

Episode Two: The Beast Within
By Thru Terry's Eyes & Tree

"Yours??" John choked as Zack finally broke down, head hanging, shoulders shaking, tears as well as blood now splattering his jeans. "What yours?" John snarled. "You don't have any family, you bastard! Everyone knows that!"

Zack laughed and the sound burned Sam's ears. "Well, guess again, John!" He coughed, bloody saliva dripping from his mouth as he sneered in disgust. "You think you're the only man in this that has anything to protect? *To lose?*" Zack laughed again, shaking his head. "God...I tried so hard to keep them out of this..." It was as though he was talking to himself. "For them not to know what I... *I just wanted to keep them safe!*" He burst out, lunging against the ropes that held him.

Sam jerked back involuntarily, glancing quickly at John, not altogether sure this wasn't some kind of trick considering Zack's current track record for betrayal.

John could have been formed from stone he stood so rigid and still, only his eyes moved, narrowing as he stared at Zack. A chill iced his blood as he listened to Zack mumble to himself, rocking against his bindings, making the chair creak rhythmically.

John grabbed the chair behind him and yanked it closer, seating himself so that his knees almost touched Zack's. He stretched out a hand and caught Zack's chin, forcing the other man's head up to meet John's cold eyes.

"You talk to me ..." John growled, deep in his throat. "Talk to me now. Justify this. What you did to my family, to Dean!" *I dare you*, his tone implied. "Or I swear to God, I will kill you where you sit."

John sensed more than saw Sam come up to stand next to him, saw his son's fingers curl over the grip of his gun, keeping it at ready. The intensity and anger that had been rolling off his youngest son since the previous day startled him, but didn't surprise him. He knew that Sam was as worried and focused on finding Dean as he was.

Zack rolled his eyes at John, snorting. "*I have* a family, John. *Surprise!* I chose not to make them a part of this, to keep them hidden, a secret. Is that so shocking, knowing what we deal with? What our lives are like?"

"You're lying" John interrupted flatly, wanting it to be a lie. Needing it to be.

"*I'm not lying!*" Zack yelled in John's face, spittle flying. "Is it so damned hard to believe that someone else could have people they love besides you? People they would do *anything* to protect?" Zack's eyes moved to Sam. "I have a son and daughter! We don't see each other often. Their mother and I separated, but we still kept in touch. She died..." Zack's eyes closed and his head dropped as John suddenly released him, sitting back.

Sam and John exchanged looks, faces tight.

Zack fought to get himself under control. "All this time," he gasped. "They never knew about any of this and no one knew about them. I thought they'd be safe...I didn't want them growing up in this world, didn't want them to end up like your -" Zack cut himself off with a snap, eyes shooting to John in a panic.

John stiffened, face darkening.

Sam dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Dad -" he murmured warningly.

John shook him off like a fly. "You son of a bitch!" he exclaimed grabbing Zack by the shirtfront and dragging him up chair and all. "How *DARE* you judge me! You think I wanted this for *my* family? For *my* sons - ?"

Sam pulled at him. "Dad! Please! This isn't helping!"

John felt the desperation in Sam's grip, fighting his anger.

"It was Haris!" Zack cried. "He found them, dammit! My daughter called and said Daniel was acting crazy, had been arrested for assault and was under psychiatric evaluation." Zack felt John slowly lowering the chair back to the ground. "I rushed out there. God, he was *possessed, John.*" Zack's face twisted in pain at the memory, the horror of that moment of discovery. "I knew the minute I saw him..."

Anguished noise poured out of him, his head falling back as he struggled against the ropes that held him. "He did that to my boy...the sweetest kid God ever put on the earth. He'd never hurt anyone. Never! And now -" Zack's head snapped up and he cried out, eyes blazing. "Haris came to me, told me what he'd done. What he *was gonna* do if I didn't help him! Kill Daniel, Amelia, her husband...their baby...my grandchild!" He spat his next words in a blast of fury, straight in John's face. "They're my family, John! What was I supposed to do?"

What would you have done?" He cackled dementedly. "You'd put a bullet through my head right now if you thought it'd save Dean. Hell, you'd do *anything*." He hissed, leaning closer, head twisted at an angle. "What makes *you* so different from *me*?"

John let go his grip so suddenly Zack and the chair tumbled backwards with a thud. He towered over Zack, fists balled, contempt in his eyes. "He promised you they'd be safe if you betrayed us-" John sneered. "And you believed him?"

Zack locked eyes with John. "I had to, you self righteous son of a bitch! *I didn't have any choice!*"

John moved forward but Sam grabbed him once again and put himself between John and Zack.

"No!" He pushed against John. "Calm down! We need him to help find Dean!"

John glared at Sam for a moment and then suddenly twisted away and slammed through the door into the next room, leaving Sam gaping after him.

"Sam -" Zack began, still on his back. Sam heaved the chair upright once again and kicked it.

"Shut up!" he snapped, watching the still swinging door.

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John stormed through the door into the small kitchen, leaving it swinging wildly behind him.

The furious pressure that had been building inside him demanded release. In desperation he grabbed one of the chairs and swung it into the wall, splintering it into kindling.

Damn him! John swore internally. He punched the wall with the side of his fist, unsure what filled him with more anger, the unwanted knowledge Zack had confessed to them or the inference that he and John were not so different.

He couldn't stop the thoughts that tumbled through his mind. What *would* he have done to spare Sam and Dean from this life? To give them the normality that Sam hungered for and Dean had no concept of.

It was a moot point. Their destinies were bound up in seeing this through to the end. Sam and Dean were a part of it, integral players in a game none of them really knew how to play. What lengths would he have gone to then, if he'd had a choice? What lengths was he willing to go to now?

Dean's life was on the line, God only knew what that bastard Harris, was doing to him. What he planned on doing to Sam, if he got his hands on him. He was dealing with the same wrenching decision Zack had dealt with. And try as he might, John couldn't deny the truth of Zack's words. If he could have saved Mary...saved them all from the never ending nightmare of what their lives had become...

John slammed his fist into the wall once again, swearing angrily. He sucked in a lungful of air and spun on his heel, back across the room and straight-arming through the door, jerking his knife from the sheath as he did so.

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Sam stood as John burst back into the room, looking even angrier than before if such a thing were possible. He pulled his knife, the flashing blade bouncing light into Zack's eyes as John crossed to him.

"No!" Zack cried out, instinctively flinching back, as John's knife rose, then slashed downward.

"Dad! *No!*" Sam yelled, leaping forward.

Zack's arms fell limply forward as the pressure from the ropes holding him was abruptly released. Stunned but wary, Zack looked up, rubbing the raw flesh on his wrists and forearms.

"What are you doing?" he asked hesitantly, jerking back again as John slammed the knife into the post beside Zack's chair and stood there for a moment, staring into the area behind Zack before drawing breath and speaking in a low, intense voice.

"Are they keeping Dean at the old army base?"

Zack licked dry lips, glancing up at Sam nervously, then reluctantly at the back of John's head.

"I...I don't know." Stiffening as John turned to stare at him, hand still curled around the knife grip. "I swear, John! God, I swear!"

Zack started to rise, but Sam stepped forward, lifting his gun, stopping him. "They probably are!" He exclaimed. "Haris is mobilizing, but as far as I know he's still using that for his base." Zack used his shirtsleeve to wipe blood from his face, eyes on the floor. "I'm sorry, John." And he meant it. "I wish I knew for sure -"

John released the knife and turned back toward Zack. "Help us," he said. "Help us get Dean back. He doesn't deserve this."

"I can't," Zack replied hoarsely. "My family...if Haris found out I was helping you -" Zack struggled unsteadily to his feet, shaking his head.

John stretched out one hand to halt Sam's forward movement, with the other he caught Zack's arm, closing his eyes briefly. "Please," John whispered, and only Sam knew what that word cost him. "We'll protect your family. Keep them safe -"

Zack pulled his arm away, laughing bitterly. "Protect them?" he replied contemptuously. "No offense, John, but you haven't been able to protect your family from its *own* curse. How the hell are you gonna protect *mine*?"

John's face darkened.

Sam looked up, brows drawing together. "The curse?" he snapped, eye shooting first to John then to Zack, both of whom ignored him. "Zack?" he demanded. "Dad, what curse? Dammit, somebody tell me what you're talking about!"

Zack and John stared at each other for another long moment. "I'm sorry, John. I am." Zack hung his head. "For every damned thing, but I can't help you, not this time, not with my own family at risk." He lifted his face to meet John's eyes, man to man, one desperate father to another. "You of all people should be able to understand."

John sighed and nodded, rubbing his hand across his mouth, fingers scratching over his beard. "Yeah, I know." He turned away. "Sam -"

Sam, annoyed at having his questions ignored, jerked. "Yessir?"

John tossed Sam the Impala keys. "Take Zack back to town, let him go. Then come straight back. We're heading for Tennessee." His voice was tired, desolate.

Sam grabbed John's arm. "What? You're letting him go? Just like that?" He cried, outraged. "What about Dean? What's this curse stuff Zack was talking about - ?" Unwilling to be denied, eyes bouncing angrily between the two battered veterans.

Zack gave Sam a look, his mouth twisted in a sad smile. His eyes moved to John, clearly reading the message his eyes were broadcasting. Zack shook his head, *John you damned, stubborn fool...*

"I'm just shooting my mouth off, Sam." Zack said, turning toward the door. "Let's go."

Sam tightened his grip on John's arm. "No! Dad? What did he mean?" he pleaded.

John pulled his arm free. "What's going on," he stated, "is that you are gonna take Zack back to town and then get your ass back here as fast as you can so we can go after your brother!" he was more harsh than he wanted to be but he was not having this conversation.

He gave Sam a slight shove which Sam began to resist then gave up with an angry huff of air and a sharp roll of his eyes.

"We're not done here!" He spat. "Come on!" he growled at Zack, shoving him ahead.

At the door Sam looked back at his father but John had turned away, his fingers curled once again around the handle of the knife he had stabbed into the post, his forehead resting against the end of the grip.

Sam's mouth tightened, eyes flickering, then he followed Zack out the door.

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Office at the Abandoned Base

"Just like your brother Dean, if I can't have you, then no one can. I'll get that amulet off of you if I have to cut your head off to do it." Haris growled as his hand began to move.

The knife moved the barest of fractions, a thin line of crimson appearing at the crease of Dean's neck. The blade was the epitome of sharp, its edge honed to the thinness of a slip of paper. So sharp in fact, that as it cut into his flesh there was no real perception of pain. Had it not been for the warm stickiness of his blood following gravity and pooling in the small divot of his collarbone, Dean might not have even realized he had been cut; not that he cared in the

least anymore. Blood and the dull thumping in his chest were the only indicators that he was still alive; everything else that he used to define himself was gone.

Mom had been gone forever, destroyed by a demon that viewed her as nothing more than a gnat to be swatted aside in a quest to obtain his brother so many years ago. In his mind, Dean could remember her vividly. Long blonde hair surrounded her face creating a glow about her even when the only source of illumination was the nightlight at the doorway to his bedroom. Laughing eyes, crystal clear blue that managed to brighten even more when she looked down into his small face as she tickled him unmercifully. Her soft voice, lilting and gentle, soothing away hurts as easily as she read him stories.

Dad was gone now too, killed alongside men that had shared his determination to remove evil from the face of the earth. A tough man, not just in physical measures, but in sheer resolve, his father had been a rock in nearly every aspect of his life. Strong arms that tossed a four year old into the air and just as easily caught him on the way back down, had easily borne the weight of a twenty-four year old with a broken leg out of the woods during a thunderstorm. The same grease-blackened hands that had so skillfully worked on engines and transmissions had also placed sutures with surgical precision. Never verbose, when his father talked, a few simple and well chosen words spoke volumes, but never nearly as much as his eyes, especially when he thought no one was watching.

And Sam.

Dean could barely bring himself to admit the truth. What more proof had he needed than the bloodstained knife currently carving into the soft tissue of his neck? Hazy memories meant nothing compared to that stark evidence of his treachery.

The void left behind by the loss of Mom and Dad hurt, was in fact absolutely excruciating, but it couldn't compare to the agonizing abyss that Sam's death by his very own hand left in him now. Dean may not have truly believed in God, but he did believe in souls, and his own was now as barren and lifeless as a desert at high noon.

Twenty-four years of being the ever-watchful guardian, teacher, and surrogate parent, but first and foremost, the big brother and he had reduced all that to wasted time with a flick of his demon-possessed hand.

'Sam! I failed you!' his conscience wordlessly screamed.

Dean was vaguely aware of the increasing pressure of Haris' blade on his neck. The force of the demon's arm pressing down against his trachea was only noticeable because it threatened to cut off his air. Silently, Dean willed the evil bastard to bear down a little harder allowing the knife to sever through cartilage and carotids and bring him the blackness he was prepared to receive.

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple actually causing the knife to flinch upward briefly before the pressure returned. Dean laid perfectly still, eyes now open and staring upward but not seeing, ears not perceiving anything past the internal voice of recrimination, body not sensing the physical pain or even the hardness of the conference table as it pushed against his bruised joints.

Haris paused, staring at the hunter before him. Were it not for the slow rise and fall of Dean's chest or the occasional blinking of his blank eyes, the demon might have thought that the long blade had already done its job. But no, he had been careful, never applying any more pressure than it took to achieve the desired result.

Yet, the desired result hadn't been achieved. Not to Haris. His quarry was still alive, not possessed, and most definitely not under his control. To add to the demon's frustration, Dean seemed to have "checked out", not even reacting to the lethal threat that he had employed.

Swearing to himself, Haris suddenly realized his miscalculation. In his haste to get Dean to surrender to him, he chose to batter the young man's psyche with the implication that his father and brother were dead; assuming the anger and rage would force the young hunter to succumb to the demon within him. At first, Haris thought his plan had worked, but now, as he scanned the empty hazel eyes, he knew that Dean had resigned himself to death beneath the blade.

"Dean?" the demon asked questioningly, seeking to elicit some sort of response, curious if the young man might be shrewd enough to be faking. Haris drew the blade further along Dean's throat, opening a new wound.

No response. Dean's eyes remained unfixed.

Enraged, Haris lifted the weapon from Dean's neck; fresh blood tainted the steel mixing together with the rust colored flakes of dried serum. He was furious that his bluff had been effectively called, leaving him no closer to either subduing the hunter or freeing his trapped

offspring. Had he not still needed the elder brother as a potential bargaining chip for a very much alive Sam Winchester, he might have considered actually inflicting the fatal wound.

But that had never been his intent, never his ultimate goal.

Looking down at the figure before him, the horned-faced amulet mocked the demon, mocked his inability to control the situation.

Moving the blade slightly, the demon changed his focus. If he couldn't physically touch the amulet, which in itself was both surprise and insult, then he would simply cut it from the hunter's neck. Slipping the tip underneath the edge of the leather cord, Haris pulled sharply upward severing the brown loop. Dean flinched visibly, a deeper part of him reacting to the attack on the amulet as though it had been a violation of his own body.

"... You wear this, and never take it off!"

Arms restrained, Dean thrashed weakly on the table, inner voice spurring him to resist. Haris laughed at the feeble effort and moved to flick the tarnished charm from its resting place against Dean's chest with the flat of the blade. As his yellow eyes looked back to Dean's neck, they narrowed with suspicion. The leather thong was whole once more, no evidence that it had been cut just seconds before.

The demon placed the blade beneath it again. Violently, he yanked the edge upward, separating the cord once more. As he watched intently, the length pulled itself back together, ends seeking each other like quicksilver and blending together without so much as a scar to mark the laceration.

Haris stared in disbelief. Perhaps an enchantment or protective spell had been placed on the seemingly weak piece of leather. How else could the dead bit of animal skin resist the attempt to destroy it? But Haris knew, as certain of the reason as he was that evil walked the earth. The amulet's power had grown!

'If only Wren would have been successful in destroying the damn thing before!' Haris thought to himself angrily.

Attached to its guardian, the amulet was now not only protecting its bearer, but also protecting itself. He should have been surprised, but he wasn't really, knowing full well the threat that the ancient talisman represented.

"Potestatem obscure lateris nescis!" the demon muttered defiantly.

His plan thwarted, Haris slammed the knife down onto the table just inches from Dean's ear. The force of the impact was enough to shake the entire surface, even Dean's body shifted slightly in spite of being pinned by the guard's muscular arms. Regardless of it all, the young man did not react, eyes remaining blankly cast toward the ceiling.

"I should have known! Giving up? You're weak, Dean! Just like your father, just like Sam too!" Haris taunted, shaking his head derisively. "How could you have thought to ever protect your brother from me?"

'Get away from here and protect Sam!'

Something snapped inside Dean's head. A rubber band of a thought stretched too far and now recoiling back into shape. None of this made sense. Not Zack's betrayal, not his possession, not the amulet, not the demon's toying with him, none of it.

In a strange way, his confusion brought clarity. It gave his beleaguered mind something to work on, a distraction from the brain-numbing pain that was still washing over him in a tsunami-sized wave.

"Why me?"

The sudden question startled Haris, stopping him in his tracks and causing him to spin back around to look at Dean.

"Why you what?" the demon responded warily, moving closer.

Dean paused, swallowing hard, his mouth dry.

"Why do you want me? Hasn't this always been about Sam? About all the other kids like Sam?" he continued. "You've been after him since he was six months old and now all of a sudden, I'm the big catch and you sacrifice him?"

"Dean ... Dean ... Dean!" Haris began, his head shaking from side to side in mocking disbelief. "You? You're nothing. It was always about Sam. The ritual was nothing more than a way to obtain his powers. But killing him, well, that was your twist on things."

Haris moved back to stand beside the table, a tilt of his head directing the large sentinel to release his restrictive grip on the hunter. Hair and arms free, Dean turned his face to look up at the yellow-eyed demon. He lowered his arms to his sides, relishing the return of normal blood flow and suddenly forced to acknowledge the sharp ache in his right shoulder from the

bullet wound. His muscles tightened reflexively. Nearly insane with grief and self-loathing, he needed this to end, one way or another.

"You're the one that got carried away, Dean! All you were supposed to do was cut little Sammy enough to provide the blood offering for the ritual. Imagine my surprise when I see my chosen, his neck gaping open, and blood gurgling in his throat as he tried to scream."

"You, Dean, are nothing more than the consolation prize," Haris stated, amusement in his voice. "Although in retrospect, perhaps I should have buried all the Winchesters together that day and put an end to your pathetic family once and for all!"

"Yeah, you should have!" Dean snarled as he rolled to his right and off the table.

His feet hit the floor as he quickly assumed an offensive stance, his right hand now brandishing the demon's discarded knife. Dean's eyes flashed back and forth between Haris and the massive black-eyed guard on the far side of the table.

Dean knew there was no way he could possibly take both demon-possessed men. The guard was simply too big and Haris, well, Haris was simply too powerful. Still, when did size and numbers ever really matter to him? He'd never been afraid of dying and was even less so now, convinced that death was still preferable to possession.

For a long moment, no one in the room moved or spoke; Haris remaining just a few feet away, the guard stood unmoving, waiting on his orders, and Dean defiantly held his ground, knife at ready.

"Now Dean, what do you think you're going to do with that?" the demon asked, breaking the tense silence and taking a small step forward.

"Well, first I'm gonna kick his ass," Dean began, pointing the tip of the blade at the towering behemoth. "Then, I'm gonna kick yours."

Haris laughed, "And then what? Supposing for a minute that you actually stand a chance of getting past either one of us, where will you go? There's nothing left for you out there Dean!"

"Hmm, well, there's always Paris ... Hilton or France. I wouldn't mind spending time in either one!"

"Dean. Masks again? When will you ever learn? You don't have to put on the brave little soldier face for Daddy or Sam anymore. They're gone. Your place is by my side. I'm your family now!" Haris stated.

"Then I'm putting myself up for adoption!" Dean yelled, lunging towards his nemesis, the already bloody blade whipping outward towards the demon's chest.

Haris arched backward, the edge of Dean's weapon snagging the fabric of his shirt, tearing it away, but missing flesh by scant millimeters. Surprised by the near-miss but not concerned, the demon spun around to the far side of the table. Placing a hand on the towering sentry, Haris pushed the possessed man forward at Dean.

The hunter rushed ahead, not intent on backing down now. Dean lowered his shoulders, reducing his body to create a smaller target. The guard moved in as well, his momentum carrying him into and past Dean as the young man deftly sidestepped and flung the giant off his hip and into the wall behind him.

Immediately, Dean turned, prepared for the next rush. The guard recovered quickly and came at him again, this time with more caution and calculation. Dean thrust out with the knife but the huge man blocked the attack and countered, swinging his own large fist and catching the young man on the side of the chest.

Dean dropped to one knee, stunned and breathless, the air in his lungs trapped by the constriction of his ribcage from the blow. The guard closed in, towering above the kneeling figure. Dean remained head down, eyes focused on the floor, but sensing the threat above him.

'Wait ... wait ... closer ... just a little closer ...' his hunter's instincts sounded off in his mind.

Dean could nearly feel the enormous hands as they reached to grab him. Just as they were about to close about his head and neck, he lunged upward, using his entire body to jam the elongated blade into the man's chest, twisting it as it plunged in up to the hilt.

The guard staggered backwards, startled that the weapon had found its mark. Dean followed him, his hand still clenching the knife. He tugged, but the blade was firmly wedged deep within the possessed man's body. Letting go, he hesitantly backed away.

Weaponless, he cast a quick glance at Haris just beyond his shoulder. Looking back toward the guard, he saw the door to the room just a few feet away.

"Time to go!" he muttered and broke for the doorway.

Immediate freedom was just within his grasp; his hand had closed around the handle when his head was viciously snapped backwards.

Fingers wove through his hair again as the massive guard yanked Dean away from his escape route. Unable to resist, he was easily brought down to the floor. The guard lashed out with a booted foot, catching Dean full in the chest. Air evacuated his lungs once more as his body rolled violently away from the blow.

Through glazed eyes, Dean saw Haris standing above him, yellow orbs glowing to match the sneer on his face.

“Take him out of here!” Haris commanded. “Do as you will, but keep him alive.”

Laughing sadistically, the guard obliged his master, kicking at Dean’s supine form again and again; continuing long after Haris had left the room and long after consciousness left Dean.

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Haris strode smugly from the office, the telltale sounds of pain-filled grunts trailing behind him as the guard’s booted foot connected with the body of Dean Winchester over and over. As a demon, Haris took no physical pleasure from any activity, but human suffering in any form always brought a certain sense of satisfaction to him; especially when the words “pain” and “Winchester” were combined in the same sentence.

He well knew how obstinate and defiant Dean could be, had witnessed it first hand that night in the cabin when, cloaked in the skin of the elder Winchester, Haris had taunted the young man, even tortured him. In fact, he would have killed him then and there had it not been for Dean’s pathetic plea that brought John to the surface and briefly in control.

“Perhaps I should have finished him then,” Haris stated aloud. “Should have taken him out of the game when I had the opportunity.”

Regret was another emotion that demons did not feel, but just the same, Haris knew that he had missed an opportunity. Now, faced with a semi-possessed hunter and a powerful amulet, Haris accepted that his original plan had failed. Failure was also something that a demon did not experience, well at least not for long.

Master was unforgiving. Failure was not a result that was tolerated in the ranks and Haris well knew the punishment associated with disappointing his Lord.

Walking several more feet, Haris reached the door to another room. Reverently, the demon entered the space, darkness greeting him. With a wave of his hand, several candles throughout the room erupted into life, illuminating a large altar.

Standing chest high, the ceremonial table was covered in spent wax and dried blood. More candles lined the rear of the countertop, also lit and casting ominous shadows across a massive golden bowl and a slender black chalice.

Haris strode to the altar, his hands reaching out to grasp the large vessel. Nearly the size of a punchbowl, it bore a dozen ghastly faces, cast in relief, screaming out in silent agony. Haris ran a fingertip across the design, each face accounting for a human soul, subdued and trapped forever in the place humans referred to as Hell. The demon knew better though. Hell didn’t exist as a place so much as a condition. A condition to which he knew he might soon be subjected if his report to the Master was not acceptable.

Setting the bowl back onto the altar, Haris picked up the ceremonial dagger. Communication with the Master required a blood offering, and not just any blood, but blood from the body he currently occupied. Rolling up the sleeve on his arm, he inserted the tip slowly into the inner portion of his left elbow, burying the first inch of the blade. In a precise move, he drew the blade from left to right, opening the antecubital vein and brachial artery in one fluid motion.

Blood coursed from the open wound as Haris calmly replaced the dagger and held his arm over the golden basin. His blood, or more accurately, the blood of the body he currently possessed, quickly filled the bowl. He then took the black chalice, a near duplicate of the larger container, with its own macabre faces carved into the metal. Dipping it into the thick, warm liquid, blood spilled forth from the open mouths of the carved faces like a bizarre fountain.

Haris lifted the goblet holding it high above his head as more blood poured out of the chalice coating his hands, his forearms, and the altar below. He spoke the incantation slowly, not due to lack of familiarity, but rather reluctance; he knew Master was not going to be pleased.

The invocation completed, Haris returned the cup to the altar as the candles in the room flickered as if from an unseen wind. Selecting a larger candle from the table, Haris plunged the flame into the blood-filled chalice igniting a pyrotechnic display to rival that of any rock band concert.

Stepping back, the demon waited for the internal voice that signaled the connection with his dark lord.

"Yes my Master!" he acknowledged.

"Yes, the battle was successful. Many of the hunters that have plagued our ranks were destroyed"

"No my lord, we have not yet found the body of John Winchester. There was an explosion and many of the hunters were burned beyond recognition." *Misdirection.*

Haris' body jerked suddenly, his Master's way of punishing the half-truth.

"No my lord, I do not have the younger son ... but I antic ..." The word cut off as an invisible hand clenched around the demon's throat, silencing him. Haris strangled silently for a few moments more, his body held rigidly by another unseen hand.

The invisible force released, the demon slowly straightened. He knew that while he was held in high stead amongst the ranks of Hell, he also recognized that his Master would not tolerate another word of failure.

"I have the elder Winchester son. He is under my control." *Technically speaking.* "He will bring us the father and brother."

The candles on the altar flared brilliantly just as Haris' body was lifted and launched across the room, slamming into the far wall before crumbling in a heap. The demon staggered to his feet once more. He knew he was on dangerous ground with his commander. One more false step and he might be joining the tortured faces on the chalice.

"Master, I will not fail you!" Haris insisted, a final assurance offered.

Disconnected, the yellow-eyed demon stepped back away from the dark altar. Relief spread through him as he extinguished the remainder of the candles with a subsequent wave of his hand. Grabbing a towel from another nearby stand, Haris methodically wiped the remnants of his dark work from both arms before rolling his sleeve back down. Running his hands over his shirt and trousers, he smoothed away the wrinkles that the wall had caused just moments before. The smug smile returned, his "game-face" back in place as he stepped back into the hallway, making his way back to the large office.

Both the guard and his prisoner were gone when Haris entered the room, but a small pool of congealing blood marked where the defiant young man had been beaten.

Dean Winchester!

He knew it was only a matter of time before his lord learned about the amulet, learned that Dean was not "completely" under his control. He simply had to rectify that situation. He needed the dark-haired hunter in order to gain control of his younger brother and he required Dean fully possessed and serving him.

Granted, the amulet had caught him off-guard, but after centuries of planning for the ultimate battle, he had learned to be patient and methodical. Every human had their price or their breaking point. The same would be true for Dean Winchester, Haris simply had to figure out what that trigger was for the young man.

Sliding into the leather high-back chair, Haris reclined, hands behind his head in contemplation. Physical torture hadn't worked thus far and playing on Dean's family loyalty had only served to inspire more defiance. Every time Haris thought he nearly had the young man converted, he would spring back with renewed rebellion.

The amulet again! It had to be! The power had grown to where it could influence its guardian as well as protect him. He simply had to get the charm off the young man.

The soft creak of a hinge drew Haris' attention to a young woman that stood in the doorway to the office. Another of the large guards escorted her inside as she sullenly carried a tray of food in her hands.

Dirty blonde hair lay in tangled curls about her face. Cleaned, she would have been very attractive, but the ragged clothing and smudged downcast face made her look pitiful and weak, a helpless victim.

As she rounded the edge of his desk, Haris reached out to brush a lock of hair away from her eyes. She visibly flinched, recoiling from his touch, blue eyes going wild with fear. As he absently continued to draw his fingers through her hair, his own yellow-eyes narrowed as he realized his oversight.

What a fool he had been...trying to sway a hunter with the wrong bait.

"What a pretty thing you are," He crooned to the girl, a clawed fingertip subtly moving to the corner of her eye, holding there, poised to impale the orb. "So vulnerable, so innocent. If only there was someone that would rescue you from the torment I have planned."

The girl screamed as demonic laughter filled the room, seeping out into the hallway and down the corridor to where a dark-haired hunter cringed.

* * * *

Sam and Zack drove the first half of the thirty minute trip back to town in a heavy silence so complete it filled the car to a point it barely left room to breathe.

Sam, face set in a scowl, fingers curled around the steering wheel like talons, shot Zack an occasional glance, mouth tightening as he did so, but still said nothing. His body language, however, was screaming.

Zack sat as close to the passenger door as he could get without hanging out of the window, shifting restlessly from time to time. Braced for what he wasn't exactly sure, but nerve endings singing a warning to be ready for whatever Sam might do.

"Sam..." Zack's voice was hoarse, subdued.

"Shut up," Sam snapped without looking, fingers gripping the wheel even tighter.

"Please, Sam."

Sam threw a glare at him this time, his growl of "What?" not even slightly encouraging.

Zack stared at the floorboards. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, his own hands twisted together in a knot.

Sam laughed. A brittle snort of derision. "Yeah, I'm sure. Sorry it didn't work!"

Zack ignored him, going on in desperation. "I didn't mean for things to end up like this! Haris swore you and Dean wouldn't be hurt -"

Sam laughed again, cutting him off. "You really are an idiot!" he replied. "What the hell did you think would happen when he got us? We'd all sit down and talk this out over a beer?"

"I had no idea Dean would end up possessed!" Zack protested, knowing his defensive position was weak to say the least, but unable to stop himself from trying to make Sam understand. "How could I have known that?"

Sam slammed on the brakes so hard the car fishtailed to a halt.

Zack was pitched forward, stopping himself from smashing into the dashboard by throwing his hands up.

Before he could do more than catch his breath Sam was on him, the muzzle of his gun digging into Zack's throat, his face so close Zack could feel the heat of Sam's breath. His heart racing, Zack spluttered, "You gonna kill me now? John said to let me go!"

Sam thought about Dean, writhing on the floor, a bullet fired by John in his shoulder, the cold blackness in his eyes. No matter how horrible the images that played through his mind about what Dean was going through at Haris' hands, he knew they were nothing compared to the reality.

The pressure on his throat increased and Zack gagged.

"I should kill you," Sam hissed. "Us alone on the drive to town. You catch me by surprise. Dad would expect me to defend myself." Sam put his lips close to Zack's ear. "He'd be pissed at me, but I'm used to that, and I really don't think in the long run he'd give a damn one way or the other about what happens to you."

Sam abruptly released Zack and sat back, Zack's head thumping against the window. Sam dropped his gun hand into his lap, covering his eyes with the other hand, drawing in and letting out a long breath.

Zack stayed frozen against the door, heart pounding.

"What did you mean when you said the Winchesters were cursed?" Sam demanded unexpectedly, still staring out the windshield.

Zack relaxed slightly. "I didn't mean anything, Sam. I was just trying to come up with something that would make you guys let me go."

Sam's head snapped around to glare again at Zack, who couldn't quite stop his flinch at the sudden movement.

"That's crap, Zack, and you know it!" Sam said in a low, intense voice. He twisted the key in the ignition, the Impala roaring back to life. Slamming the car into gear, Sam hit the gas, starting them back to town. Several minutes passed in silence, Sam finally pulling into town and heading for the bus station.

"I'm tired of all these damned secrets. All this need-to-know shit!" Sam hit the steering wheel. "I have a right to know why Haris has targeted my family! Why he wants me!"

Sam stopped the car and grabbed Zack's arm as he started to get out. "You owe me," he said. "You tell me what you know. *Please.*"

Zack pulled loose and heaved himself out of the car. "I'm sorry, Sam. Really. I don't know anything."

Sam's hand dropped to the seat and he sighed.

Zack didn't move away from the car. He bent, leaning into the passenger window, meeting Sam's desperate gaze.

"Talk to your dad, Sam. He knows. He knows everything." Zack backed out of the window, turned and walked quickly away, vanishing into the bus station.

* * * *

Inside Barracks

Dean swayed unsteadily, one hand reaching out to the wall in an effort to hold himself upright, while the other was extended before him in a less than effective effort to ward off another blow. He was having a hard time finding a portion of his body that had not suffered from the harsh kicks of the guard's boots. In fact, his first mistake was regaining consciousness from the initial beating in Haris' office. In retrospect, maybe staying on the floor might have been a better choice as yet another savage blow was launched at his head.

Sometime during his oblivion, another equally mammoth sentry had joined the mix and the two were now taking turns using Dean as a punching bag. Figuring that it would be much harder for their feet to connect with his head were it not on the floor, Dean struggled to remain upright.

Blood trickled from a cut beside his right eye, flowing down his face until it dripped from his chin and joined the reopened gunshot wound in his shoulder. There were other cuts as well, mostly scrapes from the rough rubber soles of the guards boots where they connected with unprotected flesh. All in all, Dean was pretty confident that this must be what it felt like to go five rounds with Mike Tyson.

'Well, at least neither of them have bit my ear off yet!' He thought to himself, ironic humor bringing a brief smile to an otherwise haggard face.

Dean braced for the next blow to land, his body stiffening for the inevitable assault. He put forth his best, most well practiced, look of "screw you"; hoping perhaps that at some level the two bruisers might be intimidated.

The next strike came at his head, but at the last moment, Dean was able to duck down, the guard's fist flashing past him, skimming across the top of his spiked hair and followed by a grunt as the guard's momentum carried him past and into the nearby wall. The grin that spread across the hunter's face was short-lived, quickly replaced by wide-eyes as both black-eyed men charged him simultaneously.

Back to a corner, Dean had no place to retreat as the two larger bodies slammed into him, smashing him against the wall and driving his head once more against the unyielding concrete block wall. The room spun sickeningly, objects both animate and inanimate cloned themselves in Dean's blurred, double vision. He felt several more blows land to his torso as his legs gave out again, dropping him in a heap to the floor.

'Damn ... and it took me ten minutes to stand up straight the last time!' he thought to himself.

Get hit... fall down ... get up ... get hit again ... fall down again ... pass out ... wake up ... repeat – the monotony of the routine was almost humorous to Dean's punch-drunk mind.

Copper filled his mouth, blood finding its way down his throat and antagonizing an already empty stomach. Had he eaten anything in recent memory, Dean would have taken great joy in puking on the nearest offending boot. Instead, he settled for hacking out a large glob of blood and spittle that splattered against the tan suede of the nearest guard's footgear.

The demon-possessed man looked down to his feet then back at Dean, black eyes flaring. Hands closed around the hunter's neck as he felt himself lifted from the floor, his feet dangling in the air. As choking became gasping, Dean felt panic rise in his chest. He struck feebly at the thick corded arms that held him suspended as consciousness began to drift from him. Just as his eyes began to slip shut, the door to the barracks room swung open, Haris striding into the area.

The demon casually noted Dean's currently lofted position and with a wave of his hand, the young man was dropped to the floor as the guard holding him was flung backward, the

sickening sound of bones crushing as the huge body fell. The tell-tale black fog seeped out of the destroyed body and rapidly dissipated out a nearby vent.

"I believe I said to keep the hunter alive!" Haris shouted at the emaciated husk. Stooping down, he offered a hand to a stunned Dean who swatted it away and rose stubbornly, albeit slowly, to his feet.

"Suit yourself Dean." Haris shrugged, straightening. He turned and motioned toward the still-open door.

A young woman slowly advanced from the hallway carrying a small tray laden with food. She mutely stepped towards Dean, her face downcast, blonde hair shrouding her but unable to hide the subdued slump of her shoulders or the multicolored bruises on her bare arms.

She set the platter at his feet, the inviting odor of grilled steak infiltrating Dean's nostrils as his stomach screamed out for recognition. Just as quickly, the girl took two steps back, glancing up briefly to meet his gaze. The absolute terror in her eyes burned into his head as all thoughts of hunger were replaced by anger and resolve.

Haris moved up to her right side, his hand coming to rest on the crown of her head as he began stroking her like a docile pet. The young woman shrunk visibly at the demon's touch, goose bumps raised on her skin as she shivered involuntarily.

Dean caught the girl's reaction and Haris likewise noted Dean's. He smiled in satisfaction watching the young man tense up with anger in response to the condition of the young woman.

Brushing aside her stray locks to reveal an unblemished, porcelain face, Haris shrewdly studied Dean's hoping for the desired effect.

"She's beautiful, isn't she? Clean her up and she could rival any of the greatest beauties of the ages."

Dean glared at the demon, suspicion tingling the skin at the back of his neck.

Haris continued. "She can be yours Dean. One of the perks of being on the winning team. You've always wanted a family, why not start with her?"

"I have a family!" Dean snapped back.

"Had, Dean. Must I keep reminding you?"

The silence in the small area was deafening, words forcing reality on the hunter and reminding him of the emptiness inside him that had nothing to do with the lack of recent meals.

"No! Not like this!" Dean refused.

Haris shrugged and in a single fluid motion he snapped the blonde's neck dropping her lifelessly to the ground. Dean screamed out in rage and denial, shocked at the swiftness of the murder that occurred before him.

The demon never skipped a beat, motioning once more as the remaining guard opened the door and another young woman was forced into the room. Brunette this time and like her predecessor, she could have been beautiful were it not for the beaten and broken demeanor.

The demon placed his hand on the back of the girl's neck, a whimper escaping her lips as his fingers curled around her throat. Dean jerked forward, fists clenched and ready to attack should Haris make any further threatening move.

"How about this one Dean? More to your liking? So innocent, don't you think?" the yellow eyed fiend questioned, his hand constricting tighter.

The young woman's delicate fingers flew to her neck as she began to gasp.

"Stop it!" Dean shouted. "Don't do this!"

Soft doe eyes widened in desperation as the young woman frantically clawed at the demon's hand but, Haris refused to relent.

"I'll stop Dean, in exchange for the amulet," he offered nonchalantly.

Heart and head immediately began to clash. There was no way Dean could stand by and watch another innocent woman be slaughtered because of him, no way his battered soul could withstand it, yet he knew just as certainly that he could not part with the amulet either. Without the amulet, he was certain that he would fully succumb to the demon, not to mention that the last time he was without the amulet, it nearly killed him. Still, what was his life worth anymore anyway? Why not sacrifice it for the life of someone more deserving to live? Maybe it would be a small reconciliation for the blonde, for Layla, and for Sam.

"The clock's ticking, what's it going to be? The girl or the amulet?" Haris demanded.

Reluctantly, defeat evident in both his eyes and his body language, Dean slowly reached up to the knot behind his neck. As he fumbled, his fingers shaking with the emotional turmoil, Haris stepped forward smiling in triumph.



Drawing near to the young hunter, the demon moved away from the girl eager to receive his long awaited prize. Eyes downcast, Dean's hand moved to his chest where the darkened charm lay against his shirt. His palm encircled the ancient bauble, gripping it tightly in his closed palm.

From within his black suit coat, Haris produced a small, dark box with gold runes covering the sides. He slowly lifted the lid, revealing crimson colored satin lining the inside. Extending it outward in his hand, he awaited the amulet.

Every muscle in Dean's body was coiled like a snake, pent up anger, frustration and pain nourishing him like no amount of food ever could. As the box slid into view, he looked up and for the briefest moment, coal-black empty irises flashed at his captor.

Opening his hand, the amulet did not fall into the proffered container, but instead fell back against his body. The empty box, not to mention the stiff middle finger of Dean's right hand that waggled in front his face, alerted Haris to the fact that he had been duped. In that instant, the young hunter sprang forward, grabbing the hand of the submissive young woman and bolting for the still-open door.

Running as fast as his abused body and the frightened girl would allow him, Dean headed toward the large double doors he had spotted earlier when he had been taken to Haris' office. Just as he approached, the doors swung open and two uniformed men entered, blocking the escape route. As large as the carbon copies that had been guarding Dean, he knew there was no way to get past them with the brunette in tow.

Spinning around, he saw Haris and the remaining sentry moving in from the opposite end of the hallway. Glancing nervously, both obvious exits blocked, Dean pushed the young woman behind him in an effort to shield her as the demon approached.

As he neared, Haris nodded his head slightly in Dean's general direction, his yellow eyes swirling like flames. Dean could feel the girl's body jerk behind him, could hear her scream abruptly stifled by a gasp. He turned to aid her just as her chest burst open, blood cascading down the light green jersey she wore. Brown eyes stared downward as she watched her own life pouring out.

Dean could feel his own chest hitch in response, the nightmare of being ripped apart still fresh enough in his mind that he grimaced, his hand unconsciously reaching to his heart, feeling it pound beneath the thin fabric of his t-shirt.

Frozen in the memory, Dean could only stare as the young woman collapsed to the floor, eyes dilated in death. He screamed in rage, his fists pounding into the wall behind him over and over.

"Not again! Not more innocent blood on my hands!"

Haris stepped forward, toeing the dead girl like a piece of garbage.

"There's plenty more where she came from Dean! We can do this all night!"

* * * *

The first bloody glow of dawn was shimmering on the horizon as John and Sam took up a position of relative safety behind a thick clump of bushes rimming the fencing running along the edge of the small compound. There wasn't much to look at. One long barracks, a small hangar and a few outbuildings of varying sizes scattered about the dusty area. Now and again figures could be seen moving from one building to the other but not much else had been happening in the last eight hours.

Bobby's presence on the scene for the past three days could attest to that. He had kept close watch on Haris's base of operations since speaking with John. He and the small group of hunters that had joined them had maintained a constant surveillance of the area. Bobby felt fairly secure in the number of inhabitants inside, but as to what activities were being conducted he had no clue.

He glanced up as John and Sam settled in beside him, lowering his field glasses to nod at the two men. "John. Sam."

John clasped Bobby's arm but said nothing, accepting the glasses as Bobby held them out and scanning the compound himself.

"Hey, Bobby," Sam said softly. "Anything new?"

Bobby shook his head slightly. "No sign of Dean, or Haris," He replied, looking away from Sam's disappointment. "But they're definitely moving out. No new people have come in and when the trucks come in, they come in light. But they leave heavy. With what I don't know."

John lowered the binoculars after he completed his scan of the area and sighed. "We need to get everyone together, make sure everyone knows their part." He glanced back at the base. "I can't believe you've been able to monitor this from so close. No guards, no patrols." John spat disgustedly. "Arrogant bastard."

John handed the glasses to Bobby and touched Sam's arm to draw his attention from the compound. "C'mon, let's go."

* * * *

As they made their way back to the road other hunters materialized silently from the surrounding area, following along until John called a halt.

He paused before speaking, surveying this scruffy group. They brandished a variety of weapons. Their clothing and expressions were equally worn and battered. Young, old, a couple of women John would have thought twice about before taking on. He knew most of them, and if he didn't, Bobby did, which was good enough. They had wanted to keep it to a small, trusted group.

John stood in the center as the other hunters slouched and hunkered down around him, waiting.

Sam stood to one side, avoiding their looks. He knew a couple of them casually but John had always kept Sam and Dean out of the mainstream of other hunters and he felt a little out of place under their intense scrutiny.

He knew John may have had their respect as a seasoned and formidable hunter, but their presence here had more to do with a mutual desire to bring Haris down than any love for John and his abrasive ways.

As far as John was concerned, looking around at his colleagues, this was a mission to rescue his son. If Haris went down in the process, all the better, but all he gave a damn about was getting Dean back. One way or the other. The thought that choked him was not knowing whether Dean would be the hazel-eyed son or the black-eyed demon John had shot. Either way, though, Dean was coming with them. That he might already be dead was not a thought John was willing to entertain.

John took a deep breath. "Okay," he began, "any questions about what we have to do once we get in the compound?" He had already gone over the plan with everyone, but marine training demanded he go through it one more time.

"Sid, Micheal, Jefferson and Rennie-" he gestured at each individual in turn. Sid, a heavy set man around John's age who looked like he would be more at home as a department store Santa; his companion, dark skinned Micheal, who rarely spoke and never looked someone in the eye unless he intended to kill them. Jefferson, the lanky Texan, who always seemed to be smirking, as if enjoying a never ending private joke. Rennie, a dark haired woman with a slashing scar down the side of her face and bigger scar she kept hidden inside.

"You're all with me on the barracks, John confirmed. "The rest of you go with Bobby to the hangar once the explosives are planted at the outbuildings." He swept them all with a hard look. "We hit hard and we hit fast. In and out. Surprise is all we have."

He stopped again, looking at them all. "I know there are innocent people in there, including my son, Dean. We have to accept the fact that there will be collateral damage." His gaze turned cold. "I will not accept Dean being a part of that damage. If someone finds him before I do, hold him until I get there. Are we *absolutely* clear on this?"

As the grizzled veterans mumbled and nodded assent, out of the corner of his eye, John saw Sam suddenly grimace, a hand shooting to his temple as he gasped, knees buckling...

* * * *

When the pain hit from out of nowhere, Sam couldn't stop the gasping cry he made as his hands shot to his head, a searing blast of pain tearing through his skull as he stumbled to one side.

NOT NOW! He thought in horror as the vision engulfed him.

* * * *

The floor was covered in pools of red. In the peripheral of his "sight" Haris stood to one side, arms crossed, looking bored and irritated. His gaze was fixed on the huddle of bodies

gathered in the center of the room. Sam's eyes swept across the chamber, past the crumpled forms of several young women, their faces frozen in stark terror, the blood spreading on the floor emanating from their torn bodies.

His gaze came to rest on the action taking place in the center of the room where several large men with ink black eyes were engaged in the enthusiastic beating and kicking of a figure twisted on the floor, trying ineffectually to protect his face and belly by curling into a ball. His muffled cries and grunts of pain tore into Sam with every blow.

"Enough!" Haris called suddenly. The assault ceased instantly and the tormentors fell back, breathing heavily, their victim writhing at their feet.

Haris knelt next to the figure and with surprising gentleness rolled him onto his back, drawing a low cry from the broken form as he did so.

"No more, please..."

Sam's heart froze as Dean's battered features were revealed. His eyes barely open, blood and bruises covering his exposed skin.

Haris shook his head slowly. "This can all stop, Dean. You can end it right now," he said in a soft, reasonable voice, a father reluctantly administering punishment to an errant child.

Sam felt sick.

"You know what you have to do." Haris held out his hand. "Give me the amulet, Dean, and all this goes away. No one else dies because of you. The pain stops. Everything will be all right. I promise..." Haris was practically crooning now. His other hand stretched out to Dean's sweaty, blood-matted hair and stroked gently.

Dean groaned, unable to move away from the hateful touch. So tired...

Eyes down, he made two abortive attempts to grip the blackened amulet before he could make his shaking fingers close around it. His breath choked in a sob.

"NO!" Sam screamed, clutching the explosion in his head as he watched a trembling Dean lift the cord from around his neck and hand it Haris, whose eyes began to glow such a brilliant yellow they appeared to be on fire.

Sam screamed again as Dean suddenly fell back to the floor, a twisted smile pulling at his lips as he began to laugh softly, staring at the ceiling, his eyes blacker than midnight.

** * * **

John crossed the short distance to Sam in two quick strides, pushing aside Jefferson and Micheal who were trying to come to Sam's aid, not sure exactly what he needed as he thrashed on the ground.

John pulled Sam to him, trying to shield the young man from the view of others.

"Dad...my God, I saw him...saw what they're doing!!!" Sam clutched his head and rolled into his father.

"It's okay, Sam! Shhh! Quiet, it'll be okay..." John's desperate attempts to hush Sam were pointless as Sam was not even slightly in control of himself.

"Dean's gonna give it to him!" Sam cried, "He'll turn if he does. Dad he'll turn!!!" Sam gripped John frantically, staring past him at something only he could see.

Bobby, as startled at the rest, abruptly realized this was not good. The hunters standing around were starting to look at each other and Sam with growing alarm. They were, by nature, a suspicious lot and most of them had a "shoot first and worry about the consequences later" attitude.

"Okay, c'mon!" he snapped. "The kid's been sick, let's leave 'em alone. Give 'em some room. He'll be fine." Bobby hurriedly shooed the other hunters away, pushing those reluctant to leave along. "We'll be leaving in a minute, do what you need to get ready and we'll meet at that big dead tree in ten minutes!"

Bobby shoved the last man ahead of him and turned to shoot John a desperate look. John thanked him with his eyes and turned back to Sam who appeared to be coming out of it.

"Talk about lousy timing." John grouched. He brushed Sam's hair out of his eyes and held him steady as Sam shakily got to his feet. "Of all the damned people to have that happen in front of!"

"I'm sorry," Sam said, coughing, still holding his temple. "I can't control it..."

"What did you see?" John hissed when he was sure the others were out of earshot.

"My God, Dad, they're beating him to death!" Sam tried to keep his voice down. "All these women around him, dead. There's blood everywhere!" John grabbed Sam's arm as he swayed.

Heart in his throat, John forced himself to be calm. "What else?" he gritted.

Sam paused trying to make sense of it. "Haris is trying to get Dean to give in to something. He wants Dean's amulet...I don't know why, but it's important." Sam shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Whatever it is, Dean's still fighting. But -" Sam caught John's shirt in his fist. "Dad if we don't get to Dean in time, he's gonna give the amulet to Haris and it'll be too late!"

"Okay, Sam, I understand. We gotta go. Are you all right? Can you make it?" John bobbed to see Sam's face more clearly.

Sam wiped his eyes and straightened. "Try and stop me!"

John clapped him on the shoulder. "Then let's go!"

* * * *

Inside the Barracks

*Where do I take this pain of mine
I run but it stays right by my side
So tear me open, pour me out
The thing inside that screams and shouts
And the pain still hates me, so hold me... until it sleeps ...*

Pain and numbness, generally opposites, but given enough pain, either mental or physical, then numbness will soon follow. Such was now the case for Dean. How many times had he unconsciously hummed Metallica, had hummed this song, not cognizant of the lyrics but comforted by the strong rhythm which could numb him into ignoring whatever pain was plaguing him. Now, it mocked him with its appropriateness, no longer distracting or soothing, the words reminding him of the evil thing inside him and the futility of the situation he was in.

Three days; the beatings at the hands of Haris' latest guards continued until nearly every inch of his body was covered in bruises. Three days; more young women were paraded before him like animals at an auction only to be slaughtered by the demon when Dean would not, could not, hand over the amulet. Three more days that his conscience tore him apart from the inside, chastising him for being so weak, so pathetic. And three more days for him to sink further and further into the darkest recesses of his mind.

Around him, the bodies of the dead girls littered the floor like broken dolls left behind by a spoiled child. So many bodies spread before him that he shrunk back into his favorite corner, compacting his body as tightly as possible in an effort to separate himself from the carnage. Everywhere he cast his eyes, Dean was met with the stark reminder of his refusal to submit to the demon's demands.

He dry-heaved at the sight of the thick, gelled blood surrounding the lifeless forms, but nothing came up, his stomach having long since given up reminding him of its emptiness.

When had he eaten last? Days? Weeks? Did it even matter any more? God, he was so tired. Maybe if he could just close his eyes and sleep. Maybe he could wake up from this nightmare, Sam shaking him alert and standing over him with those eyes that always looked so damned sincere, so concerned.

Sam! "Sammy!" his voice called out weakly, dry from thirst, hoarse from screaming.

"You're not gonna let me die in peace are you?"

"I'm not gonna let you die at all!"

If only it were true! If only Sammy were alive and rushing to save him. Funny! He'd always considered himself his baby brother's self-appointed savior and protector, but how many times had Dean been the recipient of Sam's stalwart determination to redeem him?

What did it matter now anyway? Sam was gone, Dad was gone, and there was no one left that cared enough to come and find him. He was lost.

Lost in a trance, his eyes focused on the blood on the floor, *blood on his brother's throat*, all his fault!

He crimped his eyes closed once more. Even in the self-imposed darkness, the images of the dead women burned into his brain. They were dead because of him; there was no denying that fact. Their blood was on his hands, no amount of justification could wipe away the stain. Would there ever be hope for redemption? Was he becoming a corporeal version of Claviger? Just because he hadn't actually done the killing like the ancient cowboy, he was just as surely guilty of the crime.

"You hate me because you see in me what you may one day become ... " Claviger's prediction seemingly coming true as the demon inside Dean stirred.

Layla's words came back in a rush to haunt him. "He was once a good man, now turned so inherently evil he is hard to destroy." *Who had she really been talking about? Had she somehow known that he, like Claviger, would somehow succumb to evil? And like Claviger, did he too need to be destroyed?*

Dean wrapped his arms, stiff and sore, tighter around his chest, hugging himself as he slowly began to rock back and forth.

Although he could close his eyes to prevent seeing the butchery splayed out all around him, the victims' final screams still sounded in his head, deafening him. Reaching up, elbows tucked into his chest, he cupped his palms over his ears. Just like the visage that was etched into his minds-eye, the screams continued inside his skull.

"Stop, stop, stop, STOP!" Dean shouted, trying to drown out the voices in his head.

Deep inside, the demon growled. Dean could feel it making its presence known, could sense it rising up to battle him; *battle the amulet?*

"Dean! You can make it all go away. The blood, the screams, the nightmares, the pain!" the demon within pressed him.

"No!" He refused, weaker than before, determination slowly fading like the last rays of sunlight before nightfall.

"But Dean, you haven't even heard my offer yet!" Haris stood before him, silently appearing in the room, his voice booming and breaking through the internal dialogue.

Dean looked up, his face blanching as he saw the small figure held before the demon. The boy was no more than six or seven, eyes peeking from behind a shaggy brown mop of hair. Like a puppy, the boy was all limbs, gangly and needing to grown into his frame.

"Remind you of anyone?" Haris taunted, clearly relishing the effect that the boy was having on the hunter.

"You bastard!" Dean snarled.

He tried to avoid looking at he terrified eyes of the little boy, but the piercing blue-green bore into him; pleading, begging, hopeful, Sammy! Dean turned away, trying to hide the exhaustion and defeat that he knew was evident on his face.

"I can't save you Sammy! I couldn't save you before and I can't save you now. I can't even save myself. I'm sorry! Forgive me – please!"

"This can all stop Dean. You know what I require! Give me the amulet and the boy goes free!"

The demon clamped his hand onto the junction of the boy's neck and shoulder, claws digging into the soft flesh as the child whimpered and nearly dropped to his knees. Brows raised, eyes wide, the boy extended a hand out towards Dean silently imploring the young hunter to come to his rescue. Small fingers barely touched the skin on Dean's arm and he flinched, the contact stinging him with brutal reality.

"The amulet, Dean?" Haris reminded. The demon's hand gripped tighter as the boy cried out, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

Dean couldn't stand it anymore. Beatings could be tolerated, pain could be pushed down, and hunger could be ignored, but guilt ate at you, devoured the very essence of what made a man a man. So much blood! Blood on the floor, blood on Sam's throat, blood on his hands. He was tired of blood; his, theirs, anyone's and he wasn't about to watch this innocent boy's blood be spilled because of him.

Reluctantly, remorsefully, beaten and broken, Dean reached up to his neck. His numb fingers began working the knot that held the talisman to his body. His eyes never left the face of the little boy, trying to relay some sort of confidence and reassurance while the demon within him laughed in derision.

Glancing up at Haris, the cord nearly apart, Dean expected to see a similar look of smug satisfaction. Instead, he was surprised to see yellow eyes startled and rapidly moving about. It took several more seconds before his head finally blocked out the voice of the demon and his own internal barrage, his ears picking up the rapid "popping" of automatic gunfire.

As his hands dropped away from his neck, Dean watched as Haris ordered the guards out to check on the disturbance. Turning to face the hunter, the demon could not hide the concern from his face.

"I'll be back Dean. We'll pick up where we left off," Haris promised, but for once the ominous tone to his voice was missing.

The demon strode from the room, dragging the young boy behind him as the sounds of gunfire grew closer. Dean leaned back against the cool wall, listening to the weapons barrage. Voices, human voices, accompanied the dull thuds of bullets as they ricocheted off of wood and concrete.

"DEAN!" His name shouted over and over from the exterior hallway, but Dean didn't hear it.

"Resist, Hold on, Stay Strong!" over and over, the mantra began replaying again.

"You're not gonna let me die in peace are you?"

"I'm not gonna let you die at all!"

* * * *

At the large dead oak, the other hunters were gathered, checking ammo and making last minute comments in low undertones. The talk ceased as John and Sam approached, a few of them casting Sam odd looks. Sam ignored them.

John checked his gun. "We ready for this?" He accepted the nods and murmurs of assent from the others. He nodded at Bobby. "Let's do it." He moved to the front of his group and headed toward the compound. Bobby and his men moved to the left and vanished into the trees.

* * * *

Getting in through the gate was easy. No one challenged them as they cut through the padlocks and shoved the gates aside. A little hesitantly, but finding the absence of confrontation irresistible, John and his companions raced to the barracks and glued themselves to the sides of the building, peering carefully into the dirty windows.

There was a sharp blast and Sam was shocked to see Michael suddenly pitch backwards and land in the dirt several feet away, minus a large part of his skull, blood pouring from his head.

Sid yelled as his friend was thrown backwards. He didn't need to go to him to know he was dead.

More gun blasts poured through the windows and black-eyed men suddenly rushed out the double doors.

Sid went insane, grabbing a machete from the sheath on his back and wading into the knot of Haris's servants, gun roaring in one hand, blade slashing with the other, indiscriminately lopping off whatever body parts were presented to him from the men who had murdered his partner.

The other hunters took advantage of Sid's mad diversion, firing their own weapons and going at it hand to hand if needed. They were outnumbered but the men attacking them were moving without a plan, only the desire to eradicate. A single-mindedness of purpose that was not that difficult to overcome.

An explosion sounded behind them and one of the outbuildings was blown apart. Friends and enemies alike ducked and covered their heads as they were pelted with debris. No sooner had the one gone off than the other two buildings were blasted skyward.

"C'mon!" John yelled at Sam, shoving him into the now unbarred doorway. Behind him Sam could hear Rennie screaming like a banshee.

Jefferson and Sid stumbled through the door, Sid turning to squeeze off one more shot into a still moving body. Sam grimaced, but he understood. They were not taking prisoners.

Rennie stepped in. "What now?" she demanded, blood dripping from her forehead.

John looked down the long corridor, festooned with doors, all closed.

"Start searching the rooms! If you find prisoners, release them, but tell me if you find Dean!" he gestured with his gun and they spread out, opening doors and making rapid sweeps of the rooms.

"Be careful, Sam!" John called to him as they split up.

Sam nodded and moved on down the hallway. He could hear more muffled gunfire and yelling outside. Smoke and dust from the explosions was starting to fill the air, making it hard to breath.

He moved down the corridor, jumping a short set of steps and began searching the rooms on this lower level. Gunshots rang out behind him but he ignored them, moving on from room to room, each new door a promise and a lie. Dean wasn't in any of them. Mostly what he

found was bloodstains. Too many and too big, in almost every room. One or two still had the cold body that the blood belonged to lying stiffly on the floor but one look and Sam could tell they were beyond any help he could offer.

Angry and growing more and more frustrated, he didn't even try the last door, he just kicked it open in a fury.

* * * *

Dean jerked at the sound of the door crashing open, starting reflexively, but beyond actually caring enough to lift and his head and see what it was. Haris back, no doubt, with that little kid, ready for more fun and games. Dean couldn't take anymore, of that he was sure. The gunfire Dean had thought he heard was obviously a figment of his desperate imagination.

"Dean, my God!"

Dean's head did snap up that time, hearing that voice, knowing he'd finally lost his mind. Desperate hands grabbed his arms and he cringed away, farther into his corner, throwing his filthy blood-streaked hands up to protect himself.

"Leave me alone, you bastard!" he gasped.

"Dean, it's me, Sam! Look at me! It's okay, you're okay! We're here to get you out!"

Dean felt large warm hands on the sides of his face. Even as he tried to jerk away, his eyes finally got the idea and Sam's shaggy haired face swam into focus. He gaped in disbelief, his heart pounding in his ears. His fingers closed spastically over the fabric covering Sam's arms, shaking uncontrollably. His eyes searched the smiling face in front of him.

"It's a trick..." he whimpered. "I killed you..."

"No! Dean, you helped save me. I'm here, Dad's here. I swear...God, Dean, what's that son of a bitch done to you..." Sam's voice thickened as he took in Dean's battered features, torn clothes, the blood. His eyes swept over the room, at the bodies strewn carelessly over the floor. The blood pooling everywhere that Dean had tried so hard to get away from by cramming himself as far into the corner as he could.

Dean suddenly clawed Sam into his arms, grasping him in a crushing embrace. "You're alive!" he choked, fingers digging into Sam's back. "You're alive..."

Sam returned the hug, giving Dean what comfort he could. "I'm fine, Dean I'm fine. You didn't hurt me." Sam braced himself. "C'mon, let's get you out of here, we don't have a lot of time." He helped as Dean struggled unsteadily to his feet.

They had barely made it upright when Dean's eyes went wide and he made a weak effort to push Sam to one side.

"Dean, what are you-" Sam gagged as an arm like a bar of iron closed around his throat and he was dragged backwards, away from Dean.

Dean stumbled back against the wall with a cry.

Sam struggled, but his air was effectively cut off and even as he flailed, he could feel darkness closing in.

Haris gave a little, allowing Sam to suck in a short breath. "Well, hell, Dean! I guess even you must have realized by now that Sam isn't dead." Haris laughed. "What can I say? I've always been fuzzy on details. No problem though. Since he is alive-" Haris eased his hold once again but Sam's struggles were getting weaker, "for the moment, anyway, he's a much better bargaining chip than that raggedy-assed kid I had in here. So what do you say, Dean? Hand over the amulet. I may have lied about Sam being dead but I don't have the slightest problem correcting that situation," Sam choked as Haris tightened his grip. "*Right now!*"

Sam struggled against the stranglehold, his hands tearing at the claws that bit into the flesh at his neck. A thin trickle of blood appeared on his skin from where one sharp talon had pierced the tissue. Although the wound was minor and certainly not painful, the crimson trail became a red flag to Dean, who was now on his feet, adrenaline surging through him for the first time in days.

In an instant, his mind flashed back to the ceremonial chamber. With great clarity, he recalled the knife lying against Sam's throat and his hand as it began to slowly draw the blade across his brother's flesh. He remembered the look in his brother's eyes, understanding and acceptance combined, but something else too. As Dean's hand subtly moved to the rope binding Sam's left wrist, a brief glint of a smile acknowledged that his older brother was still there behind the black eyes: protector, savior, hero.

"I won't hurt you Sammy! I could never hurt you! Trust me!" It was then that he also remembered hearing the myriad of gunshots as the hunters stormed the chamber, felt himself spun around as the slug from his father's weapon found its mark in his shoulder.

"Dad, NO! Wait! You don't understand!" his mind shouted out as he had fallen to the ground.

"Dad is gone. Sammy is gone. You're all alone, the last of the Winchesters."

Haris had lied to him, *big surprise*, and in his battered psyche, he had believed it. How close had he come to giving in, sacrificing himself, thinking that he had nothing left to live for?

As Sam began to gasp, Haris' grip tightening and restricting air flow, Dean reacted. The pain, the lies, the agony of thinking that his family was gone, the torture, the blood of the innocent women, all of it rushed up from deep within him and joined together morphing into one emotion: rage!

Letting open the floodgates, he allowed the sensation to wash over him. Every other thought, feeling or discomfort was pushed aside as Dean let the anger feed the demon within him. No way was he going to stand aside, passively watching as Haris threatened Sam. No chance that he was going to risk losing his brother again, this time for real.

Inside him, the demon laughed, sending a chill that shook him from the pit of his stomach. *"You're mine now!"* it hissed.

Muscles tightened and his jaw clenched, his molars grinding audibly.

"I'll never be yours!" Dean shouted loudly.

The vehemence contained in those four words startled Sam, momentarily ceasing his struggle as he looked into the black-filled eyes of his older brother.

Haris' mouth opened, the beginning of a sharp reply forming on his lips, but halted as John Winchester burst into the room, another hunter entering on his heels, both with weapons at ready.

The Winchester patriarch took in the scene with one well-trained glance. One son held captive by his arch enemy while the other stood before them, beaten, bruised, and black-eyed. John's heart leaped into his throat as he looked at his eldest child, demon-possessed.

"I'm too late!" he cried silently.

Distracted by the arrival, Haris' loosened his grip slightly on Sam as he turned to face the new threat. Dean capitalized on the diversion and charged into the demon, knocking Sam to the floor as his momentum carried him and Haris into the nearby wall.

John ran to reach his youngest, helping Sam to his feet as the young man coughed and sputtered with the return of normal airflow. Both turned to watch the contest taking place a few feet away. As Sam regained his composure, he strained against John's hand on his arm, seeking to rush to Dean's side. *Why was his father restraining him? Why wasn't he also hurrying to help out his oldest son?*

"Dad, we have to help Dean!"

As black eyes and yellow eyes flashed, bodies fighting for supremacy, Sam understood.

Empowered by the demon within him but lacking any real weapon, Dean simply took out his fury on Haris' physical body with his fists. He knew that the action was ineffective, but his heart and soul cried out for retribution for everything he'd been through and for all the torment that his family had undergone.

His arms moved like pistons, each driving knuckles again and again into the pasty flesh of the demon's face. All Dean could see were Haris' yellow eyes, boring into him, taunting him, defying him to make them blink or turn away. He struck again, putting every ounce of aggression, his own and the demon's, into each punch, anything to blot out those eyes.

Haris tolerated the assault, never fearful but rather allowing it like a parent would allow a child to throw a temper tantrum, waiting till the child had expended all its energy before responding. As Dean's attack slowed, Haris chose his moment. With a nod of his head, his own power much stronger than that of his child's within the hunter, he threw Dean aside. Springing to his feet like a gymnast, Haris faced off against the other occupants of the room.

With his son out of the field of fire, John swung up his weapon, pulling the trigger as fast as his finger could respond. Joined by Jefferson and a now armed Sam, the three men unloaded every round within their weapons at the demon. As the guns emptied and the residual smoke cleared, Haris remained standing despite his torso being pock-marked by holes from the bullets fired at point blank range.

With lightning speed, he reached down and grabbed Dean by the hair, pulling him to his feet and wrapping one arm around his chest, drawing the young man in front of his body like a shield.

"Care to try again John? Fire away," Haris sneered. "You've done it before; shot Dean that is. Wouldn't it be worth the sacrifice to get me?"

John tensed, his hand on the gun flexing nervously as he absorbed the demon's words.

"Look at him John! Look at Dean's eyes! He already belongs to me," Haris continued, slowly inching backwards toward the open door.

"I want my son, you bastard. He doesn't belong to you, neither of my boys do!"

"Oh John! Such sentiment. Why don't you just take Sammy and go. You're not fooling anyone by trying to act like you care as much about Dean as you do Sam."

Sam grimaced at the remark, knowing full well that particular wound had never healed for his brother. John merely glared back in response. He knew he loved both his sons. Always had, always would. True, maybe he loved Dean differently than he did Sam, but definitely not more or less. Even now, when his eldest child's eyes gleamed coal black back at him, Dean's face still begged for his father's help, just as it had that awful night in Missouri.

Stepping into the hallway, Haris tightened his grip on Dean as he continued his retreat. John and Sam slowly advanced, guns still leveled. Outside, the echoes of automatic gunfire ceased, the battle at the hangar having drawn to a conclusion that John could only pray had been favorable for their side.

Haris noted the cessation of combat as well, but his face remained stoic, his yellow eyes never leaving the hunters that were pursuing him. He knew that they couldn't really harm him with the weapons they carried as surely as he knew that John wouldn't make any move that might endanger his son. Taunts aside, Haris held no delusions about John Winchester's devotion to his sons.

Halfway down the hallway to the main door, Dean struggled against the demon's arm. Although he could still feel the demon rumbling around within him, churning inside like the worst upset stomach he'd ever had in his life, Dean knew that he couldn't tap into the spawn's power any further. Having exhausted the strength to control it, Dean also knew that each time he "used" the demon's abilities he risked succumbing to it totally. Calling up every reserve of desperate energy he could muster, Dean pushed the demon back down yet again.

Sam didn't miss the change in his brother's eyes as the familiar hazel reappeared.

Nudging his father, he motioned his head in Dean's direction.

John tried not to act relieved as haggard green irises made contact with his brown ones. He smiled briefly, hoping to convey encouragement despite the desperate situation.

"Let Dean go and I'll let you go," John offered. *Anything to get my son back. I'll hunt your ass down again later, and then there will be hell to pay!* "He isn't yours, not now, not ever."

"Maybe not, but he does have something that belongs to me," Haris replied. "Something I have no intention of leaving behind. See, demons have families too John and your son has already cost me a couple of my own children. Fair trade don't you think?"

Demons have family too.

I have a family, John. Surprise!

John reflected somberly. Demons had families, Zack had a family, both actions driven by familial responsibility. Had he ever considered his own family in his quest to seek vengeance? Had he really done his sons any justice by dragging them into his misguided quest?

Dean groaned loudly, breaking John from his thoughts, as Haris' claws punctured the skin at his neck. Sam lunged forward but the demon shifted backwards pulling Dean along with him. Having reached the main doors, Haris smiled broadly, his escape nearly within reach.

"You'll never leave here with Dean!" John promised seeing the smug grin. "Feel free to take your demon brat and go back to whatever pit of hell you crawled out of."

"Now that's the dilemma, you see. Did you know what you were doing when you gave Dean that amulet or was it just dumb luck on your part John? Never mind, no need to answer that, had to be dumb luck," the demon sneered.

John was about to reply when Haris suddenly lurched forward, a look of surprise on his pale face, his grasp on Dean lost as the young man fell forward away from his captor. Sam never skipped a beat, moving quickly ahead and grabbing his brother by the arms, drawing him towards his rescuers.

Both John and Sam stepped around in front of Dean, shielding him with their bodies, waiting for Haris to retaliate. As the demon lifted his head, a gleaming tip of metal protruded from the front of his neck, a curl of smoke rising from where the blade made contact with Haris' skin.

Peeking from behind Haris, his hand still firmly grasping the hilt of the knife, Zack Murzak smiled weakly at the group.

Haris' hands reached for his throat as his yellow eyes widened. A strange gurgle escaped from his mangled trachea, followed by a startled cry from Zack. As they watched, blood began to pour from the former hunter's mouth and ears, the front of his brown shirt saturating with his blood as Haris fought back with demonic power.

"Go! Now! This won't hold him for long!" Zack yelled, blood now forming at the corner of his eyes as the demon destroyed him from the inside.

Sam immediately lifted Dean, his arms wrapping around his brother, supporting his weary body. The other hunters wasted no time skirting around their former comrade, making for the nearby exit.

John reached to lend his own hand to support Dean, but his eyes remained fixed on Zack. The hunter's features were nearly coated in crimson, but he never wavered, his redemption and sacrifice complete.

"Zack?" John whispered, his eyes conveying the gratitude his words could not express. "Your family?"

"Safe now, and forever John. Now, go take care of your boys." Zack gasped, his knees beginning to buckle, eyes drooping, but hand maintaining its death-grip on the ceremonial blade.

John nodded and led his sons through the open door and out into the waiting sunshine.

* * * *

Bobby's Place

4 days later...

Dean sat semi-reclined on the threadbare couch, one arm flopped across his head, covering his eyes but not muffling the voices that seeped in from the next room. Beyond him, John and Bobby were gathered around the desk, surrounded by the usual myriad of reference materials that the older hunter had gathered over the years. Dean knew what they were "researching" and he could also tell by the tone of his father's voice that they weren't meeting with any huge success.

"There has to be something Bobby," John insisted.

"I'm telling you John, there's never been anything about 'semi-possession' before. It's all or nothing with these kinds of things."

"What about the amulet? Dean said Haris wanted the amulet, tried to take it off of him but couldn't. He thinks that the amulet was protecting him somehow. Sam, did you find anything on-line?"

Sam shook his head discouraged, his eyes reddened from spending nearly every waking moment scanning the internet to find something to help his brother.

"What are we going to do Dad?" he asked, his voice low.

"Well, we can't have him running around with a demon inside him and it's only a matter of time before Haris comes back looking for him. Or before Dean can't ..." John stopped, afraid to voice his deeper fear of his son losing control to the demon within him.

"Dad!" Sam exclaimed, sensing his father's thoughts. "Dean won't, he never could, not even in the ceremonial chamber. Besides, he doesn't need to hear this, not now, not from us."

"Yeah, but *he* can hear you," Dean stated, coming to stand in the doorway, his body leaning casually against the jamb, hazel eyes red-rimmed, but his body remarkably healed from the abuse suffered at the demon's hands. "Last time I checked, I wasn't four years old, needing people to talk about me like I wasn't there."

"Son, that's not it. That's not what we meant; we're just trying to find a way to help you." John answered.

"Yeah, help me before I turn black-eyed and evil permanently?"

"Dean," Sam began, but was interrupted as his older brother continued.

"I know you don't trust me Dad. Hell, I don't trust myself anymore. I nearly killed Sam and all those women died because of me. I can feel the damn thing gnawing at me from inside. I can hear it laughing when I sleep, shouting at me when I'm awake. I don't know if I can control it much longer," Dean continued, fatigue and frustration evident in the waver of his voice.

John Winchester stepped towards his eldest. Never one for exhibiting physical emotion, he placed his hand on Dean's shoulder and gently squeezed, hoping that small gesture would express what he was feeling in his heart. Dean's eyes went to the floor, unable to look at his father, afraid that hazel would be replaced by obsidian and proving all their unvoiced fears correct.

"John, there's always a simple exorcism rite," Bobby interjected. "If it works under, well, normal situations, then it might work here too."

The elder Winchester looked back to his long-time friend, the slump of his shoulders acknowledging that they had no other options. Nodding to Bobby, he turned back to Dean.

"It's the only thing we can try son."

Dean lifted his head, forcing himself to meet his father's gaze. He'd never been very good at meeting his father's eyes, afraid of seeing disapproval, afraid of seeing disappointment, and now afraid of seeing fear. He was surprised when brown eyes locked on his, softened by concern and tempered with a father's love.

"I just want it out of me. Please! Before I ... can't control it anymore." *'Before I hurt someone'* remained unvoiced.

Bobby returned, softly clearing his throat, his hands holding a book and a small flask. He tossed the flask to John who deftly plucked it from the air.

"Holy water?" John asked.

"After all these years, you have to ask?" he answered, an easy grin spreading across his bearded face as the elder Winchester spun off the cap and tilted the flask back. Finishing, he handed it to Dean, who in turn took one long pull, then another. Just before spinning the cap back into place, he hesitated and took one final swig.

"Just for luck," he added, his own weary but time-tested roguish grin falling into place.

"And nothing for me?" Sam piped in. "I am legal in every state you know," his own uneasy laughter an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Nothing for you geek boy, don't need you slurring the Latin and sending me to the seventh level of hell by mistake," Dean quipped, the familiar brotherly banter not masking the nervous movement of his hands as he fumbled with the flask.

Bobby continued with the preparatory activity, placing a chair in the center of the room, directly underneath the Seal of Solomon that was blazoned on the ceiling. Dean looked from the chair to the ceiling, his mind clearly recalling another time, and another possessed person sitting in the same spot.

John returned, a length of rope in his hands that he handed off to Sam, his unspoken instructions eliciting a shocked look from his youngest. Sam recoiled visibly, the cord held loosely in his hands.

"Dad? I ... I can't do this," he began. But when John did not respond, merely glanced downward, Dean intervened.

"Sammy, it's okay! He's right. You saw me, you know what can happen if I can't control it. We can't take the risk," he stated matter-of-factly, taking a seat on the wood chair and placing his arms on the armrests.

"But the Key of Solomon ... "

"Won't keep me in this seat if things go south. Now come on Sam," Dean insisted.

Sam shook his head slowly but moved forward towards his brother. He cringed as he began wrapping the heavy rope around Dean's forearms. He vividly recalled the vision of a broken and battered Dean, lying on a filthy floor as he was repeatedly tortured and abused by Haris' guards. He fought down the bile that burned the inside of his throat, disgusted that he was forced to treat his brother in this manner. Unconsciously, he wrapped loosely, being careful not to cause Dean any unnecessary pain.

Before Dean could say something to Sam, John and Bobby returned. There was an uneasy moment of silence before John spoke.

"You're sure you're ready? You want to do this?" he asked once more. Dean merely nodded, afraid his voice would betray the uncertainty that was making his heart pound in his chest.

Bobby held out the weathered book containing the exorcism rite. With a shaky hand, Sam reached out and took the proffered text, flipping it open to the familiar passage. John watched as Dean closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath, preparing for the ritual to begin. He reached out and gripped Dean's shoulder one final time before nodding to Sam to begin.

"Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis ..."

His eyes remaining closed, Dean twitched, a shiver cascading over his body as his brother continued.

“... et nomine Jesu Christi Filii ejus, Domini et Judicis nostri...”

A shudder now, his muscles contracting more visibly, Dean shook his head from side to side trying to clear the voice inside him that had begun to shout.

“... et in virtute Spiritus Sancti ...”

A pain-filled scream tore from Dean's throat startling the others. Blood began to slowly ooze from his left nostril, joining together at his neck with twin lines that trickled from his ears. His breath came in quick pants, as though he had recently finished a marathon, but still, his eyes remained tightly shut.

“... ut descedas ab hoc plasmate Dei ...” Another scream, followed by blood gathering at the corner of Dean's mouth. Sam faltered, pausing as he saw his brother's face contorted in pain.

“Sammy!” Dean cried out, his restrained hands opening and straining to reach out to his sibling. The plea tore into the younger Winchester and before John could stop him, he was kneeling on the floor in front of Dean.

In an instant, Dean's eyes flew open, charcoal black. His right hand snaked out from under the loosely tied rope and caught Sam across the jaw with a vicious punch that tossed his brother across the room.

Immediately, John and Bobby pounced on Dean, Bobby struggling to hold down the freed arm while John quickly and securely replaced the binding. Sam rose from the floor, shaking his head to clear the haze and wiping blood from his nose across his shirt sleeve. He gathered the text as he stood, careful to remain several feet beyond his brother's reach. More determined now than ever, he continued the ritual.

“... quod Dominus noster ad templum sanctum suum vocare dignatus est ...”

Dean's eyes shifted rapidly from black to hazel and back again, an external sign of a greater internal struggle. On his chest, the amulet turned darker, more tarnished than it had been before.

As Sam continued the Latin invocation, Dean screamed out over and over. Tears mixed with blood as hazel eyes took their turn at appearing.

“... Tu autem effugare, diabole ...”

Another scream and even more blood now cascaded from Dean's mouth, reminding both father and brother of another time and place. Sam looked over at John, eyes beseeching his father to do something. Despite his limited experience, Sam knew, could sense even, that the demon within his brother was hanging on, clawing him from the inside as it fought against being expelled. The exorcism wasn't working, at least not the way it was supposed to.

“Dad?” he questioned.

“Finish it Sam!”

“... appropinquabit enim judicium Dei ...” Sam continued.

Dean wailed, his head slumping forward in exhaustion. ‘Give in ... RESIST ... let go ... HOLD ON ... have peace ... STAY STRONG!’ The familiar litany blazed through his head, searing every cell in his brain as the demon and amulet fought for supremacy.

“Dad,” he began weakly. “Stop, please! It's tearing me apart.”

“That's the demon talking! Keep going Sam!” John instructed.

Bobby pulled in closer, his voice insistent.

“John, it isn't working. Look at his eyes, look at the amulet. I think the demon is bound in there. The amulet for whatever reason is protecting Dean, maybe absorbing some of the demon, but because of that, it won't let the demon out either. It really is tearing him apart inside.”

John knew his friend was right, but desperate to free his son, he was reluctant to give in. As Dean weakly lifted his head, his green eyes pleading, begging for relief, John acquiesced.

Sam sighed audibly, relieved that his part in the “torture” of his brother was over. He dropped the book on the nearby stand and rushed to Dean's side, immediately untying the ropes. Once removed, he grabbed his brother by the arms, helping him to stand as Sam walked him over to the couch once again.

Bobby joined them with a wet cloth and Sam immediately took over cleaning the blood from his brother's face as Dean sat limply on the sofa, a silent commentary on just how much the failed exorcism had taken out of him.

John appeared at the edge of the door, arms folded as he considered his two sons. The sacrifices he had made paled in comparison to what Sam and Dean had given. He knew he

could never replace the lost time, lost blood, and the dreams lost to both of them. Hell, he couldn't even protect them anymore, not like he had when they were children. He might as well have served them up on a silver platter to Haris compared to what they were going through now.

Looking over to Dean, haggard hazel, *Thank God*, met John's eyes. In that brief glance, a silent conversation took place.

"I'm sorry!"

"I won't give up."

* * * *

Several hours later, all four men fed and rested retreated to the so-called living room. Sam sat with the laptop open on his knees, the afternoon's failed exorcism only spurring him to continue searching for an answer. John sat across from him in a chair, fingers absently rubbing at his temples. Bobby entered, toting four steaming cups of coffee which he handed out with the dexterity of a seasoned waitress.

Dean reached for the cup, grimacing noticeably as the bullet wound in his shoulder pulled. John noticed the movement and swallowed hard, guilt surfacing.

"Dean, I ..." he began, his voice choking off before the rest of the words could be spoken. *"I didn't know, couldn't have known that you weren't going to hurt Sam. I didn't want to have to choose between my sons."*

The young man looked up at his father, understanding the unspoken words, his own mouth frozen shut, sharing the genetic code that prevented him from expressing that amount of emotion too.

Sam sighed loudly, exasperated that the web wasn't forthcoming with more reliable information on demon possession, not that he'd really expected to yield any better results than he had in the past four days. He stretched, long legs extending out in front of him, arms raised upward.

Seated apart from them, Bobby worked a Bowie knife against a whetstone; the rhythmic sounds of the blade being sharpened caught Sam's attention. Unbidden, the memory of Zack flashed in his head. He recalled the blade protruding from Haris' neck, the demon impaled and momentarily restrained, but still able to exert his power.

"Why do you think Zack came back?" Sam asked, breaking the heavy silence.

Dean shot a glance over to his brother, his face betraying the feelings lying underneath. Like the women that Haris paraded before him and then slaughtered, Dean also took on the burden of Zack's sacrifice.

"I dunno Sam. He was a good man, but he was backed into a corner. Maybe I would have made the same deal to protect you two if the tables were turned," John answered. *Hell yes, I would have sold my soul to protect you boys.*

"But he died," Dean began. *Died for me, for nothing.*

"He owed you that Dean." Sam stated, his voice almost a snarl as he thought about his brother writhing on the floor in agony as the black mist enveloped him.

When Dean didn't respond, another snippet of a memory sent Sam off on a tangent.

"Dad, Zack kept saying to ask you about the curse. Are you going to tell me what he meant now?" Sam's voice held enough edge that John knew his wasn't about to let him ignore the question.

"Curse?" Dean asked as even Bobby stopped his task, curiosity piqued.

"Zack mentioned something about our family being cursed when we were being held at the complex. He said it again when we were questioning him. Said Dad couldn't even protect his own family from the curse. He wouldn't tell me more, but said that Dad knew all about it," Sam said, his eyes never leaving John, watching and waiting for the denial or avoidance he was sure would come.

"Tell them, they have a right to know. Look where your secrets have taken you, John. Look at the price you've paid, the price that Dean and Sam have paid," his conscience chastised him.

"Sam, it's all about ..." he began, only to be interrupted by the loud crash of something striking the front door of the house.

"Bobby. We know you got the Winchesters in there with you. We want to talk to John," Sid's voice boomed.

Bobby sprang to the nearby window, pushing aside the thin curtain, immediately seeing the small collection of armed hunters outside. John peered through the window in the door, taking in the former colleagues as they scurried in the darkness, each taking up strategic positions.

"Bobby, we got no beef with you. We just want to talk to John about his boys. Send 'em out and we'll all go on peacefully."

Dean, Sam and John exchanged nervous glances. John knew that many of the hunters had witnessed Sam's "vision" and even Jefferson, one of his oldest friends, had seen a black-eyed Dean attacking in all his possessed glory. How could he expect these men who hunted similar supernatural creatures on a daily basis to turn a blind eye to his sons?

The sound of a slug being chambered in a shotgun turned John's attention, as Bobby tossed a duplicate weapon to him. The metallic click of Dean's .45 joined the other noises as he cocked the pistol and took up his own defensive position.

"Don't make us come in there. We don't want to hurt anyone," Sid yelled. "But we're getting those boys one way or another."

John cast a worried look at Dean and Sam, both of his sons with weapons ready, neither willing to budge, defiant to a fault. Bobby too, remained steadfast, his eyes never leaving the window or the commotion outside. John knew that they could, probably would be taken or even killed if they chose to stand and fight, but there was also no way he was giving up his sons.

"Bobby? The cellar?" He asked. His friend nodded in agreement but maintained his position.

"I'll stall them John, you go with the boys."

"Sam, Dean, head out through the cellar. There's an entrance to a tunnel just behind the furnace. Follow it. It will take you out into the woods. You can get back to the car from there. We'll hold them off."

Sam reacted immediately, grabbing their gear bags and his computer. Dean remained frozen in place, reading between the lines and knowing that his father had no intention of coming with them.

"Dad, I'm staying, I'll fight. It's me that they're after," he insisted.

"No argument Dean. You two get the hell out of here. Get somewhere safe and stay low. I'll be in touch," John firmly ordered. "Now go!"

"Winchester! You got two minutes or we're coming in!" Sid shouted once more.

"Dean, please! Go! Before it's too late," John pleaded.

Sam came up behind his older brother, hand tugging on Dean's sleeve, pulling him away towards the cellar door. Both sons looked one last time at their father. It was Chicago all over again, after the Daeva, after Meg's trap. Watching their father drive away back then had torn both Winchester boys to the core, and now was no easier. Now, they needed him as much if not more than they had then.

Sam leading the way, Dean paused at the top of the basement stairs. He looked over his shoulder one final time, seeing his father and Bobby as they prepared to battle their fellow hunters. Just before Dean pulled the door closed behind him, John glanced back. Father and son's eyes met one final time, a brief smile appearing on John's face.

"*Goodbye, be careful, I'm sorry, I love you son,*" all unspoken, but contained in the solemn look.

Dean nodded back and slowly closed the door.

The End