disturbing on a primal level. *What the hell was Sam seeing?*

“Sam...I... I’m not sure ...can you see them now?”

Sam tilted his head slightly, watching. Darkness moved slowly over the blur that was Dean, splitting into several individual parts then rejoining behind him to start again. Tiny flashes of red appeared here and there.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, Dean. I can. You’re just a blur, but there’s at least three around you right now.”

“What about you?” Dean exclaimed. “Aren’t they around you?”

“I don’t know,” Sam replied. “I can’t tell. None of it makes any sense. Can you get my laptop? I want to check some stuff out.” Sam got up and moved to the small table.

“But, Sam, if there really is something, how can you see it and no one else can? You pretty much can’t see *anything*.” Dean retrieved the laptop from Sam’s bag and put it in front of him.

Sam’s fingers moved over the laptop with practiced familiarity, opening the case and turning it on, his hands working as automatically as if he could see what he was doing.

Dean sat next to him, fascinated, having never really watched Sam pull information from the machine before. He could use the computer, sure, but he was a hunt and peck typist and had to look at the keyboard as he worked.

Sam stared at the screen he couldn’t see, and his fingers flew over the keys as though it were nothing. The net popped up and Sam typed words into the search engine faster than Dean could read them.

“How the hell can you do that?” he demanded, as site listings appeared on the screen.

“Shortcut keys,” Sam replied. “Takes you right to where you want to go. The rest is keyboarding.” He tilted his head toward Dean, unable to keep the smirk out of his voice. “They taught it in school. You shouldn’t have to look at the keys to type.”

Dean frowned at him. “Maybe you don’t,” he muttered.

"This is just a guess," Sam said, "But maybe for some reason, when that body exploded, whatever the hell was on it, maybe it was a chemical, or maybe it was just some one in a million random thing... but whatever the hell it was, even though it blinded me, it left me able to see on some level I normally wouldn't be able to."

"Huh?" Dean replied, giving him a strange look. "You mean like some super power? You're, what... like Daredevil now or something?"

Sam laughed, but shook his head. "No, I mean it turned off one thing and turned on something else. You're gonna have to help me with this, check these sites over, what are they saying?"

Dean studied the screen. Sam had typed in "shadows." He shook his head. "This is all about what causes shadows. Man, I don't think the sun can be blamed for what you think you're seeing."

Sam added the word "creatures" and hit "enter." "Now what?"

"Gaming stuff," Dean replied.

Sam replaced "creatures" with the word "demon."

Dean blinked, scanning the page. "Holy shit," he said, sitting up straighter.

"What?"

"These are all sites about shadow people." Dean pulled the laptop to himself and opened the first site.

"Shadow people?" Sam pulled his head back slightly, his brows drawn together in thought. "Dad always said they were just the crap people saw out of the corner of their eye. Not really there."

"I know," Dean opened another site and quickly read through it. "The only entry about 'em in his journal says there's no proof that they really exist." Rapidly he opened one site after another. "Listen to this," he said turning the laptop toward Sam without thinking. *"Even though many investigators write off shadow people as a figment of the imagination or a trick of light, they have been reported for centuries as everything from a dark glimpse you see out of the corner of your eye to full black figures that interact with their surroundings. Reports break them into several basic types."*

Dean licked his lips and went on, using his finger to follow the lines.

"Dark, human-like, semi-transparent figures that flee once they have been noticed. Shadow animals, rabbit-like in shape but very fast and rarely seen. Peeking shadows, small child-like forms that peer around corners and from the edges of doorways. These are associated more with harmless curiosity than any menace. The Hat Man, similar to the human shadow form but with the addition of a shoulder-wide brimmed hat, curiosity is also associated with this manifestation. The black mist or smoke shadow person-"

He broke off, suddenly distracted as Sam sat up slightly and leaned closer. His head was cocked to one side, listening, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. He looked...blind.

"What's the matter?" Sam said. "Go on."

Dean swallowed, brought his eyes back to the computer and continued. *"These beings are said to have intelligent characteristics and react to outside stimuli. Encounters with these smoke shadows are frequently associated with feelings of dread, malevolence and extreme terror. They are seen most often in situations where negative energy is present."*

"There is speculation amongst researchers that shadow people are collections of negative psychic energy from areas where traumatic events have taken place and evil people frequent. The negative psychic energy begins to manifest and takes on form and motive, thriving on fear and negative emotions for sustenance."

Dean's voice dropped and he suddenly felt cold. *"The most frightening examples of this type of shadow form are those with glowing red eyes, said to be the embodiment of pure evil."*

Dean sat back in the chair and rubbed his face. "Sam, why the hell would you see these things, assuming any of this crap is true? And if it is true, what the hell do we do about it? Dad obviously thought they were a load of bull... I've never heard Bobby mention them."

He stood up and took a restless turn around the room. "And why the hell are they hanging around me?" He exclaimed as he ended up back at the table.

Sam shrugged. There was no way in hell he was answering that question even though he was pretty sure he could. "Maybe dad never encountered any of them. They sound like they're pretty elusive. That's not a helluva lot of information."

He stretched and closed his eyes, massaging the lids. He was getting a headache and the faint burn told him it was time for his meds. Dean reacted to Sam's gesture instantly by heading to the bathroom for Sam's eye drops. Sam frowned as he noticed the darkness around Dean suddenly grow thicker, several other smoky forms oozing right from the walls to join the others already surrounding him. Red dots glowed hotly within the swirl.

An idea nudged Sam and when Dean came back out Sam spoke without thought, testing his abrupt theory.

"Maybe you're right," he commented lying back on the bed but keeping Dean in his eyeline.

Dean paused. "Right about what?"

Hating himself, Sam replied. "I guess we should have been more careful with that corpse. The idea of spending the rest of my life like this..."

Guilt washed over Dean. He fell back as if he'd been sucker punched and Sam saw the shadows fall over him like a cloak. Sam jerked upright, startled even though he'd been expecting it. Dean almost vanished inside of the blackness.

"Sam...I'm sorry. You know I-" Dean began in a hoarse, broken voice. "I'd give anything if it could be me instead-"

Sam pushed off the bed. "Dean, no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it. I wanted to check something...see if I was right. I wasn't thinking."

He clasped Dean's arm through the black, not really surprised this time, to see it coil away from his touch.

"What the hell are you talking about, Sam?" Dean snapped, shaking him off. "I already feel like shit over what happened. First you tell me it's okay and then you blame me? Which is it? 'Cause I need to know how I'm supposed to respond!"

With every word that left Dean's mouth the cloud around him grew darker, boiling like hot tar. The tone of Dean's voice told Sam he was getting more worked up with each passing second, and Sam began to realize his thoughtless little experiment might not have been such a good idea.

"Dean, calm down..." Sam was having trouble keeping his eyes open, they were really starting to burn. He reached out again.

"No, dammit!" Dean snarled. "You might be like this for the rest of your life. How the hell do you think that makes me feel?" Dean balled his fists and slammed one into the wall.

"Dean, you gotta stop and calm down!" Sam exclaimed, trying to make his way over to where he thought Dean was. He grimaced and pressed a hand over his eyes, still moving toward Dean. "The madder you get the worse they are!"

"What are you talking about?" Dean yelled, turning as Sam caught his toe on one of the heavy table legs and went sprawling, barely missing the arm of a chair with his head. He went down with a surprised yelp, landing with a thud and a grunt, arms outstretched.

Dean was next to him instantly. "Shit, Sam!" He grabbed Sam's shoulders. "Are you okay? God, I'm sorry-"

"Dean, I'm okay," Sam said breathlessly, "I just tripped. I'm all right." *God, I'm tired of this and it's only been two days. What if I have to... live like this?*

He let Dean help him to his feet and over to the bed. Squinting up, he realized with relief he could make out the blur that was Dean again. The swirling cloud had thinned considerably around him.

"Lie back; let me get these drops in." Dean fumbled for the bottle on the bedside table, trying and failing to hide the fact that his hands were shaking. He felt like he had just come down from the world's biggest adrenaline rush and he sank down on the edge of Sam's bed gratefully.

Sam tried not to flinch under Dean's unintentional roughness but eventually the drops were administered. Sam sighed with relief.

Dean capped the bottle and set it back down. "Are you sure you're all right?" he said softly.

"Yeah, Dean. I'm fine. And *I'm* sorry." Sam tugged lightly on Dean's sleeve.

Dean glanced over at him. "Whadda you got to be sorry for, dude? You haven't done anything."

"I got an idea watching them around you...I was kind of experimenting when I said what I did... when I said you shoulda been more careful. I'm sorry, I expected a reaction but I didn't mean to set you off like that." Sam put his arm over his eyes. He just wanted to sleep.

"You said that just to piss me off?" Dean's voice was both puzzled and hurt.

"No! No," Sam grabbed Dean's sleeve again. "I got an idea. It may explain what's happening here in town, what happened to you earlier."

"Like what?" Dean demanded.

"When we were walking into town earlier," Sam wearily pushed himself up and leaned back against the headboard. He made a point of actually looking at Dean when he spoke, having noticed his new tendency to simply look into the distance at nothing. It made it easier to think if he just quit trying to see. "I kept seeing these dark shapes everywhere, brushing against people, surrounding them. When those two women almost ran into each other there were shadows all around them. In the diner, they were everywhere, following everyone." Sam raked his hair back. "God, I'm so stupid. I should've realized how wrong it was."

"Sam, it wasn't your fault, man, how could you know? But you coulda said something to me." Dean was frowning. "I would've at least listened. So what else about the diner? You think that happened because of them?"

Sam nodded. "When that waitress went over to the guy who shot her, and stuff started going crazy," he gestured at Dean, "when you got up, man, those things were everywhere, they came in through the doors, the walls, the other customers. It was like they were congregating over a kill. The more that came the worse everything got."

Sam leaned forward, his hands on his knees, staring intently at what he could see of his brother.

"That's what I wanted to see: if you got angry or upset, would more of them show up? When I said what I did about being more careful, you got really upset, angry, whatever. Dean, after a few seconds there were so many I couldn't see you anymore. That's when I tripped, I was trying to get you to calm down before everything went nuts." He looked away. "It was stupid. I wasn't thinking. But it worked."

"You're damn right it was stupid!" Dean growled, rising. "Dammit, Sam I was furious, at me, at you...I mighta hit you!"

"I know, I saw. But doesn't that prove what I'm saying? Dean, you never woulda reacted like that unless something was pushing your buttons or making it worse."

Sam put a hand against his temple, leaning back, feeling suddenly lightheaded.

"Maybe that's what these things do, they sense the negative feelings and join together to make them worse, to feed off of them. Maybe that's what's happening here. Why everyone is so mad. It would account for why stuff is getting out of control that normally wouldn't."

"Yeah, but if that's true," Dean argued, "then why aren't people shooting each other in the street all the time? Sam, we've been all over the country a gillion times and I've never seen anything like that."

"I dunno," Sam replied vaguely. "Maybe this is something unique or they're gathering for a reason..." He grunted softly, rubbing his forehead.

Dean turned and came back to the bed, noticing Sam's actions. "Sam?"

"I think I better lie down for a while," Sam murmured, sliding back down in the bed. "Maybe I overdid it a little."

"What's wrong? You were fine a second ago." Dean sat down on the edge of the bed and put the back of his hand on Sam's face.

Sam shrugged him off. "I'm still fine. Just really tired and I'm getting a headache." He groaned. "I gotta do some more research..."

Dean's stomach growled, suddenly reminding him that breakfast had never happened and that had been several hours ago. "Listen," he began, "I'm starving. I know you gotta be hungry. I'm gonna go grab something and bring it back. Then we can research. Just rest till I get back."

Sam sat back up, "No, Dean! What if something happens? I'll--"

Dean pushed him back down as he tried to get up. "What? Go with me? Dude, I'll tie your ass to the friggin' bed before I'm letting you outta this room again. I got enough to deal with without worrying about you feeling your way along behind me. I'll be right back, I'll mind my own business and if it looks like trouble brewing I'll walk away, I swear." He straightened and grabbed his jacket, slipping it on as he walked to the door. "It's 1:45 now. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes call me on your cell. I set the alarm for you so you'd know when the time was up."

"Fine," Sam sighed, settling back. He really was tired and the pain in his eyes had settled under his right eyebrow.

Dean smiled and slipped out the door. A police car with a siren screaming raced past him and around the corner, tires squalling.

He resisted the urge to walk to the corner and see if he could tell where it was going; doing as he had promised and heading down the street to a fast food joint he'd spotted earlier, making sure he went nowhere near the area of the diner.

The feeling in the town had changed incredibly just since this morning. The sky had turned overcast, making it seem more like evening than barely afternoon. A chilly breeze blew bits of trash along the street, scattering it among the noticeably fewer pedestrians.

There was definitely no eye contact made; passersby stepped to one side to totally avoid any possibility of coming in contact with another person. Dean looked around with a creepy sense of wonder: the town felt very pre-everyone-is-dead *Omega Man*. Drivers hunched over their wheels, honking at anyone who lingered too long in the crosswalk.

Dean's steps slowed. He flipped his collar up and looked around uneasily. His nerves were tingling; he hoped it was a normal reaction to the tense atmosphere and not the influence of whatever the hell was hanging around him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and started down the next block.

He stopped short as he saw a steady stream of people moving toward a large building in the center of the next block. Watching them, he inadvertently stepped off the sidewalk and was rewarded with a sharp blast on a horn from a car coming up next to him. He jumped back, also receiving an upraised finger from the grandmotherly driver.

Slightly taken aback, he was torn between laughing and a sudden urge to chase the car down and bash in the windshield. He shook his head, fighting back that feeling, finally continuing on down the street toward the gathering crowd.

The building was an old theater called *The Victory*, apparently no longer in operation. There were signs posted on the marquis stating a town meeting would be

held at 2:00 pm, inviting everyone to attend. There were men handing out leaflets to people as they entered the two double doors.

One of the flyers fluttered past him on the ground and he reached down and snagged it as it flew by.

What is happening in our town?

Husband against wife, parent against child, friends, sisters and brothers torn asunder by unexplainable violence. Where did it start and where will it end?

Join your community at 2:00 pm to discuss ways to end the violence and restore peace to our friendly town.

Your city fathers, the community of churches and your fellow citizens invite you to help find the solution.

Dean rolled his eyes and wadded the paper into a ball tossing it away. "Great," he growled.

He looked around at the tense faces of the men and women gathering in front of the building. God only knew how many were packing. There was a sullen grumbling from people waiting their turn to get in the building. He was getting a really bad feeling about this. The last thing anyone needed to do around this town was congregate in a large group. It would be a powder keg looking for a match.

He glanced at his watch, it had already been twenty minutes and it didn't look like he was gonna be getting back quite as quick as he planned. Trouble was brewing, but try as he might, he couldn't walk away.

* * * *

Sam groaned and tossed fitfully on the bed. His head was aching in short, sharp bursts right behind his eyes. He rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up slowly, holding his temples. Even the dim light filtering through the cheap curtains was splitting his head in half. He stumbled to his feet and groped for his jacket on the back of a chair. He tossed it somewhat unsuccessfully over the window, cutting off some of the offending glow.

Turning back he gasped as the pain shot through his head in a sudden blast. Caught off guard he fell forward onto the bed, clutching his head.

He lifted his head, images shooting across his mind's eye. *God, not now! Of all the damned times for a vision...*

After a few seconds he realized whatever this was he was experiencing, it was not a vision. Or at least, not quite. Yes, he could see pictures in his head but they were accompanied by rapid light and dark flashes, as though someone was turning the lights off and on repeatedly. It was almost like his brain was replaying the last few days in his head. Images of the explosion, of Dean, the hospital, played out for him like a bad movie. He ground his fists into his eyes heedless of the pain, trying to breathe through it.

A wordless noise of relief blew out of him as the successive images stopped just as suddenly as they had started, leaving him shaking and nauseous from the pain, gasping for breath. *What the hell?*

He dragged himself fully onto the bed and hung there, head down on his arms, wondering if he was going to be sick and how the hell he was gonna get to the bathroom without puking on everything between here and there, trying to fumble his way to it.

His breath sawed in and out as he slowly got himself under control, swallowing desperately. His eyes felt like they were on fire. He forced his lids apart and glanced around the room, there seemed to be a whitish aura around the edge of his limited vision and it hurt to look. Puzzled and disturbed he decided to splash some water on his face and try to figure out what was going on. There had been nothing threatening in the pictures he had seen, just things that had already happened.

He yelled, jumping, as the phone alarm went off on the bedside table. He snatched it up and turned it off, heart thudding. His finger hovered over the speed dial. Fifteen minutes Dean had said. Maybe the place was crowded, or it took longer to walk there than he had thought. He decided, reluctantly, to give him fifteen more minutes before he called.

* * * *

Dean shouldered his way into the theater as politely as he could, ignoring the dirty looks and sounds of annoyance as he moved through the crowd. It was gonna be a full house. The room could have held several hundred people and there was standing room only already.

A table and chairs were set up on stage around which several harried looking men and women sat, watching the gathering crowd with unease. Like maybe they were realizing this might not have been such a good idea after all.

Dean agreed with that heartily. He stayed close to the doors, looking back at the stage as a bell rang and a voice tried to make itself heard over the buzz.

"If everyone...please, if everyone would find a seat or at least a place to stand!" There was a general shuffling among the people and a creaking as they gradually settled in the old chairs and leaned against the walls.

"Please, the fire department asks that you don't block the doors..." The speaker, a thin man with glasses and an expensive suit gestured ineffectually at the back of the room where the doors were solidly blocked.

"Get on with this!!" a voice bellowed from the crowd. "We came here for answers! What the hell is going on around here?"

A chorus of other voices, male and female joined in, demanding questions shouted out from all sides, several people jumping to their feet.

"Please! Please, just let us get started." The man patted the air and forced a strained smile. "In consideration of why we are all here, I asked Reverend Haley to offer a brief invocation-"

A bald, heavysset man in a dog collar began to rise.

"Screw that!" someone else yelled.

The Reverend Haley sat back down.

"My son was shot in the street yesterday! He's in the hospital. Your invocation isn't gonna change that!"

"Yeah, my car was rammed deliberately-"

"-windows shot out-"

"I'm afraid to leave the house!"

More and more voices rose to join the shouts and accusations, many people now on their feet and a dangerous rumble was beginning to emanate from the crowd as a whole.

Dean stiffened. With or without the assistance of the creatures Sam was seeing, he could tell that this situation was gonna be out of control pretty damn fast.

"Everyone please *calm down!*"

A bottle sailed through the air with stunning accuracy and smashed on the table in front of the suited man, glass and liquid bursting over him in a rain of shrapnel. The man fell back with a cry, arms over his eyes.

And that fast, Dean was thrown back against the wall in a crush of surging bodies. All hell broke loose in a wild melee of swinging fists, cursing and screams.

* * * *

Sam waited what felt like fifteen minutes, hit twice more by the sudden kaleidoscope of images and light as he waited. The last time took him to his hands and knees on the floor, forehead pressed against the rough dirty carpet as images

burst in front of his face in white hot flashes and coronas, his cries of pain muffled against his fists.

After what felt like forever, it finally ended and he slumped to the side, coughing, rolling his head against the floor, palms over his eyes. Tears poured from his eyes and fell to the floor, feeling like acid as they rolled down his still-blistered skin.

Grunting and gasping he pulled himself up, leaning against the side of the bed, wiping his face even though a fresh torrent streamed down his cheeks. He cursed as his jacket slipped from the window and allowed the dim light to wash in.

Blinking away more tears, he shielded his eyes with a hand but was surprised to see that instead of a colorless unidentifiable blur, he could make out the fingers of his hand as fingers. It was like looking through a dirty, pocked lens; it was dark around the edges and drifted in and out of focus but still, if he held his hand close enough and concentrated... *He could see it.* His head hurt like a bitch, but he could see his hand!!!

He shot his eyes around the room, still dim and anything more than a few feet away was lost to him but when he waggled his fingers close to his face, despite the sickening sensation of losing and gaining focus, he knew what he was looking at.

His heart started to race and he grabbed his phone off the table. He snapped the case open and held the screen almost against his eye. Faint but there, he could just struggle to make out the time. 2:42. It had been 1:45 when Dean had left.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. *Dean had been gone almost an hour! How long had these episodes lasted?*

His head snapped up as sirens shrieked from outside, tearing past the motel, followed shortly by the klaxons of a fire truck and the *woop woop* of an ambulance.

Sam heaved himself to his feet, swaying dizzily. He may have been able to see better close up but distance was still a problem and what he could see was in the shifting center of his vision, anything outside the perimeter of his tunnel vision was lost in the same blurry darkness.

He stumbled his way to the door and jerked it open, surprised at the cold wind that hit his face. Stepping out to squint in the direction the sirens had gone, jumping back as yet another vehicle tore past, its screaming siren deafening him.

People were running in the same direction, shouting incoherent words. The sudden multiple sensations confused him. Flowing silently and smoothly among the running people, the shadows flickered in and out of existence, every now and then the hot flare of red appeared to him.

Grabbing a streetlight that he fell against as he was knocked into by one of the hurrying figures, Sam looked at the sky over the wide dark shapes of the buildings down the street seeing a pale glow topped by a wide bobbing column of darkness. He grimaced as sudden balls of light, like flashbulbs, went off in front of his eyes. Each burst sending pain through his head.

He struggled to hold his head up and keep his eyes open. *Where the hell had Dean gone?* He hadn't said the name of the place.

Another glance in the distance and Sam realized with horror that the pale glow he saw was tinged faintly with yellow and red and the billowing cloud of black he could just make out was smoke pouring into the afternoon sky. He didn't waste time reveling in the fact that he could see the color, only that something awful was going down and he knew beyond a doubt Dean was in the middle of it.

Sam pressed himself against the building and using it as a guide began feeling along the walls as he made his way down the street as fast and carefully as he could toward the smoke and noise.

And Dean.

* * * *

Breath knocked out of him by the sudden shove into the wall and the resultant press of angry bodies, Dean fought to regain his footing before he was crushed beneath the shuffling feet around him. Several others joined him on the floor, victims of randomly thrown punches and loss of balance.

He could barely hear above the shouting and screaming of the mob surrounding him. Using whatever hand holds he could get on the pant legs and jackets around him, he clawed his way upright only to get a solid punch in the jaw that threw him backwards.

The tightly packed crowd did not allow him to fall far and even though his ears were ringing, he lashed out at the nearest face in a boil of anger, feeling the satisfying crunch of knuckles on bone.

A frantic voice over the PA screamed uselessly for order, but that only succeeded in adding to the existing din. Dean's boots slipped in a growing puddle of blood and somewhere much too near him for comfort, a gun went off to the accompaniment of more screams. There was a concerted effort to back away from the sound but the mass of flesh left nowhere for anyone to go.

Trying to get his bearings and shoving against the surging throng in an effort to get to the door, he smelled the smoke at almost the exact second the flames began to crawl up the old projection screen.

What the holy frigging hell was happening?

The mayor, Reverend Haley, and assorted members of the city fathers abandoned ship with a vengeance, forcing their way into the crowd in an effort to get to the emergency exits, all still effectively blocked by other individuals either fighting each other or fighting to escape.

The building was old and it didn't take much for the screen to melt away and collapse in a burning heap onto the wooden stage. The leaping flames clawed at the moldy, floor-length velvet curtains sending flames shooting to the ceiling in one quick burst and from there to the fabric lined walls.

Using all of his strength, Dean forced his way through the packed crowd, smoke filling the air and obscuring his vision. People were still fighting around him but now to get out of the building, trying to climb over one another, clawing madly for escape as the crackling flames spread through the interior of the old building.

* * * *

As Sam made his way along the street, the smell of smoke becoming stronger, he could hear screaming and shouting ahead of him along with orders being shouted through a megaphone.

He could make out nothing semi-clearly more than three feet ahead of him. Using his hazy view of the fiery skyline as a target, he relied on his outstretched hands to guide him through the growing crowd of people. He was forced to stumble to a halt now and again as he was assaulted by more of the brilliant flashes across his own vision. Each unexpected burst sent him against the wall he was using as a support and guideline, hands clutched to his head.

He reached out and caught someone's shirt as they hurried past him, holding firm as they tried to jerk away. "What's burning?" he yelled.

"The theater!" The barked reply came. "They were having a town meeting and the building caught on fire!" The fabric was wrenched from Sam's desperate grasp.

Reaching out until he felt the solid roughness of the brick wall, he leaned there trying to think, finally doing what he should have done before and fingering open his phone. He hit the speed dial for Dean and held the phone to his ear, hunching over to try and block the increasing noise around him. The air was getting foul with smoke and it added to his difficulty in trying to see.

"C'mon!" he demanded of the phone, hanging up when it went to voice mail. "Dammit!" he spat.

Trying not to get knocked down by the people running past him, Sam pushed away from the wall and made his halting way toward the crowd gathering in front of the burning building despite the efforts of police and firefighters to keep them away. A strong stream of water began to spray on the front of the old building.

Fights were breaking out in the watching crowd even as smoke filled the street and panicked individuals stumbled screaming from the blazing theater. Sam could hear the crackling of the flames, his eyes now streaming from the acrid burn of smoke.

Without realizing it, he blundered into the edge of the throng and was instantly enveloped in the mob of fighting, yelling people, getting shoved this way and that as the crowd surged. People were stumbling and falling, being trampled underfoot as the mass of terrified people fled. Still half blind, Sam totally lost his bearings as he was pushed helplessly through the morass of out-of-control humanity.

Starting to panic, lost in the crush of bodies, smoke starting to gather in his throat and his eyes streaming, Sam did the only thing he could think of: He called for his lifeline.

"Dean!" Hoping that if Dean were close enough he would hear. "*DEAN!*"

In that moment, the firemen manning one of the hoses were ordered to turn it on the crowd in an effort to disperse them.

The cold pressure of the water blasted into the forefront of the crowd knocking them backwards and into each other like falling dominoes. Sam never knew what hit him as he was half-drowned by the icy flow and thrown to the ground, his head cracking against the pavement as he was buried under falling bodies.

* * * *

Dean couldn't believe it when his phone buzzed against his chest. *Of all the damn times for a phone call!*

He was still trapped within the crowd trying to get out of the smoke-filled theater. Bodies were packed at the door; too many trying to get out at one time, pulling each other bodily away from the openings. Dean had never seen anything equal to the panic he was witnessing. People were going to die needlessly. He reached out for a woman who fell in front of him but she was immediately lost under the forest of legs.

Burning fabric was peeling from the walls and falling into the already screaming mob, the flames licking the ceiling and setting the rococo ornamentation on the ceiling ablaze. The whole damn thing would be coming down in no time.

For the briefest of seconds it crossed Dean's mind that now would have been a good time to have been able to draw on a little assistance from his former passenger. Horrible as that situation had been, the sensation of being able to pull that power forward when he needed it still lingered in his mind. A fact that he would never have vouchsafed to Sam.

Pissed off now, with a strength born of desperation, Dean fought his way through the tightly packed crush, shoving when he could, hitting when he couldn't, until he managed to get to the doorway where at least twenty people were trying to push through an opening intended for two.

"Help me or we're all gonna die in here!" Dean yelled at one of the burly men next to him. His eyes were watering and it was getting harder to breathe. The man scowled at him but then seemed to understand Dean had a point.

Between them they muscled into the throng at the door and began to hold back enough people to allow a trickling stream of others to begin to escape. Resistance was strong and violent, but several more men joined Dean and his companion and gradually the crowd began to thin and coughing people staggered out into the street.

By the time the last of them filed out, some being assisted, the ceiling was burning in earnest and pieces were starting to crash to the floor. The heat was appalling and

even as Dean hacked for air and wiped his eyes he knew the people still lying on the ground among the burning seats wouldn't be leaving.

Hating it, but knowing he had no choice, he turned and followed the last man out as the blazing old chandelier burned free of its fastening and crashed to the ground, sending skyrocketing fire throughout the room. Seconds later the rest of the ceiling joined it.

Dean stumbled away from the inferno behind him. Doubled over coughing, wiping at his eyes, he gradually realized that other than some muffled crying and sounds of pain, the huge group of people gathered in front of him were huddled against one another gazing at the ruin of the old theater and at each other with looks of shamed horror and confusion. A soft murmur was all that could be heard of the words that passed among them.

As he watched, many of the survivors began to fall into each others arms with cries of comfort and sorrow. The overwhelming air of fury and tension was gone and in its place was overwhelming loss.

Dean staggered to a lamp post and leaned against it, dragging his phone out of his pocket and snapping it open.

Missed calls: Sam

He automatically hit redial.

"You've reached Sam, leave a-"

Dean was dumbstruck. *Shit!!!* He shot a look at his watch. It was 4:37. His heart went into overdrive as he put an instant scenario together.

He'd been gone for hours, Sam would have heard the sirens, maybe smelled the smoke. He was no fool and would have quickly put two and two together. He would have figured out Dean was in trouble and half-blind or half-dead would have gone to the spot where Dean was most likely to be. Right in the middle of it all.

"God, Sam!" he breathed. Sam was here, somewhere. He stepped into the street and screamed Sam's name, began to push his way through the weeping, confused throng, yelling Sam's name over and over. "SAM! *Sammy!*"

"Have you seen my brother? Real tall, long hair, he's here somewhere!"

One after another, the pain-twisted faces denied him.

"Please," he begged, "he's blind...I gotta find him!" Voice and hands shaking now as shoved his way through another knot of people.

Sam!

Lying on the ground, soaking wet, shoulders being supported by an equally wet, heavy set man, Sam held a hand against his head, blood streaking the side of his face. He shifted uncomfortably, groaning.

Dean burst through and landed on his knees by Sam, clutching his arms. "Sam! My God, Sam! Are you okay? How did you get here?" He fingered through Sam's blood matted hair trying to find the source. "What happened? What the hell are you doing here? Why are you all wet?"

Sam blinked and stared up at Dean. "I'm okay....You didn't come back....I went after you...saw the fire...they hit us with a fire hose...I think...hit my head..." His face screwed up. "Is that everything...you asked?" He pulled his head away as Dean's fingers found a gash over his ear. "Ow!"

"Why didn't you stay at the motel, Sam? Are you nuts, you can't see!!" Dean was torn between anger that Sam had followed him, had gotten himself hurt – again -- and relief that he was there. He was safe and he was *there*.

"You've got on a blue shirt," Sam replied weakly.

"I know I've got on a—" Dean broke off in surprise. "Holy shit!" he choked. "Can you see me? See what I'm wearing?"

"Sorta," Sam replied, grimacing. "Help me up." Sam groped out for Dean's hand.

"I think he oughta see one of the paramedics," the man supporting him said.

Sam shook his head, clutching onto Dean's shirt, *his blue shirt!*, pulling himself into a sitting position. "I'm okay. I wanna get outta here."

Dean rose slowly accepting as much of Sam's weight as he could. "Sam, what happened?"

He asked again, desperate to recognize the miracle of Sam's eyesight.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked instead as he and Dean moved slowly away from the wreckage of Riverside's citizens.

Dean laughed, then coughed. "Dude, I've never been better!" he replied truthfully. He tightened his grip around Sam's waist and walking slowly and carefully, led him back toward their motel.

* * * *

"Hold still," Dean said softly, carefully washing the blood from Sam's hair so that he could assess the damage. "When did you start seein' better? Was it from the fall?"

"Ow! No. After you left, my headache got worse and all of a sudden I thought I was having a vision or something."

"Man, you shoulda called me back!" Dean exclaimed, parting Sam's hair with gentle fingers. "What were you thinking?"

Sam grimaced, trying not to pull away. "Honestly? It hurt so bad I wasn't thinking. I kept seeing these flashes, like a vision, but it was stuff that happened over the last couple of days. Like I'd seen it, but my mind was playing it back suddenly. And I started seeing colors again, my hand. Like looking through a weak telescope but still..."

He looked up at Dean and Dean felt a momentary thrill knowing Sam could actually see him this time. Maybe not perfectly but something made him feel the worst was over.

"Dean, all those people in the theater...all the people since this started, how many were hurt or killed?"

Dean sighed, dabbing antiseptic on the cut, which was long but not deep. "I dunno," He paused, staring past Sam. "I've never seen anything like it. It was..." He almost whispered; images that would haunt him as much as any supernatural event burned into his memory. "You think those shadow things caused all this?" he asked, moving his eyes back to Sam.

It was Sam's turn to look away. "After it was all over, everything...everyone felt different."

Dean, recalling the atmosphere of pain and sadness that had settled over everyone as the theater collapsed, killing God only knew how many inside that couldn't make it out, had died trying, had felt the change. "It was like whatever started it had gotten what they wanted." He shook his head. "We couldn't do a damned thing to help them." He placed the bottle of antiseptic on the table.

"I can't see them anymore," Sam said.

"See what?" Dean replied absently. He looked up, suddenly realizing. "You mean ... " he couldn't help looking around himself. "Gone from me too?"

Sam nodded.

"I don't understand why they were hanging around me in the first place." He turned away, not sure how clearly Sam could actually see him. If a lie actually showed in your eyes. He was just glad they were gone.

"They're gone...or at least..." Sam shrugged. "If they're still here, I can't see them. But...I think they're gone." Sam fingered the bedspread.

"Why do you think they were here to start with?" Dean asked, as if Sam would know. "Where did they go if they're gone?"

Sam shook his head slightly. "Maybe they were finished here. They moved on." He let out a slow breath. "To the next town, I guess. This is so stupid," he growled in frustration. "Why be able to see the damn things and not be able to do anything about it?"

"I dunno, Sam. Maybe it was just a freak thing. Wrong place, wrong time, some one in a million combination of unrelated stuff," Dean rubbed his face. "Man, I'm tired. And we never did get to eat." Not that he was hungry now. He gathered up the first aid supplies and carried them back over to the kit.

Sam lay back against the bed and rubbed his eyes. Everything was still a little blurry but compared to the day before it was crystal. He was exhausted. He closed his eyes drowsily and listened to Dean repack the kit.

"You shouldn't have come after me, Sam." Dean said suddenly. "You're lucky you weren't hurt worse. Hell, Sam, you couldn't see, what did you think you could do?" Dean turned to glare at him. "You coulda been killed, Sam." His voice betrayed what his face couldn't show.

"Dean, all I knew was you had to be in trouble." Sam replied eyes still closed. "What happened to 'if I see trouble brewing, I'll walk the other way?'" he said sleepily.

Dean's eyes flickered and he looked down. "It didn't work out that way," he stated with slight twitch of his mouth. "I couldn't just—" his hand moved in a slight sweeping gesture.

"I know that, Dean. When I heard the siren's...I knew you were there." Sam sighed, his voice fading as he drifted on the edge of sleep. "I couldn't *not* go." His eyes might be better but the headache was zeroing back in. He was having trouble concentrating. "I was losing you, I had to make the deal..." he murmured, rolling to his side and nuzzling into the pillow. Facing the wall as the words left his mouth, his eyes snapped open in horror.

Dean laughed softly, going back to repacking kit.

I had to make the deal... the words playing back through his brain.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded, turning back to Sam's recumbent form, a frown creasing his forehead.

Sam blinked and stared at him. "What?" he said. Adrenaline flooded his bloodstream, making his heart race and his head pound.

Dean cocked his head and approached the bed. "You said you had to make the deal. What did you mean by that? What deal?" Dean enunciated the words clearly so there was no chance of Sam misunderstanding him.

"I didn't say that." Sam replied. "You heard wrong." He rolled completely over so that his face was buried in the pillow. *Please, please, please...*

Dean's fingers clawed into Sam's shoulder, not gently at all, and he was jerked over on his back.

"Hey!" Sam yelled.

Dean's eyes narrowed. "Talk to me." He said in a hard voice. "You talk to me, *now*."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Sam snapped with what he hoped was just the right amount of irritation.

"What did you do?" Dean breathed.

"Dean, I didn't do anything!"

"Don't lie to me! You think I can't tell? After all this time?" Dean's hands shot out and he grabbed Sam by the front of his shirt, dragging him up face to face as Sam struggled to get his footing.

He shoved uselessly against Dean's grip. Bigger he might have been and heavier but Dean was stronger and Sam knew it. Only death would pry Dean's hands from his shirt. Sam didn't need to see them clearly to know Dean's eyes were on fire. He'd scented a rat and he wasn't gonna quit until he found it. Sam tried to control his breathing but he already knew it was too late.

"*SAM!*" Dean ground between his teeth, lips curled back in a snarl. "*You bastard, you tell me what you did!*"

He shook Sam, face so close Sam could feel the wet heat of Dean's breath.

Sam couldn't look him in the eye. He'd known this day was gonna come at some point but hadn't prepared himself for *now*. Betrayed by his own mouth.

“Dean...I...I didn't have any choice...”

Dean released him so suddenly Sam fell halfway to the floor. Dean stood over him chest heaving, his face crumpled by stunned disbelief.

Sam pushed himself up, tried to speak, say something to make this better. “Dean, you were gonna die! We had to get that thing out of you! What was I supposed to do? There wasn't any other way. Haris-“

Dean stumbled back from him, as if Sam had become too foul to be near. “*HARIS!*” Dean shouted. “How *could* you? After everything we went through to get you away from him *and you just give yourself to him for nothing?*” Dean's voice rose to a scream of fury.

“*It wasn't for nothing!*” Sam screamed back. “*It was for you!*”

Dean stared at him. He snorted sarcastically. “And just what did you get for your money, there sport?” he snarled. “Now that your secret is out, tell me about this great deal you made in exchange for *me!*” Dean made a disgusted sound.

“Dean, I had to do *something!* You were gonna lose control, hell you *were* losing it, you still think I couldn't see it, couldn't tell? You were gonna hurt yourself, other people. Haris agreed to take his spawn back in exchange for me.” Saying it fast didn't sound as awful. “But he gave me time Dean. 'Til my next birthday-“

“*Birthday? Sam!*”

“We can figure something out, Dean! I know we can. I tricked him out of the amulet ... “ *Son of a bitch! Why hadn't he been born mute!*

Dean reared back, one hand clasping his necklace. “You what? Christ, Sam, this just gets better and better!”

Sam sighed. “Haris couldn't take his kid back as long as you had the amulet. It was protecting you up to a point but it was also keeping the demon prisoner. The only way to get rid of it was to remove the amulet.” Sam raked his hair, wincing when he hit the cut from smashing his head on the pavement.

“Since I never take this off and you know why, just how did you manage that little trick?” Dean's teeth were ground so tightly together he almost couldn't get the words out.

Sam's eyes fell to the floor as he mumbled a reply.

Dean leaned forward, one hand cupped behind his ear. “I didn't quite get that.” he barked.

Sam squared his shoulders and looked Dean in the eye. “I drugged you.”

Dean's eyes became slits. “You what?” he whispered.

Sam's hands flopped ineffectually. “That night we went out for dinner and some drinks. I put ecstasy in your beer.”

Shocked beyond words, Dean finally forced out a strangled, “You gave me a freakin' *DATE RAPE* drug?”

Sam hastened to reassure him. “It was just so you wouldn't remember that night! It was easy to get.”

Dean was breathing heavily through his nose.

“When you were out I took the necklace off long enough to let the demon out but instead of giving it to Haris I tied it back on. He couldn't take it off you, so I figured it was okay.”

“Okay?” Dean cawed nastily. “Dude, what the hell makes you think anything about this is *okay?*”

Sam stepped forward, hands out. Dean backed up further. “Dean, I had to do something!” he repeated again. “You would have done the same thing for me! Dean, you've given up everything, sacrificed everything for me. What was I supposed to do?”

Dean's eyes glistened suddenly and he laughed. “If I've sacrificed so much for you what makes you think I'd be grateful that you threw it all away?” His face twisted and he slammed his fists into his thighs. “Dammit, Sam! What should you have done? I

wish to God you'd killed me, that's what you should have done. Compared to this at least then it would have been quick!"

Dean pressed a hand over his mouth, eyes darting around. He lurched to the table and snatched his jacket, that still stunk of smoke and jerked it on, wiping roughly at his face.

"Dean, please...where are you going?" Sam reached out, catching Dean's arm.

Dean jerked away like he'd been burned. "I can't believe you did this, Sam," he choked. He opened his mouth to add more but nothing came out and he finally shook his head and jerked open the door, throwing himself into the smoky darkness.

Sam jumped at the door but Dean was already lost to his still blurry eyes. "*DEAN!*" Behind him, Dean's phone, abandoned on the bedside table, began to ring.

* * * *

Dean had walked to the bar, knowing if he got behind the wheel of his car he'd wrap it around a telephone pole. And damn if there wasn't some appeal in that idea right now. He was so angry, the two miles to the small tavern at the edge of town, the only one, vanished in record time beneath his boots.

His mind reeled with what Sam had told him; anger gradually being replaced by hurt, disbelief and a staggering sense of betrayal. After everything that had happened all these years, everything that had been done, that he had done to keep Sam safe, all of it had been washed away in an instant's thoughtless act. How could he have done such a stupid, stupid thing, Wasted himself. For nothing. *NOTHING!*

Dizziness overwhelmed him and he reached blindly for one of the trees along the road, leaning his body against the rough bark, feeling it scratch the skin of his face. Giving him something real to anchor himself to. If he'd had anything to eat it would have been on the grass by now. He hung there hands over his face, breathing deeply. Gradually his head cleared and he finally pushed away, walking slower, his destination a glowing haven a short distance away.

What in the name of God was he supposed to do now?

* * * *

Sam was sure by the time he got to the phone the damned thing would have quit ringing, but no such luck. His head was about to blow into pieces.

"What?" he groaned wearily.

"Sam?" a gruff voice replied.

Sam snapped upright. "Dad"

* * * *

Dean looked up as a shadow fell across him. His table was littered with shot glasses but he was still cold sober.

"Go away, Sam," he said, rolling an empty glass under his fingers, looking away.

Sam glanced around, the bar was deserted. He guessed everyone was home recovering from the days events.

"Can I sit down?" Sam asked softly.

Dean moved his head slowly back and forth. "No," he said flatly.

Sam nodded. "Okay. You're mad at me."

Dean's eyes flicked up briefly.

Sam nodded again. "Okay... you're furious with me. I can understand that. But, Dean, what I did, I'm not gonna apologize for it. I'd do it again. Right now."

Dean snorted. "I'll bet you would," he sneered.

Sam closed his eyes and counted softly to himself. "I know you think I threw myself away for an unworthy reason. But I didn't. I need you to know that. Where is

me trading myself for you with a chance of maybe being able to fix it worse than letting you die or become one of the things we hunt? And then there's no one to save me. I couldn't let that happen to you. I'm sorry I had to drug you to do it, but I knew you'd never go along with what I wanted to do." He shrugged. "I don't know what else to say. It's done, Dean! Like it or not, we have to deal with that reality. You can hate me, if that's what you have to do, it's okay. I understand."

Sam had nothing more to say.

After a moment Dean lifted his gaze and fixed it on Sam, tilting his head slightly. His eyes were bloodshot and the look on his face and what he saw in those haunted green eyes tore into Sam like the jagged edge of a knife.

He would have preferred the hate.

Finally, Sam drew in a breath and held out a piece of paper with some information scribbled on it.

"Dad called after you left. He's got a job for us. Some place in Tennessee."

When Dean made no move to take the slip of paper Sam pulled it back and shoved it in his pocket. He nodded his head toward the empty booths lining the opposite wall. "I got the car. I didn't really have any trouble seeing to drive here. When you're ready, I'll give you a ride back to the motel."

Dean just continued to stare at him.

Sam moved away, turning back at the last moment to add something to his statement. He blinked, reaching up to rub at his eyes as he saw a slither of darkness move across Dean's face. It was gone in an instant. So fast Sam wasn't sure he actually saw anything.

He hesitated, looking into Dean's flat gaze. "Never mind," he murmured, continuing to the booths and sinking into the furthest one from Dean, shaking his head when the bartender asked what he'd have.

Dean's eyes never left him.

The shadowy silhouette draped over Dean's shoulders, shifted slightly before settling in like a contented cat, its eyes barely discernible as a faint red glow, unseen and unnoticed.

As always.

The End