

Episode Eighteen: Unseen Heroes by Gaelicspirit

Navajo Indian Reservation, Casa del Eco Mesa, dusk

Eyes creased by years and shadowed with knowledge stared calmly into the dancing orange light of a campfire. He'd purposely built the fire just outside of the Joshua Trees, where the surrounding halo would combat the growing darkness. Where he couldn't see, but could be seen.

Though what he was prepared for was an act of ancient Navajo tradition, he was not dressed in the ceremonial garb of his ancestors. He would meet the fate he'd called up on himself dressed in the denim, flannel, and leather of the white man. He would face it without a weapon, without a fight, and with no remorse in his soul.

As the dark grew the stars above him snapped and sparkled with their cold light. He lifted his dark eyes to the heavens, his mind carefully blank. He did not want the spirits to doubt his conviction. He simply wanted to see the light from those celestial bodies as they teased the black sky with promises of wishes granted.

He dipped two fingers into the shallow wooden bowl and scooped out some of the red paste he'd made earlier that evening. Whispering the words of his forefathers, he spread the red stain across his cheekbones, under his eyes, the gritty substance sinking immediately into the lines framing his time-worn eyes.

He was ready.

The cry of the screech owl split the darkness and immediately all other night sounds ceased. The world was quiet, still, breath held in anticipation of the moment to come.

From the shadows a boy stepped out and stood at the edge of the firelight. The old man saw his youth, saw his eagerness, and for one brief moment, sadness enveloped him and he felt himself tremble with it. The old man saw himself, fifty years ago, in this boy. The tall, broad-shouldered youth was more a man now than the old man had been when he made this choice. The dark hair was cut short as modern times dictated, not hanging in a plait down his back as the old man's had been.

But the moment was the same. The inhuman silverfish gleam in the eyes was the same. And the end result would be the same.

"You decide, old man," the youth said, his deep voice holding none of the respect this moment called for.

The old man's lips folded down in a frown, the sadness he'd felt before growing stronger. He was too far down the path to change course now, but he knew that once the ceremony was done, the youth would be lost to the hunger and there would be no one in the tribe to stop him.

Sighing, giving in to the inevitable, the old man uttered one word. "Ma'iitsoh." *Wolf.*

The youth exhaled, a feral smile twisting his handsome features into a mask of darkness. Without sound, without warning, the young man dropped his head back, his mouth raised to the night sky in a silent scream. The muscles along the flat planes of his stomach and across his shoulders tightened and he thrust his hands from his sides, his tendons straining as if an invisible force was pulling his arms from their sockets.

His hands curled slowly into fists and as the old man watched, he began to shake. The tremors wracked his body so violently the old man felt it travel across the sand and travel up his folded legs into his grieving heart. With a sound like a wine bottle uncorking, the young man's body snapped backwards, viciously, and he dropped to the ground. He began to writhe, his muscles straining, his face contorted in pain, but he didn't make a sound.

The old man watched through the fire, his face impassive. With a sickening sound, the young man's bones began to crack, his arms and legs bending and twisting into an unnatural shape. The old man closed his eyes. He listened to the sound of silent torture, the panting, the resistance. And then he heard the sounds change. The panting became more rhythmic, less pained. The movements were slow, steady, sure.

He opened his eyes to find himself face-to-face with the yellow, untamed eyes of a black wolf. The old man blinked once and whispered, "Ma'iitsoh."

The wolf raised its head, howling at the half moon cresting the horizon in the infant stages of night. An eerie, desperate, wild sound, it traversed the silence of the mesa, filtered through the Joshua Trees, and sent the desert animals searching for safety and shelter.

As he stared into the animal's eyes, the old man knew that the wolf remembered. The eyes were knowing, aware. And the old man smiled.

"Naaná." *Again.*

The wolf howled once more. The old man sighed. It was time.

"Hágoonee." *Goodbye.*

The wolf's mouth descended from beseeching the heavens and in one quick swipe of teeth, it tore the old man's throat out. The killing didn't take long. With blood saturating its muzzle, the wolf slashed the delicate tissues of the old man's chest and devoured the heart as it beat its last. Satiated, the wolf, coated in the blood of its first kill, moved into the darkness, leaving the body of the old man staring with sightless eyes at the night sky.

Soon, there was nothing but the wind and the sounds of the desert as it slowly returned to life. The campfire crackled and sparked, fading orange embers danced up on the zephyr and died. And then another man, younger than the old man, older than the young man, stepped out from the shadows of the Joshua Trees, carrying a shovel. He paused next to the body, staring down at the gore surrounding the old man.

"Happy now, Azhé'é?" His voice was choked with horror and emotion as he regarded his father. "He became what you believed him to be. And now I am alone."

The blade of his shovel buried into the ground like a judge's gavel.

Middle of Nowhere, Utah, one month later, night

"Just admit it."

"Quit pouting. I'm not lost."

Sam shook his head, the useless road map crumpled in his fist. "We haven't seen a road sign... or a building... or a *light* in like... an hour, Dean."

"I know where we are, Sam," Dean snapped.

"Yeah? Where?"

"Arizona. Or, uh, New Mexico... maybe," Dean shifted his eyes to the side, checking his mirror. No lights behind them. No lights in front of them. It was as if the desert had swallowed the Impala.

"Swell," Sam rested his elbow on the sill of the window and tipped his head into his hand. "Somewhere in the Southwest, USA."

"Exactly," Dean nodded, glancing at Sam with a forced smile.

Sam rubbed his head on the heel of his hand, not lifting it from the support.

"Dean... it's only been like three days since we left Alyssa."

"So?"

"I just," Sam pulled his bottom lip in, unsure how to frame this next statement.

"You haven't had a lot of time to... get back to yourself."

"I'm fine, Sam," Dean stated flatly, his mantra of denial smoothly masking any doubts he may have had about residual effects of the whammy Alyssa had placed on him. "Hitting on all eight cylinders. Promise."

Sam lifted an eyebrow. "Dude, even before the white light of doom you weren't hitting on eight cylinders."

"Says you," Dean scoffed good-naturedly. "I'm actually rather proud of my cylinders."

Sam rolled his eyes, leaning forward to stuff the map into the glove box, careful of any random knives that may or may not be stored there. "I'm sure you are."

Dean reached over and turned up the music when the familiar sounds of AC/DC's *Hells Bells* reached his ears.

"It's about time we picked up a radio station," he muttered.

"I'm telling you, we're lost," Sam grumbled, watching Dean's hand travel from the radio back to the steering wheel. "We took a wrong turn back there at—"

"Sam," Dean interrupted, exasperation plain in his tone. "We don't even know where the hell we're going, how could we have taken a wrong turn?"

"Dean, last time we didn't know where the hell we were going we ended up in the town that time forgot," Sam twisted in the seat to stare at his brother, his lips pursed.

Dean frowned, "First of all, that wasn't a wrong turn. That was a detour." He glanced over at Sam. "Second of all... how was I supposed to know that it would lead to the religious cult from Hell?"

Stretching his arms out in front of him, grasping his right hand with his left, Sam let out a soft sigh. He rolled his shoulders, working the kinks of the ride from his upper body. He glanced over at Dean. "I just don't want you to... y'know, push yourself."

"Dude, enough already," Dean shot him a look. "I. Am. Fine. I am me, I remember you, I'm eating, I'm sleeping... the whole nine yards."

Sam clenched his jaw. "Fine."

"Fine!"

In the distance, a faint, yellowish glow of lights caught their attention and Sam sat forward eagerly.

"Do you see that?"

"It's either a town or a space ship," Dean nodded, peering through the windshield into the night. "Where's Area 51?"

As they approached the lights, the Impala's beams caught a sign at the side of the road.

Bluff, Utah. Population 340

"Utah!" Sam exclaimed.

"Good," Dean nodded, tapping his ring on the steering wheel. "Not enough people to cause trouble."

"We're in *Utah*," Sam said.

Dean glanced over at him. "What's with you? Some kind of Mormon-phobia I should know about?"

"I just... I always wanted to see Utah," Sam said, an almost boyish smile on his face as he settled back against the seat. "Y'know, Monument Valley, the Four Corners..."

Dean grinned. "Check you out."

"What?"

"You're all... like a kid on his way to Disneyland."

Sam reached out and shoved at Dean's shoulder. "Shut up."

Dean frowned as the radio succumbed once more to static. He reached over and turned it down, glancing once at the box of CDs that they had listened to one too many times in the last year. He looked over at Sam, still leaning slightly forward, looking out into the darkness as if he hoped the starlight would reveal some of the wonders of the desert to his prying eyes.

Dean felt a slight pang for the kid that Sam used to be, the childhood that he'd tried so hard to allow Sam to have. His little brother had been through hell in the last year.

"Hey, Sam," Dean said, clearing his throat. "Maybe we should... take a break. See the sights."

Sam tilted his head, thinking. "We just took a break not too long ago."

Dean barked out a quick laugh. "Sammy, I'm not so sure a romp in the Louisiana swamp dodging black magic voodoo snakes qualifies as a break."

Sam grinned in agreement. "Yeah, maybe that's not the best example of a vacation."

"I guess we just don't... *do* vacations, Sam," Dean said, squinting slightly as they passed under a streetlight, his eyes unaccustomed to anything but the dim interior of the Impala and the complete darkness of the desert night. "Our lives are..."

"Weird," Sam concluded.

"You can say that again." He slid his eyes over to Sam, catching the hesitant hope on his brother's face. "Still... even bad-ass demon hunters deserve to sightsee now and again."

"Yeah, I guess," Sam nodded, his shoulders relaxing at the idea.

Dean scanned the sparse street, looking for anything the might resemble a good place to stop. "You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Cottonwood Steakhouse, beware," Dean said, rotating the wheel with the flat of his hand and pulling into a parking spot near the front door of the restaurant. "The Winchesters have arrived."

"Steak sounds good," Sam nodded, gripping the door handle.

"Mmmm... and pie," Dean said stepping out of the car and shutting the door with a creek of the old hinge.

"You're impossible," Sam shook his head, walking around the front of the car to join his brother.

"Easy to please, Sammy," Dean said, clapping a hand on his brother's shoulder as they approached the door. "I'm just easy to please."

Sam pulled the door open and stepped back as Dean walked through, thinking about how true that statement was. Give Dean his car, his music, the open road... *and me*, Sam thought, and Dean was happy. The last few days of aimless driving after the events in Phoenix had shown Sam a softer side of his brother. A Dean content to simply be alive, breathing, waking up every morning and going to sleep every night.

He'd actually seen his brother smile—a true, unguarded, genuine smile—yesterday.

As they stepped into the Cottonwood Steakhouse, however, it was not a smile that graced Dean's features. It was a grimace of misery as the sounds of steel guitars and pure country twang ran sideways across their ears. Dean glanced back at him, his expression pained.

"Take it easy, Dude," Sam laughed. "Steak and pie, remember?"

"Right," Dean said in a strained whisper. "Steak and pie. And beer."

"Help you?" A middle-aged woman with a large white dishtowel tied neatly around her waist stepped up to them. Her faded brown hair was pulled up in a short ponytail and her eyes were soft as she let her gaze touch on each of them briefly.

"Uh, yeah," Sam smiled disarmingly at her. "Two, please."

"This way," the woman grabbed two menus and turned, leading them past several tables filled with couples enjoying plates filled with steak and potatoes. She motioned to a booth in the far back corner.

They slid into the seats, accepting the menus with nods of thanks.

"Busy place," Dean commented, glancing back over his shoulder through the small restaurant to the front door as someone else entered.

The waitress shrugged. "When you have two restaurants in town, people don't get much of a choice. Plus we get a lot of tourism traffic."

Dean flicked his eyebrows at Sam. "Sightseers," he said in a stage whisper.

Sam nodded with a small grin.

"Get you something to drink?" The woman pulled out a pad of paper and flipped the top sheet over, then reached up and pulled a stub of a pencil out from behind her ear.

"Two beers," Dean said.

"Got local brew on tap or bottles of Coors and Heineken."

Dean glanced at Sam who shrugged in return. "Whatever you got on tap is fine," Dean said, offering the lady a smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Be right back, Sweetie," the woman said, suddenly tapping the back of Dean's hand lightly and turning from their table.

Dean blinked in surprise at her retreating form, then looked over at Sam. "What was that about?"

Sam just grinned. "Maybe you looked like a *sweetie* to her."

Dean shook his head, looking over the menu. "Whatever, Dude. You're the motherless lad, I'm the bad boy."

"Uh-huh."

"Hey, I've worked long and hard on this rep," Dean lifted an eyebrow. "Have to say it has some distinct advantages."

The waitress returned with their beers and took their orders. As she stepped away, the music shifted to a George Strait song and Dean winced.

"Dad absolutely *hates* this song," he said.

"Yeah?" Sam asked, intrigued.

Dean nodded. "You want to hear that man swear like a sailor in a whore house, just turn on some George Strait."

Sam chuckled. "I don't think I ever noticed that."

Dean shrugged, not wanting to dig too deep into the battle lines that often separated Sam and John. "Y'know how he always had music playing, wherever we went?"

Sam nodded.

"He'd listen to anything... dude, *anything*... even that Top 40 crap. One day I'm flippin' channels on this little radio in some motel and this song comes on," Dean pointed up, indicating the invisible speakers that filtered the sad, mellow tones of loneliness and love gone wrong down to their table.

Dean's face relaxed in a slight smile. "Dad... he launches himself across the room, pulls the cord friggin' *out of the wall* trying to turn the music off. Then he goes into a litany of words even I would never use."

"Why does he hate it so much?" Sam laughed, watching Dean remember.

"You got me," Dean said, his fingers tipping up in a shrug of his hands. "I think I was too afraid to ask after that."

Sam nodded. For all of his obvious love for his sons, John Winchester could be a scary individual when provoked.

"Mom had a favorite song, though." Dean continued. "She'd play it over and over... I think it was an album, actually."

"Yeah?" Sam sat back as their plates of food were set in front of them, then leaned forward once more, eager for Dean to keep talking. He didn't know where this was coming from—this infusion of words, this explosion of memory—but he didn't want it to go away.

"Yeah, I remember it had this... scratchy sound, y'know?"

"What was the song?"

"*Night Moves*," Dean replied around a mouthful of steak.

"Mom liked Bob Seger?"

"Yup," Dean nodded, washing the food down with a gulp of beer. "They used to dance in the kitchen."

"Dude, how do you remember this stuff?" Sam said, cutting his steak and laying the knife across the top of his plate.

Dean shrugged, "I don't know, man. I don't always. Sometimes it just... y'know flashes clear like I saw it yesterday."

"Think it's a... side effect of Alyssa's... powers?"

"Nah," Dean shook his head, shoveling potatoes into his mouth. "It just happens once in awhile. Always has."

Sam paused, thinking, his eyes on Dean's hands as they moved food around his plate and up to his mouth. This was not an easy life they lived. On either of them. But more so, Sam thought, on Dean. It was good to see his brother eating. Good to hear his voice. Good to simply be around him.

Dean had called them demon-hunters earlier... but they were more than that. They hunted *evil*... and Sam had learned over the last two years that evil was everywhere, in everything, and that no matter whom they thought they had defeated, the hunt would never go away. And yet... they'd managed to live their lives around that fact.

"Can't picture Dad dancing," Sam said.

"Who do you think taught me?"

"You don't dance," Sam scoffed. "Usually..."

"Well, I did once," Dean lifted his eyebrows, his eyes alight with good memories.

"What? When?"

"You remember Megan Jones?"

Sam started to shake his head, then stopped. "Wait, yeah. That dark-haired girl that used to play ball with us... where the hell were we?"

"Somewhere in Ohio... Akron, I think."

"Right, yeah. You *danced* with her?"

"Dude, eight grade, she asks me to the spring dance—uh, Stephen Hawking or something."

"Sadie Hawkins," Sam corrected, grinning around his food.

Dean pointed at him, "That was it. Anyway, I was scared to death."

Sam laughed. "Some bad boy. Scared of a girl."

"I was twelve, man, cut me some slack."

"So, what happened?"

"Night before the dance, Dad comes home from a hunt, and I told him what I had to do. He gets real serious with me, like he does right before he's gonna move us, or tell us something big."

Sam nodded, finishing his plate and picking up his beer.

"Then he tells me that the most important thing is to always keep my hands at her waist, and to watch her eyes."

"You're kidding me."

"Swear to God. I never forgot that. Came in handy, too," Dean said, reaching for his pie.

"What, in case the *bad boy* rep didn't work for you?"

"Aw, that always works, Sammy," Dean grinned. "Well, y'know, except with your girls."

Sam quirked his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Sarah hated me when we first met her," Dean grinned.

"She didn't... *hate* you."

"Well, she was certainly more impressed with your art history shtick."

Sam smiled softly, thinking of the dark-haired beauty that held a piece of his heart.

"Yeah, well, Jess wouldn't have gone for the bad boy, either," Sam agreed.

"See? You got your girls, I got mine. All balances out."

"Did you kiss her?"

Dean brought his head up quickly. "What?"

"Megan Jones," Sam said, chuckling at the look of horror that had crossed Dean's face.

"Oh! Uh... yeah." Dean nodded, his lips tipping up at the sides, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Jeeze, you started early," Sam laughed, nodding his thanks as the waitress brought them more beer.

"You only get this good with practice," Dean said, bouncing his eyebrows and pushing back his empty pie plate with a satisfied sigh. "Plus, living this life... I guess I kinda figure I have to take what I can get when I can get it."

"But you didn't know you'd be living this life in the eight grade," Sam protested.

Dean pressed his lips together, shrugging. "Maybe I did."

"Whatever, man," Sam shook his head. "You had to have had a different idea about what you wanted to be back then."

Dean sat back, one arm across the back of the booth, beer in his opposite hand. He looked down at the amber liquid thoughtfully.

"What about you, Sam?" He said, deflecting the attention. "When did you know you wanted to be a lawyer?"

Sam sat forward, turning the pint around slowly with the tips of his fingers. "I dunno... I think maybe when I was in high school."

"What triggered it?"

"Watching you," Sam said, almost shyly. He flicked his eyes up to Dean's face, then back to his drink.

"Me? Why me?"

Sam pulled his bottom lip in. "It's kinda... tangled."

"I got nothin' but time, man," Dean said, relaxing his jaw and keeping a watchful eye on Sam's bent head.

"Well, I'd watch you take care of me, and Dad, and then I'd watch you go out there and get beat to hell hunting evil... and no one knew about it."

Dean remained silent.

"You and Dad... and I guess me eventually, only not really until after... after Jess... you never once acted like you should be doing something else, something... safe."

Dean pushed out his lips, turning the pint of beer around with the tips of his fingers in a mirror image of his brother.

"I just saw you... giving your time to me, and to strangers... and I thought... well, people should know, y'know?"

Dean lifted an eyebrow. "And so you thought... lawyer?"

Sam chuckled softly. "I told you it was tangled."

Dean took a drink of his beer.

"I guess I just thought that there had to be something out there where I could do something that made a difference in people's lives—and they *knew* about it." Sam finished his beer. "Sounds selfish when I say it out loud."

"Nah," Dean lifted his mouth in an understanding smile and shook his head.

"That's kinda why I wanted to be a fireman."

"Yeah?"

"Those dudes are real heroes, y'know?" Dean rolled his neck, then sat forward. "They charge into the fire, don't think of themselves, and people love them for it."

Sam blinked, the image of Dean suddenly standing in his apartment doorway as Jessica's body burned up the ceiling and heat rained down on him flashing across his vision. Dean hadn't even paused; he'd simply grabbed Sam up and used his entire body to shove him out of the door and to safety.

And Sam loved him for it.

"Y'know, it's weird," Sam said rubbing the heel of his hand against his right eye.

"We spend hours in that car and... we never talk like this."

Dean lifted a shoulder. "Sometimes it's good to get out of the house once in awhile."

Sam blinked at him, a surprised laugh filling the space between them in the booth. Dean signaled the waitress for another round and rubbed the back of his neck. He watched as Sam settled comfortably into the corner of the booth. Neither of them were eager to move anytime soon.

"Y'know," Dean said as they started in on their third pint. "This middle of nowhere thing is good for more than just a break."

"How do you mean?" Sam tilted his head.

"Gives me a chance to try out my new gun."

Sam laughed, his dimples showing, and tilted his head back against the wall behind him. "That piece of junk?"

"It's not a piece of junk! It's a classic!"

"Classic? Are you serious?"

"I mean, sure, maybe it needs a little TLC, but... that baby has some kick to it, I guarantee you."

"And you know this how? You've never even fired the thing."

Dean tapped his thumb on the table top. "I got an eye for these things."

"That guy in Phoenix totally snowed you," Sam shook his head, rubbing his too-long hair against the wall with the motion. "Classic..."

"Hey, don't knock it, man," Dean lifted his chin watching Sam out of hooded eyes. "Steve McQueen carried one just like it in *Wanted: Dead or Alive*."

At that a genuine, full-bodied laugh erupted from Sam. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed a hand against his chest as his body shook with the motion. Watching him, Dean couldn't help but join in. Laughing was a rare occurrence, and when it happened naturally, Dean wanted to freeze the moment, hold it close to him so that nothing broke in and destroyed it.

"HELP!"

The cry was dead on the heels of the slam of the restaurant door against the wall as a lanky, dark-haired man in his mid-twenties burst into the room. Sam's head shot up and Dean twisted in the booth.

"What the hell—"

The man was dressed like a movie extra from a bad western. His Wranglers were so new they looked starched, his white Brush-popper shirt stood out in stark contrast to a tan vest and his shiny black cowboy boots squeaked on the hardwood floor as he threw himself at the nearest table and grabbed a restaurant patron's arm, wringing it desperately.

"HELP!"

All conversation in the restaurant ceased. Everyone was still. The tinny-voiced country singer carried on oblivious to the man's panicked gasping and eyes that darted frantically behind thick-rimmed glasses. The woman who had been waiting on Sam and Dean broke free of her shocked stupor and approached the man.

Reaching out to lay a gentle hand on the man's upper arm, she started, "Sir, you need to calm down—"

"I will *not* calm down!" He snapped back at her, backing away from her hand and turning to the table on his other side. "Please, you gotta help me!"

His hands trembled as he reached for the man sitting at that table and Dean could see from across the restaurant that he was sweating. Chewing on his lower lip, Dean started to push himself free from the booth.

"Dean, no, wait, don't—" Sam reached for his brother, but he was too far away. Dean was standing and starting toward the man before Sam could get out of the booth.

Dean approached cautiously, his hands up and open, waist level. "Hey, Dude, take it easy, okay?"

The man whirled away from the table where his grip was currently being dislodged by a diner whose arm he was digging his fingers into and confronted Dean. “You don’t understand! He’s a monster! I saw... I saw him turn into a MONSTER!”

The man turned to another table and Dean dodged quickly in front of him, preventing him from grabbing another diner. The man was quickly tumbling off the deep end.

“Hey!” Dean barked. “Hey, take it easy, okay?”

Dean reached out and grabbed the man’s arm, turning him roughly to face him, forcing him to look Dean in the eyes.

“What’s your name?”

Dean watched the man’s eyes dart from his face to just over his shoulder and knew instantly that Sam stood behind him. His brother’s formidable height was frequently tempered by his sympathetic eyes. Dean hoped that Sam was turning on the puppy-dog charm at the moment because this guy was two blinks from a full-on freak-out.

“Hey, guy,” Dean snapped his fingers in the man’s face, redirecting his focus. “What’s your name?” He repeated slower, his voice soft.

“Eugene,” he said, shivering slightly. He reached up with his free hand and pushed his glasses back up his nose. “B-but my friends call me Clint.”

Standing out of Dean’s line of sight, Sam quickly reached up and covered his mouth, hiding his instant grin. He caught Dean’s slight head tilt and realized his brother was trying to do the same, settling into the seriousness of the situation and not the sad humor Eugene was opening up for them.

“Okay, uh, Eugene,” Dean said, the tremor of humor in his voice expertly quelled. Carefully moving them to the side of the room, nearer the booth they’d just vacated, he continued to question Eugene. “Why don’t you tell me what you saw?”

“I was, uh,” Eugene’s voice squeaked as he looked from Dean to Sam and back. “I was walking over here from the Kokopelli Inn—it’s this place just up the road, nice place, good beds... hard to get good beds in some motels, you know—“

“Eugene,” Dean dropped his chin, his eyes calm on Eugene’s.

“Right, well,” Eugene swallowed. “I was gonna meet this Indian guide I talked to earlier... was, uh, gonna meet him for dinner over here, and I thought I’d walk and I was almost here and I heard something and I turned around and the guy—the Indian guide, well, Native American, y’know not really *Indian*, that’s just our lazy way of...”

Sam watched Dean’s shoulders visibly tighten. Evidently the motion was carried through his arm to his fingers because Eugene squeaked again.

“Hey! This isn’t easy, man!”

“Just take a breath,” Dean said, his voice a forced calm that warned Sam of a pending explosion. “You said he turned into a... monster?”

The restaurant tittered slightly at this. Sam realized suddenly that every eye was turned, focused on Dean and Eugene in the corner of the room, waiting to see how the drama would end.

“H-he stopped, right in the middle of the road, and he started to like... twist and bend all... well, you just can’t *bend* like that and then he turned into a...”

Dean dropped his head, then lifted it again, his patience rice-paper thin. “Dude, seriously. Just spit it out already.”

“Wolf,” Eugene squeaked.

“Wolf?”

“He turned into a wolf,” Eugene said, deflating, his confession finally over.

The restaurant patrons started to chuckle a bit at this, turning back to each other and their conversations, the dull hum of disinterested background noise blending seamlessly once more with the country music. Dean straightened up, but didn’t release Eugene’s arm. He looked over his shoulder at Sam, an eyebrow raised.

Sam wanted to deny the inevitable. He wanted to return to the booth and the beer and the banter. He wanted normal for just a little bit longer. But the look in Dean’s

green eyes, and the way Eugene was trembling in his brother's grip, couldn't be ignored.

"Here we go again," Sam whispered. He dug some money from his jeans pocket and set it on their table, then nodded to Dean.

"C'mon," Dean tightened his grip on Eugene and started to turn him toward the door.

It took Eugene a second to realize what was happening, but the moment he registered that Dean was taking him out of the restaurant, he quite literally dug his heels in and actually managed to stop Dean's forward motion. Sam nearly slammed into Eugene's back, so surprised was he that the skinny man had halted his brother's muscle.

"No!" Eugene shook his head vigorously. "No way, man. I'm not goin' back out there!"

"Eugene—" Dean started, tugging on the scared man's arm.

"Didn't you hear me? There is a GUY that turned into a friggin' WOLF out there!"

The eyes of the people in the restaurant once again started to turn to them. Dean rotated to face Eugene, his strong hands gripping Eugene's shoulders. Sam watched his brother's eyes soften, all irritation and anger simply drained from him in the wake of Eugene's abject fear. He'd seen this look before—had seen it directed at Lucas, had seen it directed at Michael... had seen it directed at [i]him[i]. Dean just seemed to instinctively know when fear reduced you to a child and you needed to be told that there was nothing under your bed and the closet was monster-free.

"Listen to me, okay," Dean said, his voice soft, his eyes steady. "You listening?"

Eugene's nod was stilted, scared.

"We believe you, okay? My name is Dean," he flicked his eyes over Eugene's shoulder to Sam. "That big guy back there's my little brother Sam. We're gonna help you."

"B-but—the guy..."

"Hey, listen, I promise," Dean shook Eugene once. "I promise nothing bad's gonna happen to you, okay?"

Eugene brought his eyes up, meeting Dean's. He seemed to be weighing something as he paused, then looked back at Sam who smiled tightly. He looked back at Dean, his throat working, and Dean felt slightly heavy as the trust he saw in the dark-brown eyes was handed over to him.

"Eugene?"

"O-okay," Eugene said and allowed Dean, albeit reluctantly, to lead the way to the restaurant door.

Sam followed, nodding at the waitress and offering a salute-like wave to the last of the diners that stared after them. Dean kept hold of Eugene's arm and opened the back door of the Impala, half-tossing him onto the seat. He joined Sam at the trunk.

Eugene swung his legs out of the car, bending at the waist to look around the end of the car and listen.

"You think two extra clips?" Sam asked.

"How many silver bullets do we have?"

Sam shrugged, "Enough for two extra clips."

"Okay, smartass, why're you asking me then?"

"Just want to make sure you're on board," Sam said. He looked up at the darkened sky. "Cloud's are covering the moon."

"Yeah, well, it's the right time in the lunar cycle—tail end of it anyway."

"You got your knife?" Sam looked over and saw Dean flip up the tail of his shirt to reveal the knife sheath he'd fashioned to hold his Bowie knife behind him. "Good."

"I'm bringing the gun." Dean reached into the depths of the weapons cache for the large, sawed-off shotgun. The barrels had been cut down lower than the required 18 inches and hollowed-out. Dean liked the extra bang for the buck the highly-illegal 15

inch barrels promised.

"What? No way!"

"Yes, way," Dean said. "We can use those silver pellets you melted down awhile back."

"We've never even tried out the silver pellets, let alone fired that gun. You don't know how accurate it is."

"Dude, it's a *shotgun*... stand close enough, accuracy doesn't really matter."

"What are you guys doing?" Eugene piped up. "Silver bullets? Shotguns? What the hell?"

Dean and Sam exchanged a glance. Sam tilted his head, lifting a shoulder.

Dean pulled in his bottom lip and shook his head. Sighing, he glanced around the end of the Impala.

"Hate to tell you this, but, uh your friend? Is a werewolf," Dean stated flatly.

"Way to break it to him gently," Sam remarked dryly.

"What?!" Eugene shot upright, cracking the crown of his head on the doorframe of the car and sat down again, rubbing his head. "What?" he repeated, softer.

"Where'd you last see this wolf?" Dean asked.

Still rubbing his head, Eugene leaned low out of the car door and looked at Dean, watching with wide eyes as Dean shoved shells into the shotgun and clicked the chamber shut.

"In the middle of the road," he said.

Dean looked over at Sam, who shut the Impala's trunk, rolling his eyes. Dean squared his shoulders and with a slow tilt of his head, slid his eyes back to Eugene.

"Which way did he go, Eugene?" His voice held a measure of patience that Sam didn't always give him credit for.

Eugene dropped his hand and looked up at Dean. "I didn't wait around to find out," he shook his head, pushing his glasses up his nose. "I just ran for help..."

Dean rubbed at his forehead, then glanced over at Sam. "Well, it's gotta be around here somewhere. Between here and that... Coca-Cola Inn."

"Kokapelli," Sam and Eugene corrected him in unison. Dean headed to the driver's side door, tossing Sam a *whatever, Frances* look.

"Get in, Eugene," Dean set the shotgun on the seat and waited until Eugene had closed the back door before starting up the engine. "Which way is this motel of yours?"

"Uh, that way," Eugene pointed behind him. "So, what, are you guys like... Buffy?"

Sam's laugh made Eugene jump slightly, and Dean simply shook his head as he hooked his elbow over the back of the bench seat, watching out of the back window as he reversed out of the parking space and turned in the direction Eugene had pointed.

"Wait... Buffy was vampires... who kills werewolves?" Eugene said, frowning.

"We do," Dean said, watching the road for the motel. Seeing it only a half mile away, he turned in and parked in an empty space. He shoved the gear into park and turned sideways in his seat. "Out."

Eugene shook his head.

"I mean it," Dean jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Eugene sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I *can* drag your ass out of here, man."

"What if it's waiting for me?"

Sam dropped his head, his chin tucked into the chest, content to let Dean handle their stubborn passenger.

"It's not going to be waiting for you."

"How do you know?"

"Because..." Dean rolled his eyes, staring daggers into the side of Sam's head.

"Werewolves can't... open doors, okay?"

"I'm staying with you," Eugene shook his head.

“Dude, we’re going *after* the wolf,” Dean said. “If you’re scared, the last place you want to be is with us. You’ll be safe here. I promise.”

“But—“

“Out! Now.” Dean made a move for Eugene’s arm, causing the skittish man to back up.

Sam bit the inside of his cheek.

“Fine! Fine, I’ll go,” Eugene sputtered, shoving the door open. “But I don’t like it.”

“I’ll try to live with that,” Dean shot back.

Eugene slammed the door, and stormed up to the front of the building. He glanced back once, then dug out his room key and unlocked a ground-floor room, slamming the motel room door behind him. Sam started laughing the minute the door shut.

“Don’t you start,” Dean said, hefting the cannon of a shotgun in his right hand and grabbing two small Maglight flashlights as he got out of the car.

“I think I’m beginning to like that guy, man,” Sam chuckled.

Dean glared at him. “We can leave the car here and head back to the restaurant, see if we can pick up the tracks.”

“You take left, I’ll take right,” Sam said and Dean nodded, tossing one of the flashlights to Sam.

They walked slowly, unconsciously in-step with each other, scanning the dirt on the quiet roadside.

“I can’t believe no one in the restaurant’s come this way yet,” Dean commented.

“Hey, Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“When’s the last time we hunted a werewolf?”

Dean paused. “Don’t think we have since we were kids,” he replied, then froze at the sound of rocks skittering across the road. Without glancing at Sam, he whirled, his gun up in point position, facing the threat approaching from behind.

Eugene squeaked, stumbling backwards, hands raised. “Don’t shoot! It’s me! Eugene!”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean breathed, lowering the gun. “Are you *crazy*? I could have killed you. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Following you.”

“I can see that, Eugene.” Dean considered pointing the gun at him again. “I told you, man, we’re Going. After. The. Wolf.”

“Yeah, I know,” Eugene tossed a look over to Sam waiting silently on the other side of the road. “And you got the guns. I’m sticking with you.”

“You’ll be safer back in your room, man,” Sam offered, his voice kind.

“That... thing... knows who I am,” Eugene pushed his glasses back up on his nose, looking at Dean. “It—he—was meeting me for *dinner*.” A shaky, nervous laugh colored Eugene’s next words. “I’m not safe anywhere.”

Dean sighed. “Oh, hell.” He handed Eugene the flashlight. “You just stay close to me, okay?”

“Dean! What the hell?”

“He’ll be okay if he stay’s close, Sam,” Dean called over to his brother.

“You aren’t seriously letting him come with us,” Sam shook his head.

“I got him.”

“Damn right, you got him,” Sam grumbled. “He’s just gonna get in the way.”

“Hey,” Eugene piped up. “Right here, guys.”

“Shut up,” the brother’s snapped in unison.

“Right, gotcha,” Eugene nodded, grimacing slightly as the wind picked up and the cloud cover vanished to reveal the silvery light of the full moon.

“Hey,” Sam called.

“Find something?”

“Yeah,” Sam motioned toward the open mesa on the other side of the road.

“Tracks head toward those... weird looking trees over there.”

"They're Joshua Trees," Eugene offered.

"C'mere," Dean grabbed the front of Eugene's shirt, pulling him closer than his shadow as he crossed the road and followed Sam.

"Y'know the Native Americans used to use the leaves from the Joshua Trees to weave sandals and they'd roast the seeds for food—really rather tasty, so I've heard... kinda like pumpkin seeds..."

"Eugene."

"Yeah?"

"Shut up," Dean growled, the fine hairs on the back of his neck sticking up as he followed about twenty feet behind Sam, keeping his eyes glued to his brother's back. The wind tossed the clouds haphazardly across the sky skittering shadows across the ground and playing tricks with Dean's eyes.

He watched Sam's flashlight play along the ground and kept his ears perked to the sounds of the desert. The chill of the night contrasted sharply with the heat he knew this area of the country could bring during the day. Sam's steps were slow, methodical, and Dean matched him stride for stride, keeping Eugene's shirtfront fisted in one hand, the large shotgun in the other.

When the wolf struck, it was silent.

Dean felt the impact before he heard a sound, the large, black body plowing into him from the side, driving him to the ground on top of Eugene, forcing the air from his lungs, knocking the shotgun from his grip. He had a moment to pull in a stuttered breath before the sharp claws raked heat across his left side and he cried out in surprised pain.

"Dean!"

Sam whirled at his brother's cry, his pistol up, flashlight trained on the back of the black beast that continued to swipe at Dean's struggling form. The wolf was monstrous, muscles bunching and gathering beneath its broad shoulders, paws as large as Sam's hands.

Sam drew a bead on the wolf's back as he ran, firing once. He missed.

"Dean!"

"G-get... get him..." Dean was struggling to say, and Sam saw that he was somehow, impossibly, keeping the wolf's talon-like claws at bay for the moment.

Eugene had scrambled out from underneath Dean and grabbed the barrel of Dean's gun. With a cry worthy of a Navajo warrior, he swung the butt of the shotgun at the wolf's head, knocking it sideways and freeing Dean just as Sam reached them.

Dean tried to roll to his side; Sam tried to aim at the wolf's head. Neither of them were fast enough. With the speed of the devil whispering a lie, the wolf grabbed Eugene's forearm between its massive jaws and turned, sprinting off across the mesa, dragging Eugene behind it, screaming bloody murder.

"You okay?" Sam reached for Dean.

"We gotta get 'im," Dean panted, struggling to his feet and pressing his arm tight against his side. "Where's my gun?"

"Here," Sam handed him the shotgun.

"Let's go," Dean took off after the wolf, the trail easy to follow even in the stammering moonlight. *I promise... nothing bad's gonna happen to you...* Dean shook his head, hard, banishing the thought. Intent on keeping his promise.

"He's close," Sam panted, running along side of him.

Dean looked over at him, drawing Sam's eyes with the moment they were in. They had hunted together, fought together, for so long that in moments of need, Dean knew Sam could practically read his mind. Dean gestured to his eyes with the index finger and middle finger of his left hand, his right clutching the shotgun. He then pointed a finger in one direction and the flat of his hand in the other. *I'll watch for you. You head that way, I'll flank it...*

Sam nodded and veered to the left.

They came up on Eugene in about ten more strides. They were too late.

The wolf had slashed his throat, leaving Eugene gurgling and gasping wet huffs of useless air as his body jerked and thrashed on the desert floor. The wolf had a paw raised, ready to slash toward Eugene's heart.

"HEY!" Dean barked, bringing the beast's eyes up, its muzzle coated with blood, teeth bared, eyes gleaming inhumanly in the moonlight. Dean brought the shotgun up, but a heartbeat before he could pull the trigger, the wolf turned away from Dean, spring-boarding off of Eugene's body, and slammed into Sam, knocking him to the ground.

"No!" Dean screamed and then his world went silent as Sam's scream pierced the air.

Dean brought the shotgun up, but dropped it an instant later, afraid he would hit Sam with the untested weapon. On a flat-out run, Dean pulled his Bowie knife from the sheath at his back and dropped to his knees as he approached Sam, sliding toward the wolf and his brother, knife raised, eyes wild. As his forward motion slowed, the wolf released Sam's arm, and without a backward glance, darted off through the cacti and Joshua Trees into the desert night.

Dean panted for air, his desperate eyes searching the dimly lit night for any sign of the beast. *It friggin' aimed for Sam...* Dean dropped his knife, and looked down at his bleeding, unconscious brother. A screech owl shook the silence of the desert, and as if its cry was a signal, the night calls returned, cocooning the brothers in sound.

"Aw, Jesus, Sammy," Dean breathed, his chest heaving with the effort to draw in air, his mouth dry, his side burning. He reached down and carefully turned Sam's left forearm with gentle fingers. The bite was deep and bleeding freely. Sam hand was limp in his and as Dean's eyes flew to his brother's face, he noted the pallor of Sam's features causing his brother's lashes to stand out like dark shadows on his cheeks.

Dean knew he had to get the bleeding stopped before he did much of anything. He started to unbutton his green shirt to use as a bandage when he glanced down at his side. The wolf had nicely filleted him, slashing through both his shirt and T-shirt. His blood was beginning to stain the material.

"Shit," Dean muttered, looking back at Sam's face. *Gotta stop the bleeding... how the hell... Belt!* Sam always wore a belt. Dean reached for his brother's waistband and unfastened his belt, pulling the leather free from the denim loops. "Any other situation, that might feel awkward," he muttered.

He wrapped the leather just above the bite; as he pulled it tight, Sam opened his eyes with a gasp.

"Easy, Sammy," Dean soothed. "Take it easy, I'm here."

"Dean?"

"Yeah, Dean," he said, fastening the belt. "Who else would it be?"

"What... where'd it go?"

"Ran off," Dean said tightly. "Need to wrap your arm, Sam. You think you can sit up a little?"

Sam blinked at Dean, his eyes large in the moonlight. His gaze flicked down to the arm resting across his belly and Dean saw realization of what had just happened to him filter slowly in.

"Don't go there, Sam," he commanded.

"Dean—"

"No." Dean shook his head once. "Don't. Just... just help me wrap it and get you out of here."

"Where's Eugene?"

Dean swallowed. "He's, uh... over there."

"We..." Sam gasped as Dean pulled him carefully into sitting position. "We were too late..."

"Don't worry about that now, Sam," Dean said, working Sam's right arm out of his jacket and used the loose material to wrap around the wound on Sam's arm. Sam's jaw tightened, but he stayed silent as Dean finished field-dressing the wound.

"We... we gotta burn him, Dean," Sam ground out, sweat beginning to gather at his temples.

Dean swallowed, looking at Sam's pale face in the moonlight. "I don't have anything to burn... it."

"Attacked by a werewolf," Sam whispered. "No telling if he could still turn, Dean."

"I'll take care of it, Sam." Dean said, reaching out to cup the side of his brother's face and turned Sam's blue-green eyes to meet his, and away from the gore that was Eugene's body. "I'll take care of it, okay? You with me?"

Sam blinked, nodding.

"Let's get you back, okay?"

"We c-can't just..."

Dean sighed, knowing Sam was right. "You just keep your eyes open, okay? Sam?"

"Okay," Sam whispered, slumping forward and cradling his wounded arm in his lap.

Dean stood, looking down at Eugene's blood-soaked body. He swallowed the bite of bile that stung the back of his throat. Not allowing himself to think about what he was doing—or what he'd done—Dean leaned over and grasped Eugene's bloody arms and dragged him to the base of a tree.

He dug Eugene's wallet, and as an afterthought, his motel keys, out of his pocket. There would be someone to tell... someone out there that would be wondering where their son or brother was. He cast about the ground for something to cover the body and ended up with a few dried fronds from the Joshua Tree. It barely covered Eugene's face.

Dean rotated on his heel and turned back to Sam. *Can't think about that now... gotta take care of Sam...* He grabbed his knife, returning it to the sheath at his back, picked up his shotgun, then leaned over Sam.

"C'mon, kiddo," Dean said as he bent over his brother, hooking an arm under Sam's right shoulder. "Gotta help me out a little."

"You okay, Dean?" Sam's voice was strained.

"I'm good, let's just get you back, huh?"

"Saw it get you," Sam slurred.

"Never touched me," Dean shook his head, wrapping Sam's arm over his shoulders, ignoring the burn in his side, the image of Eugene's sightless eyes.

The journey back to the road was silent and arduous. By the time they reached the Impala, Sam was sagging against him, his feet trailing weakly in the dirt, and Dean was trembling with the weight of him. Pausing only a moment to consider his alternatives, Dean propped Sam up against the side of the motel and dug Eugene's key from his pocket.

"Hang on, Sammy," Dean whispered, licking his dry lips. "Hang on, man."

He unlocked the room and maneuvered them into the room, dropping the shotgun inside the door. He managed to wrestle Sam to the closest bed. Sam's eyes fluttered closed and his breath started to come in short bursts. Dean ran the back of his hand over his mouth, trying to catch his breath.

"N-no... no hospital, Dean."

"What?"

"Don't take me," Sam blinked bleary eyes up at Dean. "Don't wanna go."

"Sam—"

"I mean it," Sam's voice was stronger. "No hospital. Not like last time."

Dean's heart caught painfully in his chest. He'd never been as scared in his life as the moment he realized Sam had been shot with a poison bullet. He'd come so close to losing him...

"Werewolf bite—"

"Don't, Sam," Dean barked. "We don't know anything, yet, okay?"

"W-we know..."

"Just... just shut up, okay? Just let me think." He couldn't let Sam see that he was shaking.

Sam closed his eyes, turning his face away. Dean took a breath.

"I'll be right back, okay?"

Sam didn't move. Dean headed out to the Impala, opening the trunk and pulling out their duffels. As he leaned in to grab the bag of weapons, his side shot a hot spark through him, stifling his breath and bringing him up short. Stuffing the pain back, denying it the attention it sought, Dean closed the trunk and hauled all three bags back into the room.

He dropped the bags with the clothing and first aid kit on the spare bed, sitting the weapons bag on the small table in the corner of the room that was currently strewn with papers, brochures, notebooks and fliers all on Navajo Code Talkers. Dean's flitted over the items, registering them, but not taking them in. He set his knife on the table next to his .45.

He gathered the supplies from the first aid box and eased down on Sam's bed. His brother's eyes were rolling wildly under closed lids, his jaw trembling as chills wracked his body. Dean swallowed, closing his mind to what lay back in the desert, to the moment of peace they'd been afforded just one hour before, to his unmitigated failure to protect an innocent, to protect Sam.

"Okay, man," Dean whispered, more to keep himself balanced as his vision swam than to reassure Sam. "You're gonna hate me, but I gotta cut your jacket free. Uh, and this... belt. There. Okay, let's look at... damn, Sammy, that's... that's a bite alright... okay, this might sting a little..."

Sam cried out, his head pressing back into the pillow, neck arching slightly as Dean doused the bite with antiseptic. Keeping up a steady stream of inane words, a monologue meaningless in its specifics and deep in its purpose, Dean cleaned and wrapped the bite, pulled Sam's boots off and wrapped his shivering brother up in the comforter. Sam didn't open his eyes.

Running a shaking hand over his own sweaty face, Dean pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He gathered up the first aid supplies and stepped into the motel bathroom. Eugene's toiletries were organized in descending order by size along the countertop. Dean closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the cool tile of the bathroom wall. He'd *promised*...

"Stop it," he admonished himself. He swallowed, looking at the red stain of blood on his side. He eased the outer shirt off of his shoulders, reaching behind his head and grasping the T-shirt between his shoulder blades and pulling it free. He used the end of his green shirt and carefully cleaned the blood from his side, then turned and dropped the tattered garment on the floor.

The cuts weren't too deep and he was able to staunch the bleeding and apply patches quickly. Returning to the bedroom, he dug out a gray T-shirt from his duffel and pulled it over his head.

"Sam," he whispered, shaking Sam's leg gently. "Sammy, wake up."

Sam blinked groggily at him.

"I gotta... I gotta go back out there... take... care of it," Dean said, hoping Sam would understand.

"Be careful," Sam whispered, closing his eyes again. Dean watched him a moment more, then grabbed the motel keys and headed for the Impala's trunk and the supplies he needed.

The walk back to Eugene's body didn't seem to take as long as the walk to the motel had taken. He reached the sad, slumped form and only then realized that Eugene's glasses were gone. He pulled the body away from the tree, trying in vain to

blank his mind to the fact that he'd talked to this guy just a little bit ago, that he'd promised to take care of him.

He poured lighter fluid over the body, gagging over the smell he normally didn't notice. He gripped the match between his fingers for a moment, staring down at Eugene's torn face.

"I'm sorry, Eugene," Dean whispered. "I'm sorry, man..."

He gave his head a hard shake and forced himself to strike the match, hesitating only a second before dropping it onto Eugene's body. He threw up a hand to shield his eyes as Eugene's body went up in flames with a *whoosh*. Dean backed away from the heat and the smell, tucking his nose into the crook of his elbow and pressing his other arm tight against his side.

He waited until the embers burned low, then retrieved the shovel and buried the remains. As he started to return to Sam, he realized that he was shivering. He swallowed. It was just the chill of the night, the release of adrenalin from the fight. That's all. He wouldn't *let it* be anything else. By the time he reached the motel, he was desperate for water. But when he saw Sam, all thoughts of his own comfort vanished.

Sam was twisted in the comforter, his long hair plastered to his face from a feverish sweat. He muttered incoherently about angels and demons, sinking ships and snakes. Dean rubbed his face. After the lives they'd led, dreams were never safe territory. Fevers simply heightened the experience. He sat heavily on the other bed, digging out John's journal from one of the duffels.

"C'mon, Dad," Dean whispered, his arm pressing tightly against his side. "Don't let me down." He scanned the pages of the journal where his father had written everything he'd known about werewolves. The only thing he found about werewolf bites was the possibility of severing the bloodline: kill the sire and end the curse.

"Dean," Sam muttered. "Don't—"

"I'm here," Dean whispered, reaching for Sam's flailing arm. He gripped his brother's hot hand tightly. "I'm here, man."

Sam settled slightly at the sound of his voice, but Dean could feel the shiver of fever through their connected hands. He knew he had to get Sam's fever down, but he suspected that Tylenol and ice packs weren't going to cut it this time. He needed something else. He needed *help*. He reached into his pocket, digging out his cell phone. He paused for one second on *Dad*, but continued down the list until he reached *Bearwalker*.

He felt weak with relief when the older hunter answered. His hasty explanation was met with calm instructions.

"You're gonna need to write this down, Dean," Bearwalker's rumble floated across the distance and settled in his ears. "You sure you're okay, kid?"

"M fine," Dean mumbled, wiping sweat from his eyes. "I'm ready. Lay it on me."

Bearwalker recited a list of ingredients for a poultice and remedy to bring Sam's fever down.

"Where the hell am I gonna find this stuff?" Dean asked, looking at the list of unusual items. "Not like a pharmacy is gonna carry arrowroot."

"I know," Bearwalker said. "You're gonna have to find an Indian reservation, Dean. Can you do that?"

Dean shivered, blinking bleary eyes. He ran a shaky hand over his mouth, watching Sam twitch and struggle against the nightmarish images assaulting him.

"Yeah, I can do that," Dean said, thanking Bearwalker and hanging up before the hunter could pry deeper as to his own wellbeing. "Where the hell am I gonna find an Indian reservation..."

"You're *standing in* one, man," said a voice to his left.

Dean jerked, wincing as his movement of surprise pulled at the cuts on his side. He stood, automatically reaching back to his waistband for his gun and grabbing air.

Where the hell is my gun? He looked in the shadows of the room for the speaker. Did Eugene have a roommate? Had someone gotten in while he was away?

"Who's there?"

"Oh, big, bad-ass hunter," said the voice. "Did I scare you?"

Dean gaped and thought for sure he was hallucinating when Eugene stepped from the shadows and into the wan light cast from the lamp between the beds. The right side of his face and nearly his entire throat was slashed, the wounds no longer bleeding but open and raw-looking. His features were pale and blue-tinged, and his shirt and vest were shredded.

Dean's eyes darted from the ghoulish figure to the small table in the corner of the room where he'd set their duffel of weapons. His .45 gleamed in the yellow light, taunting him.

"Y-you... you can't be here... I... I burned you..."

"Yeah, I know, I was there." Eugene tilted his head. "Why the hell did you do that, anyway?"

"You *can't* be a spirit," Dean stuttered, backing away from Eugene, putting himself between the figure and Sam.

"Pretty sure I'm not a spirit," Eugene agreed, looking casually around the room. He reached out and traced a finger down the wall. "I tried walking through things and kinda... bounced off. Not really sure how I got in here. I saw you in the desert, followed you home. Next thing I know..."

Dean swallowed, shaking his head. He looked down at the faded brown and gold carpet of the motel room, running the tips of his fingers across his forehead. The Alp had played with his head too much. He was imagining things.

He's not real... notrealnotrealnotrealnotreal...

"Y'know, I feel different," Eugene said, stepping closer to Dean. "I mean, sure, I'm y'know... *dead*... but it feels different than I thought it would. For one, I don't need those damn coke-bottle glasses. Guess there's an upside to everything." He smiled.

Dean could see the sides of his teeth through the hole in Eugene's cheek.

Eugene stepped closer; Dean stepped back, his knees hitting the bed, jostling his wounded side. "I mean, except for these really annoying flaps of skin," Eugene flipped the offending bits of skin with his fingertips, "that I'm sure are rather unattractive... frankly, I've never felt better."

"No... no, you're not real. You're not here." Dean gasped, glancing back quickly as Sam groaned low. *Holy shit*, he thought, *I really have lost my mind*.

"Hate to tell you this, Dean," Eugene said, stepping forward and forcing Dean to either sit on the bed or step aside.

Dean sat, unwilling to open Sam's unconscious form up to Eugene's approach.

"But I am real. I'm DAMN real."

Eugene pressed forward, his hands planted on either side of Dean's legs, his torn face inches from Dean's. Dean could feel the bed sink and leaned back despite himself.

"And you'd better get used to it, *Dean*, because you PROMISED that nothing bad was going to happen to me and, well..." Eugene straightened and spread his arms, stretching the torn skin so that the red gave way to a deep purple. "THIS LOOKS PRETTY DAMN BAD!"

"Alright!" Dean yelled, standing and pushing Eugene's figure away. He stared in shock when his hands didn't go through Eugene's body.

Eugene stared back, fascinated. A grin lifted the slightly-less destroyed side of his face. "Hey, how'd you do that?"

"Back off, man," Dean growled. "Just... just back up." *This is just friggin' nuts...*

"Okay, okay, don't get so touchy. I'm the dead one here, remember?" Eugene replied petulantly, holding up his hands.

Dean opened his mouth to retort when the phone between the beds rang, startling them both. Dean turned to it, running his hand over his mouth as it rang again.

"You gonna get that?" Eugene prompted, gesturing toward the instrument.

"Shut up a minute," Dean snapped, glancing at Sam's sweaty, pain-twisted face. He picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"It's your five o'clock wake-up call, Mr. Eastwood."

Dean glanced at Eugene, then said "Thanks" into the receiver and hung up. "Mr. Eastwood?" he smirked.

"I don't want to hear it," Eugene said, looking uncomfortable. "We all have our secret identities."

"Dean?" Sam's weak voice shot reality back through Dean.

"Sam, hey," Dean turned, wincing slightly and bent over his brother. "You okay?"

"Thirsty," Sam whispered.

"Hang on," Dean said, and turned from the bed, brushing past Eugene, and returned quickly with a glass of water. "Here you go, man."

He helped Sam drink slowly. "I talked to Bearwalker, Sam."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, he had some ideas for helping you, but I gotta go find an Indian, um..."

"Shaman," Eugene supplied, looking at the back of his hand with a frown. "Hey, do you think I'm starting to rot? You can be honest."

"Shaman," Dean said to Sam, ignoring Eugene. He noticed that Sam didn't even react to Eugene's voice. *He must really be out of it...*

"A shaman?"

"Yeah," Dean nodded. "There are some herbs and stuff that will help your fever and I think I have a way to, um, keep you from... y'know..."

"Wolfing out?"

"Yeah," Dean's smile mirrored Sam's weak attempt. "I just need to find the nearest Indian reservation, get this stuff, and you'll be good as new."

"That plan has more holes in it than I do," Eugene grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Dean tipped his chin down, directing his voice over his shoulder, but not turning. "Just shut the hell up, okay?"

Sam frowned. "Dean?"

"I'm just saying it isn't easy to find an Indian shaman," Eugene said, stepping up behind Dean and peering over his shoulder at Sam. "You're gonna be lucky if you can find the reservation, at the rate your going."

Dean stood, turning from Sam. "Thought you said I was standing in one," he challenged.

"Dean?"

"You are, but an Indian reservation covers miles and miles. I mean, you gotta find the right settlement where the shaman lives, first."

"Y'know, I've had enough of you," Dean started to move past Eugene and head for his cell phone, intent on calling Bearwalker back, getting a better idea on how to help Sam. Eugene dodged to block him. "Get the hell out of my way."

"Make me!" Eugene grinned. A flap of skin on his cheek fell loose with that motion and Eugene reached up to try to put it back in place. "Dammit," he grumbled.

"Dean!"

"Just a minute, Sam," Dean shot over his shoulder. He turned back to Eugene, gesturing impatiently with the flat of his hand. "I am trying to figure out how to help you, but this freakin' guy won't—"

"What guy?" Sam weakly pushed himself up in bed.

Dean froze, staring at Eugene, his hand extended. Eugene froze, staring at Dean, still trying to adjust the loose piece of skin back onto his cheek. In unison, they breathed out one question. "What?"

"Who are you talking to?" Sam asked, his voice trembling slightly.

"Y-you don't see him?" Dean asked, rotating slightly, the room tilting slowly around him.

"There's no one here but us, Dean," Sam swallowed, holding his wounded arm carefully against his chest.

"And the hits just keep on comin'," Eugene whispered.

Kokopelli Inn, Bluff, Utah, early-morning

"You seriously don't see anyone?" Dean asked, resisting the urge to grab onto something—the bed, the wall, Eugene—and stop the slow spin of the room.

"Who do *you* see, Dean?" Sam asked, his pain-wracked voice breathy and scared.

"Yeah, Dean," Eugene sassed. "Why don't you tell him?"

Shut up, Dean shot his eyes to Eugene, who had finally managed to get the flap of skin to stay in place. Dean swallowed hard, closing his eyes, pressing the side of his leg against Sam's bed for balance. Behind his lids, the rotating room seemed to speed up, vertigo wrestling him sideways until he bent slightly, reaching for the nightstand between the beds.

"Dean?"

"Just gimme a minute, Sam," he whispered. He took a slow breath in through his mouth, forcing his eyes open and refusing to give in to the dizzy spell. "I'm okay."

"You sure the wolf didn't—"

"I said I'm okay, Sam," Dean snapped, pushing himself back to his feet and looking at his brother.

Sam was sitting up in the bed, his back resting against the headboard, his wounded arm cradled against him. He was pale, sweaty, his eyes round and young-looking.

"It's you I'm worried about. Just need to..." Dean's voice suddenly sounded hollow and tinny in his own ears.

As Dean watched, Sam's mouth started to move, but Dean heard nothing. He frowned. Sam tipped his head forward, his lips forming around a silent question and Dean realized suddenly that the room was growing darker, the edges of light tunneling toward Sam.

Oh, shit...

He turned from his brother and in a stumble of tangled, uncooperative limbs, managed to get into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. He pulled air in through his nose, forcing down the bile climbing the back of his throat, going to his knees on the cool tile floor. He would *not* let this... weakness... take over. *What the hell? I'm not even cut that bad...*

Pressing the flat of his palms on the floor, Dean started to push himself to his feet and was mildly surprised when instead he found himself leaning hard on his forearms, his forehead resting against the tile.

"Y'know," Eugene's sudden voice made Dean jerk violently with surprise. "You kinda look like one of those Tibetan Monks when they pray... all you need is an orange robe."

"How the hell did you get in here?" Dean rasped, blinking his eyes and rotating his forehead on the tile.

"Why don't you just tell him you're hurt?" Eugene asked, tilting his head to regard Dean's prone form with curiosity, leaning a hip on the edge of the bathroom counter. "Or hell, I don't know... call someone to help?"

Closing his eyes again, Dean pushed himself slowly upright until he was resting on his knees. "Do you *ever* shut up?"

"Occasionally," Eugene said, pulling at piece of skin that had started to curl up against the gaping hole in his neck. "Used to be really quiet, actually. Guess being dead's given me a new lease on life."

Dean wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, feeling steadier. He grasped the edge of the counter and slowly pulled himself to his feet, turning on the cold water.

"So... calling for help... not an option I take it?" Eugene persisted.

Dean cupped his hands under the liquid and let it fill the hollow of his palms, then splashed it on his face. The shock of the chilly water was bracing. He did it again and again until he was sure that he could straighten up and look at himself in the mirror.

"No," he rasped. "It's not an option."

He looked almost as bad as Eugene—jagged gashes and slashed throat aside. He could see his freckles standing out against the pallor of his skin and purple smudges shadowed his eyes. Water traced a pattern down the sides of his face, gathered at his jaw line, and dripped from his chin.

"Is it like an insurance thing?" Eugene continued helpfully, oblivious to Dean's look of weary disbelief. "Cause I used to know this guy who pulled like all kinds of scams to get treatment at a hospital when he needed to—"

"Dean?"

Dean jumped at the sound of Sam's voice on the other side of the door interrupting Eugene.

"Hang on," he called.

"Dean, I—" Sam's voice caught and Dean tucked his face against his shoulder, wiping some of the water away with his T-shirt. "I can't..."

A soft *thump* on the other side of the door had Dean turning from the mirror and reaching for the handle, his focus complete; Eugene, dizziness, *weakness* forgotten. Sam sat slumped against the wall on the other side of the bathroom door, trembling, sweat glistening on his face, his eyes closed.

"Goddammit, Sammy," Dean whispered, crouching in front of his brother. "What are you—"

"W-was worried... 'bout you," Sam muttered, his eyes fluttering. Dean stood and went into the bathroom, wetting a towel with the still-running water and returning to Sam.

"You gotta pay extra for towels here, y'know!" Eugene protested.

Dean ignored him. Using the cool rag, Dean wiped his brother's sweaty face, carefully checking the wrapped wound. It hadn't started bleeding again, but Sam's forearm was swollen and the area around the puncture marks was red and angry-looking.

"Let's get you back up into the bed," Dean said, reaching for Sam's good arm, rocking back on his heels to shift Sam's weight forward.

Sam helped as much as he could, but wavered once vertical. Dean gritted his teeth as the effort of moving Sam's taller frame echoed like a scream through his side. He eased Sam down on the bed, cupping the back of his brother's neck and helping him lay back against the pillow.

"Just hang in there, Sammy," he whispered. "I'll... I'll figure out a way to find this... shaman."

"Front desk," Sam said, his eyes closed.

"Huh?" Eugene's voice came from just over Dean's shoulder.

Dean jerked, glancing quickly at Eugene. "Stop doing that!" He snapped, then turned back to Sam.

"The front desk?" Dean prompted. "Of the motel you mean?"

Sam swallowed, turning his head on the pillow to face Dean. "Lady at th-the restaurant said they have a lot of... tourists."

"Hey! Smart kid," Eugene said, snapping his fingers. "Aw, dammit," he growled in sudden disgust.

Dean looked at him. Eugene was frowning at his right hand; his index finger was gone. Dean shook his head, resisting the urge to look at the floor for the missing appendage.

"Good idea, Sammy," Dean said, patting Sam's shoulder and standing up.

Eugene lifted his eyes, a rather puzzled expression on his face. "You think it just... disappeared?" He looked down at his feet, twisting his body to look around him. "I mean... where the hell did it go?"

"I don't give a rat's ass about your finger, man," Dean hissed as he reached for the phone.

"What'd you say?" Sam mumbled, blinking his eyes open slightly.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," Dean sighed, picking up the receiver and dialing "0."

The woman at the front desk was more than happy to direct Dean to the closest Native American settlement with a shaman. She assured him that the local Indians would welcome him as they depend on tourism as much as the town did. She wished him well and hoped he would find enough information for his book.

"My book?" Dean asked, pulling the phone slightly away and looking at the receiver, brow furrowed in confusion.

"No, asshole, *my* book," Eugene spoke up from his dejected slump in the chair next to the small table. "You're in my room, remember?"

"Oh, uh, right," Dean said to the woman on the other line. "Thanks." He hung up and turned to look at Eugene. "Book, huh?"

"You get the directions?" Sam asked, his voice husky with pain.

"It's on Navajo Code Talkers," Eugene answered Dean. "That's why I'm here."

"I got 'em," Dean said to Sam, his eyes on Eugene. He folded the paper and stuffed it into the front pocket of his jeans. "It's not far."

"Well... why I *was* here..." Eugene muttered. "Don't know why I'm here *now*... not much more you can do to a guy after you rip his throat out and burn his body to ashes..."

"Help me up," Sam blinked his eyes open, trying to roll to his side.

"Maybe it's penance or something," Eugene was saying, absentmindedly flicking a flap of skin at the base of his throat. "I'm being punished..."

"You're not coming with me, Sam," Dean said, working to split his attention between Eugene's ramblings and Sam's efforts to stand.

"Or..." Eugene's voice sounded slightly brighter. "Maybe *you're* being punished... yeah... it's you!"

"What are you talking about?" Sam squinted up at him. "I'm not letting you go alone."

"You're in no condition to go anywhere, Sam," Dean shook his head, heading over to the table and the weapons bag. He stuffed the .45 into his waistband, staring at his knife, considering.

"I can't seem to go anywhere you're not," Eugene was saying. "You're the one that got me killed... heh, how 'bout that. Someone's punishing *you*." Realization burst upon him. "Hey... I'm... I'm *haunting* you!"

"Dean, you're... you're not acting like yourself, man," Sam said. "What if..."

"Course... it kinda sucks that I gotta stick around just so that you—"

"Enough!" Dean snapped, spreading his hands out so that one was directed at Eugene, the other at Sam. When the room was momentarily silent, Dean reached up and scratched the back of his head, staring at his knife on the table. "Sam... you can barely stand. We can't risk—"

"I'm coming with you," Sam said, his voice stronger.

Dean looked over at him. "Sam..."

"Dude, you just bit my head off for no reason," Sam argued, finally able to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. "Something's going on with you... something's... not right."

"I coulda told you that," Eugene commented. Dean shot him a look. Eugene held up his hands in surrender, then let them fall back in his lap.

"Fine," Dean agreed. "You can come, but we need to go now before you get any worse."

"Dude, I'm *dead*... doesn't get much worse than this," Eugene pointed out, tilting his head and staring back at Dean's glare with benign eyes. When Dean turned silently away from him toward his brother Eugene sighed. "Oh. You mean *him*."

Dean helped Sam pull on his boots, then clenched his jaw against the tremble of pain that shook loose in his side as he hauled Sam to his feet. Sam swayed slightly, reaching over to grab onto Dean and steady himself. His hand hit the cuts on Dean's side and Dean grunted slightly.

"You okay?" Dean's voice was strained.

"Yeah," Sam breathed. "Just... yeah."

Dean moved to the door, maneuvering it open and stepping through. He glanced back at Eugene. "You comin'?" he asked softly.

"Huh?" Sam looked over at him.

"Nothing," Dean said, watching as Eugene brightened slightly, and stood, striding toward the door. Just before he reached it, Dean pulled the door shut, chuckling softly at the *thump* he heard on the other side. "Sucker."

The cool of the night still clung to the early morning air and filtered through Dean's warm body, his shiver radiating through Sam as he eased his brother into the passenger seat. Sam dropped his head back, his eyes closing the minute Dean released him. Dean shut the door, a frown etched into his features. *Hang in there, Sammy...*

He moved around the front of the car, pulling out his keys as he did. The pinkish-gold rays of the sunrise rippling across the desert glinted off the sliver of his ring as he reached for the door handle. He glanced up once at the open expanse of the mesa on the other side of the road, his mind's eye flashing to the night before, the fight with the wolf, burning Eugene's body...

Shaking his head and ignoring the unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach, Dean slid behind the wheel and fired up the engine. Glancing at Sam's slumped form and closed eyes, Dean dragged the gearshift down to reverse and hooked his elbow over the back of the seat to look out the back window.

Eugene's torn visage met his startled eyes.

"Son of a bitch!" Dean cried out, jerking back, the sudden movement pulling at the cuts on his side. By a sheer miracle he managed to keep his foot on the brake.

Sam's head shot up, his eyes wide and glazed. "W-what?"

"I told you, man," Eugene said as Dean closed his eyes and pressed a hand against his side. "You're stuck with me. Believe me, it's no day at the circus from where I'm sitting either."

"Nothing, Sam," Dean breathed. He turned around and flicked his eyes up to the rear-view mirror, snarling a bit as Eugene's face was framed neatly in the center. "Scoot over, man."

"I'm against the door, Dean," Sam moaned softly.

"Why? Am I blocking you? Can't see through the ghostie?" Eugene bobbed a bit in the mirror, waving a three-fingered hand at Dean.

The muscles in Dean's jaw bunched; if he clenched his teeth any tighter, they would crack. The heat in his eyes could have melted lead as he stared at Eugene in the mirror. Eugene seemed to feel a bit of that wrath through the reflection, and sat back rather demurely.

"Wouldn't hurt for you to ask nicely, y'know," Eugene grumbled, sliding slightly so that he was positioned behind Sam.

Dean pulled in a shaky breath, backed out of the lot, then dug into his jeans for the directions. Glancing down at the paper, he blinked as the words swam in front of his eyes. Shifting to drive, he headed toward the rising sun.

Not five miles down the road, Sam groaned weakly. Dean glanced over at him and felt his heart kick at the sight of his brother's white, sweaty face. Sam was getting worse.

"Pull over man," Sam whispered.

“What?”

“Dean! Now!” Sam flopped a limp hand at the door handle.

“Dude, he’s gonna ralph,” Eugene warned.

“I *know*,” Dean snapped without thinking, wrenching the wheel to the right and coming to a hard stop as Sam practically tumbled out of the door and to his knees in the gravel on the side of the road.

Dean shoved the car into park, opened the door and sprinted around to the other side of the car as Sam’s body convulsed violently, the contents of his stomach traversing the side of the road, his wounded arm clutched protectively to his body.

“Take it easy, man,” Dean soothed, his hand on the small of Sam’s back. “You’re okay.”

“Ugh. If I were you,” Eugene said in a strained voice. “I’d be joining him.”

Dean shot him a silent glare, continuing to rub gentle, easy circles on Sam’s back, just as he’d done when Sam was younger. “Want some water?” he asked when Sam eased back onto his haunches, the back of his hand pressed against his mouth.

Sam nodded and Dean went to the trunk, grabbing a bottle of water and handing it to him.

“Want some help?” Dean asked, nodding toward the car.

“Just... wait a minute,” Sam breathed, tipping his head against the doorframe. “Still feel...”

“Oh, don’t tell me there’s more digestive pyrotechnics,” Eugene groaned.

“Okay, that’s it!” Dean barked, facing Eugene through the window. “Shut the hell up! I don’t want to hear another word out of you!”

“Well, that’s just too damn bad isn’t it,” Eugene leaned forward. “Because you’re stuck. With. Me.”

“Fine! *I’m* stuck with you, but you leave *him* the hell alone,” Dean growled, his shoulders thrust forward, pointing at Sam’s bewildered face.

“I haven’t touched him!”

“That’s not what I meant and you know—“

“Dean!” Sam finally snapped. “What. The. Hell?”

Dean took a breath and turned away from the Impala, running his hand over his mouth, across his forehead, then over the top of his head, ending at his neck. He tightened his fingers on the tense muscles there and turned back to Sam.

“Sam,” he said, looking away, then back at his brother. “Eugene’s in the backseat.”

Sam blinked, frowned, blinked again, then slowly turned his head to look at the backseat. Eugene waved at him, smiling. Sam’s eyes ran right through him, scanning the backseat, then returning to Dean.

“Dean, I—“

“Listen, I’m *not* crazy,” Dean thrust his hands out at his sides, his green eyes focused on Sam’s face. “This isn’t a demon-infested figment of my imagination, or some Special Kid whammy... there is a dead guy in the backseat.”

Sam swallowed. “And... you can... see him?”

“See him. Talk to him. Friggin’ *touch* him.”

“And it’s the dude from the restaurant. Eugene.”

“The one and only,” Eugene piped up. He looked over at Dean. “Thought he was a smart kid.”

Dean looked at Eugene, shrugging one shoulder. “Hey, this is weird, okay? Even for us.”

“You’re talking to him... now?” Sam said, glancing to the backseat once more.

“So, you guys deal in weird a lot, that it?” Eugene asked.

“Yeah,” Dean said, answering both of them.

“Didn’t you... burn him?” Sam shifted back up on the seat of the car, cradling his wounded arm.

“Course I burned him,” Dean replied, leaning on the opened car door.

"You are disturbingly comfortable with the idea of burning bodies," Eugene said, playing with the loose flap of skin at his throat again.

"Then why is he here?" Sam asked, closing his eyes, his voice fainter.

"Dude, that's just gross. Stop that," Dean said, grimacing at Eugene's actions. "And if I knew why he was here, I could do something about it, couldn't I?" Dean looked at Sam, waited while his brother pulled his legs back in the car, then shut the door.

He got back behind the wheel. Glancing up at the rearview mirror image of Eugene, Dean watched as he reached up to his destroyed cheek, his fingers tentatively reaching through the skin and touching his exposed teeth. Sam groaned and Dean shifted into drive, looking at his brother.

"You aren't looking so good, man," he whispered.

"I know," Sam and Eugene answered in unison.

Navajo Indian Reservation, near Medicine Hat, Utah, morning

The windows in the Impala were rolled down, allowing the desert air to travel through the car and vent away the imagined odor of death and the real smell of sickness. Dean hooked his left elbow on the windowsill, driving slowly down the dusty road of the small village, nodding back at the curious stares that were tossed his way.

"Maybe it's your music," Eugene offered.

"I doubt that," Dean muttered, offering a friendly smile to an old man sitting in a folding chair just outside the opening of a small hut. The Who's *Behind Blue Eyes* crooned softly from the speakers; Dean had given in to the pressure of silence about ten minutes after their brief detour and fished out a CD, ignoring Eugene's frequently voiced musical requests.

"No one knows what it's like, to be hated, to be fated, to telling only lies..."

"I'm telling you, man," Eugene said, leaning forward. "I'm pretty sure Native Americans hate Pete Townsend."

Dean flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror. "Well, you get a point for even knowing who Pete Townsend is."

Eugene looked offended. "Hey, I do own a TV." He glanced back out of the window. "I mean I *did*... you can learn a lot from VH-1 Classic, y'know. And don't get me started on CSI and using The Who for every single spin-off—"

"Dean?"

"We're almost there, Sam," Dean reassured his groggy brother. "Go back to sleep. I'll wake you up when I find him."

Sam nodded and let his eyes drift shut, his head lolling a bit on the back of the bench seat.

"No one bites back as hard on their anger. None of my pain and woe can show through..."

Dean pulled to a stop in front of what looked to him like a convenience store. He left the car running and sprinted inside, telling the man behind the counter what he was looking for. The clerk nodded to the east saying that he could walk there. Dean returned to the car and shut off the engine.

"Sam?"

Sam didn't reply. His chin trembled, his eyes rolled behind closed lids, and Dean saw a bead of sweat roll down the side of his pale face.

"Hang on, Sammy," he whispered, lifting his head and looking in the direction that the clerk had indicated. Clapping a hand on the opened door, Dean started walking as quickly as his wounded side would allow.

"What's the rush?" Eugene said sprinting next to him.

"Don't want to leave him alone too long," Dean said, glancing to his side. "You lost your thumb."

"What? I did?" Eugene pulled up short, looking at his three-fingered hand.
"Dammit."

Dean kept walking, eyes scanning the sun-bright desert for the hut the clerk had described.

"So besides werewolf killing, what else do you guys do?" Eugene asked, next to him once more.

Dean saw the windowless dirt hut and hurried toward the door. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean... you got like, real jobs, right?"

"This is our real job." Dean stepped through the door and into a sparsely-furnished square room. The air inside the hut was stifling; no wind sifted through the openings that flanked the doorway. Eugene didn't follow him inside.

"What, killing... creatures of the night?"

Dean shot a look over his shoulder as Eugene stood in the doorway, blocking the light from the outside. "Okay, one too many comic books for you."

"They're called graphic novels and you didn't answer my question."

"Don't plan on it either," Dean said, looking back into the room and scanning the area for signs of life.

"Why not?"

"None of your freaking business, that's why not," Dean said.

From a small doorway at the back of the room stepped a man about John's age, deeply tanned skin weathered from years outdoors, jet-black hair cut short and falling across his forehead in stick-straight bangs, and dark-brown, almost black eyes hitting Dean like a punch, then glancing away and out of the door.

"You bring disease here," the man said.

Dean swallowed, fighting the urge to reach out to the wall and steady himself. The heat in the room was making his head swim and his eyes blur. He pulled the list of ingredients from his pocket.

"Listen, the guy at the store said you could help me," Dean said holding the paper out to the man.

He didn't move to take it. "You need to leave."

"Be happy to, just as soon as you tell me where I can get the stuff on this list."

Dean's tight smile didn't reach his eyes.

The man looked at the paper, then once again shot his gaze over Dean's shoulder and out of the doorway. Dean frowned, following the man's eye line. Eugene stood just outside of the door staring rather forlornly at his hand.

"You need to leave," the man repeated, his eyes plainly on Eugene.

"Wait, wait," Dean stepped forward as the man turned away, reaching out and grabbing the man's sleeve. "You can see him?"

The man looked down at Dean's fingers fisted in his loose shirt. "Let go."

"Listen, man, if you know what's going on here—" Dean stopped suddenly as the room tilted sideways. In desperation, Dean let go of the man's shirt and reached out blindly for the wall.

The man turned with Dean, grasping his shoulders and carefully propping him against the dirt wall. He sighed as though giving in to the inevitable.

"Yes," he said softly. "I can see the ghoul."

"Hey!" Eugene protested, but one glance from Dean's warning eyes silenced him.

"My name is Maneulito. My father was the Hatálí." He let go of Dean's arms and stepped back. Dean stayed where he was, the support of the wall too much to give up at the moment.

"The what?" Dean asked.

"The medicine man... shaman. He was killed a month ago. By a skin walker," Maneulito said.

"Holy shit!" Eugene exclaimed. "I've read about them!"

"Skin walker," Dean breathed, his eyes shifting to the side in thought. "Not... a werewolf?"

Manuelito frowned. "Werewolf?"

"Forget it," Dean sighed, rubbing a shaking hand over his face. "Listen, I need the stuff on that list to help my brother—"

"Hey, watchit!" Eugene suddenly exclaimed, drawing the attention of the two men in the hut. He was standing just outside of the doorway, trying to dodge two women that were walking past the opening, talking, and completely oblivious to his presence. Dean noticed Eugene cast no shadow.

"How come you can see him, and I can see him, but... no one else seems to be able to?" Dean asked.

"The men in my family were cursed with sight," Manuelito said.

Dean lifted an eyebrow. "Yeah, I guess vision is highly overrated."

Manuelito looked at him. "Sight through the veil that separates this world from the next. Sight that divulges the future."

"Oh," Dean nodded, the back of his head rubbing against the dirt wall. "*That* kind of sight."

"My grandfather had it. My father had it. I have it. And... my son... has it," Manuelito looked down, his voice suddenly sad. "Most chose to channel it into healing. Others... others chose differently."

"Went to the dark side, did they?" Eugene tossed out.

"He was killed... violently," Manuelito stated, looking back at Eugene.

Eugene glanced in at Dean. "Wow," he commented dryly. "This guy doesn't miss a thing."

Dean shook his head, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah," Eugene looked at Manuelito. "Friggin' big-ass wolf killed me violently."

"It did not take your heart," Manuelito stated flatly. "That is why you are a ghoul."

"Seriously, enough with the name—"

Dean interrupted him. "Why can I see him, then? If anyone in my family has... *sight*, it's my brother, not me."

Manuelito reached out and took the list from Dean. "He was bonded to you before death," he said, scanning the ingredients in the dim light of the hut. "A debt, a wish, a promise... something connecting you."

Eugene looked at Dean. "Told you."

"Shut up," Dean grumbled, not happy to hear this. Being bonded to Sam by a promise was one thing; being bonded to Eugene... "How do I... get rid of him?"

"Ouch," Eugene put the hand still graced with all fingers against his chest. "That hurts."

"The only way to rid yourself of the ghoul is to kill the skin walker that took his life."

Figures, Dean thought. "Will that save my brother, too?"

"Your brother," Manuelito asked. "He was attacked by the creature that killed your friend?"

"He's not my friend and yeah, it bit my brother."

"When did this happen?"

"Last night," Eugene and Dean answered in unison.

Manuelito frowned. "Killing the skin walker will not save your brother."

Dean felt his body betray him, sagging weakly against the wall, a tremor starting at his fingertips and working its way up his arms to wrap around his heart. *Too many damn times...* "I can't... I can't do this again..." Dean whispered, his eyes staring sightlessly at the earth floor.

"We have to perform a *Nadáá*," Manuelito said, turning from Dean and starting back to the small doorway he'd stepped from.

"W-what?" Dean asked. Realization that hope had just been handed to him in the casual words of a stranger sifted strength into his weakening knees. "We have to do a what?"

Manuelito paused and turned. “A Nadáá. It’s a ceremony for warriors returning from battle. It rids the body of evil—evil seen and evil felt.”

“Warriors...” Eugene said softly, looking at Dean.

“What do I have to do?” Dean pushed away from the wall.

“You need to bring your brother to me,” Manuelito held up the list. “These medicines will help him, but we need to perform the ceremony soon. The bite of a skin walker is deadly within days.”

Dean swallowed.

“What about a scratch?” Eugene asked suddenly, his eyes still on Dean.

Manuelito’s face cracked slightly with his disbelieving smile. “I’m afraid a Nadáá will not help you. The skin walker left you hovering between this life and the next.”

“But if a bite can kill...”

Manuelito lifted a shoulder. “A scratch will make you ill, very ill in fact. But it will not kill you.”

“I’ll go get my brother,” Dean said heading toward the doorway.

“He is close?”

“Very close,” Dean looked over his shoulder.

“I will prepare,” Manuelito said. “Bring him to the building in back.”

Dean approached Eugene who stepped back out of his way.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Eugene scampered alongside Dean as he barreled through the dusty street and back to the car.

“About what?” Dean shot a look over at him.

“About the cuts on your side,” Eugene pointed at Dean.

“This isn’t about me,” Dean said. “It’s about Sam. You heard him—skin walker bites are deadly.”

“And the scratches make you wicked sick,” Eugene argued.

Dean reached the Impala, panting slightly. “Aw, Eugene,” he flicked his eyes at Eugene’s torn face. “You like me, you *really* like me.”

Eugene narrowed his eyes at Dean, holding up his three-fingered hand and folding down two fingers. Dean smirked, then opened the passenger door.

“Hey, Sammy,” he said softly, tapping Sam’s sweaty face. “You with me, man?”

“Dean?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Dean pulled Sam to him. “I found someone to help you.”

“Hurts,” Sam whispered. Dean felt his heart seize.

“I know, man,” Dean rotated Sam’s legs from the car, bent and slid his brother’s limp arm over his shoulder and pushed himself to his feet with an effort. “But you’ve had worse, right?” He forced out through teeth clenched in pain, kicking the door shut.

“Poison bullet,” Sam said, slumping against Dean.

“Right! Right, see? Th-that was much worse...” Dean started back toward the hut, hauling his brother with him, Sam’s feet dragging in the dirt. “H-how ‘bout when the Hookman skewered you, huh? N-not fun. Or... the vampire choke-hold?”

“This is worse,” Sam whispered.

“Yeah, well, uh... how ‘bout being trapped in a coffin... gotta be worse than this.” Dean stumbled slightly, growling low in his throat as he regained his balance.

“That was you,” Sam reminded him.

“Oh,” Dean shifted Sam’s weight against him. “Right.”

“How long have you guys been... doing this?” Eugene asked.

“All our lives,” Dean replied, fixing his eyes on the hut. *Keep moving...*

“And you just keep going?” Eugene said. “No matter what?”

“Somebody has to,” Dean replied on an exhale.

“With your shield or on it, huh?” Eugene’s voice was soft with awe.

Dean glanced at him. “What?”

“A warrior’s code. Back in ancient Greece. Come back from battle with your shield... or on it.” Eugene reached up to pull at some loose skin at his throat.

"You t-talking to... him?" Sam asked, trying to open his eyes.

"Too bad you didn't get stuck with Sam," Dean said, reaching the hut and moving to the structure in the back. "You two are like... walking encyclopedias of weird."

Manuelito stepped into view, saw Dean's struggle and immediately reached out to take some of Sam's weight. They staggered as a group into a smaller room, darker than the hut, the heat nearly suffocating. Dean opened his mouth wide to pull in air. Manuelito helped Dean set Sam on the ground at the base of a large circle.

"What is that?" Dean asked breathlessly, looking at the circle.

"Sand painting," Eugene supplied before Manuelito could answer. "The Navajo use sand paintings to channel power."

Dean swallowed, his eyes traversing the hastily-drawn, but brilliantly-colored painting. He saw the figures of three men, a large, black, dog-like creature, the sun and the moon, and several symbols that he couldn't identify.

Sam leaned weakly back against Dean's legs, his eyes closed, his breathing rapid.

"Remove his shirt and the dressing on his arm," Manuelito instructed. Dean watched another man, long white hair flowing down his back, enter the room, step around he and Sam and sit down on one side of the sand painting.

Eugene moved around the old man, studying the sand painting.

Dean sensed the room closing in around him. There were too many people and not enough air. He felt his lungs press flat in his chest, thirsty for air; sweat trickling down his face, his neck, gathering at his collar bones and the small of his back. He felt the weight of his gun uncomfortable against his skin.

Focus, Dean, he chided himself. He crouched down in front of Sam, tipping his brother forward so that he could balance Sam's nearly inert form. He pulled Sam's white T-shirt off, then carefully removed the bandages from his arm, exposing the angry, red puncture marks.

"Have him drink this." Manuelito handed Dean a wooden bowl filled with foul-smelling liquid.

Dean jerked his head back in reaction. "Holy hell," he exclaimed. "What *is* that?"

"It is the result of the ingredients you came here for," Manuelito lifted an eyebrow. "It will bring down the fever."

"Yeah, well," Dean took the bowl and turned to Sam. "Don't blame me if it brings *up* something else," he whispered. "Sammy," he grasped his brother's chin, forcing his head back slightly. "I need you to drink this."

Sam wrinkled his nose. "Guh," he uttered, turning his face away.

"Sam, c'mon, man," Dean ran the back of his hand over his upper lip, wiping away the sweat. "Just one drink, okay?"

"What's it?"

"Medicine," Dean held the back of Sam's head, helping him drink. Eugene crossed behind Sam in his ceaseless tour of the small room. "Would you hold still?" Dean complained, shooting a look at him.

"Crimeny, first it's *shut up*, Eugene and now I can't even move around?"

"You're making me dizzy," Dean grouched.

"Your *cuts* are making you—"

"Shut up," Dean snapped, knowing Manuelito could hear Eugene.

"Lay this on his arm," Manuelito said, handing Dean a warm, damp poultice. "Then sit across the room from him."

Dean laid the poultice over Sam's swollen forearm. "I'm not leaving him."

"You must balance the circle or the *Nadáá* will not work," Manuelito insisted.

Dean looked at Sam. "He's too weak," he shook his head. "He won't be able to—"

"I can do it, Dean," Sam whispered, forcing heavy-lidded eyes open, resting his conviction on Dean's shoulders with a look.

"You sure?" Dean said, pressing his free hand in the dirt for balance.

"I can do it," Sam repeated, slightly stronger.

Dean regarded his brother a moment longer, then nodded, stepping carefully over the sand painting, sitting as Manuelito instructed directly opposite his brother. Manuelito sat opposite the white-haired man. Eugene paced.

"I think I saw this in a movie once," he whispered.

Dean sliced through him with his eyes.

"Sorry, sorry," Eugene held up his disintegrating hands and took a step back.

Manuelito closed his eyes, the white haired man following suit. Soon their voices pitched and fell in undulating, distinct rhythms. Dean glanced from one to the other, then over to Sam whose eyes were once again closed, his body listing slightly to the side, arm cradled against his middle. *They're singing*, Dean realized. Each was singing their own chant, their own rhythm, in their own language.

It was discordant, disturbing. He frowned as he watched Manuelito's hands begin a purposeful tremble, his right hovering slightly over Sam's wounded arm. Dean was about to reach up to stop him, when he suddenly realized Eugene had joined in with the singing... only not in Navajo.

"Josie's on a vacation far away. Come around and talk it over. So many things that I wanna say... You know I like my girls a little bit older..."

What the hell? Dean thought, looking at Eugene incredulously. Eugene lifted a shoulder, his tattered shirt rippling, and kept singing. Dean blinked, looking over at Sam. His brother seemed to be weaving slightly with the clashing rhythms that he could hear. *What the hell*, Dean decided, *couldn't hurt*. He began to softly sing the first song that came to his mind.

"I awoke last night to the sound of thunder. How far off I sat and wondered. Started humming a song from 1962. Ain't it funny how the night moves..."

As the Navajo words rose and fell around him, the heat in the hut increased and Dean felt himself sway as he watched Sam. Without warning, Manuelito's voice rose sharply in pitch, his hand shaking so fast over Sam's arm that it was a blur to Dean's eyes. Dean closed his mouth with a click, tensing as Sam's head snapped back, the tendons in his neck standing out.

The man across from Manuelito called out staccato beats of sound and Sam jerked, a cry of pain erupting from his mouth and slamming into Dean like a physical blow. Dean reeled, reaching out to stop himself from falling backwards and feeling a hand wrap around his wrist. Blinking his eyes into focus, he saw Eugene's blue-tinged fingers. What was left of them. Eugene released him as he caught his balance. Dean shot his eyes toward Sam and his frantic gaze met the calm black of Manuelito's.

Dean took a breath. *Did it work?*

"Dean..." Sam breathed and Dean watch him start to crumple forward. Dean pushed himself to his feet, leaping over the sand painting and dropping down next to Sam, pulling his brother to him.

Sam was completely pliant. His bare skin was slick with sweat, but he was no longer trembling. The poultice slid from his arm; the puncture marks were present but no longer red. Sam's eyes were closed, but calm. Dean didn't see him wrestling, alone in the dark, with the demons that had chased him through his life.

"Sam?"

"He will wake soon," Manuelito promised, slightly winded. "He will need to sleep again, but the evil is gone."

"Gone?" Dean asked.

"Gone," Manuelito stood, retrieving a package from the ground behind him. "This is for later."

"What is it?" Dean asked his arms tightening convulsively around Sam's shoulders as Manuelito approached them.

"Fry bread and corn," Manuelito set it next to Dean.

"What the hell is... fry bread?"

"It's like a Navajo taco, man," Eugene spoke up, watching Sam closely.

"There is more medicine," Manuelito said, glancing from Eugene back to Dean. "A poultice and liquid to bring down fever."

"Thought you said it was gone," Dean frowned, looking down worriedly at his unconscious brother.

Manuelito stepped back over to the sand painting, swiping a hand through the intricately patterned colors, erasing the picture and ending the ceremony.

"It's not for him," he said, then stood. Just before he left the room, he turned and looked Dean in the eye. "You will find the skin walker at the Casa del Eco Mesa. To kill him, you must remove his head."

Dean licked his dry lips. "How do you know where it's gonna be?"

Manuelito glanced down, then looked over at Eugene. "It is my son." With that, he turned and left the hut.

Dean looked down at Sam. "And I thought our family was screwed up," he said softly.

Sam stirred weakly, blinking his eyes up at him. "What... what happened?"

"You missed the show stopper, kid," Eugene said, resuming his pacing. "Chanting, singing, a little jazz hands..." He demonstrated, spreading his remaining fingers and shaking them rapidly. The little finger on his formerly intact hand fell away. "Dammit!"

"You're gonna be okay," Dean said, easing Sam to a sitting position.

"No... no wolfing out?" Sam asked, his eyes already looking clearer.

"No wolfing out," Dean grinned. "You look beat, Sam."

Sam glanced at Dean. "Were you... singing?"

Dean chuckled. "Yeah, a little." He looked up at Eugene standing above them, frowning at his hand. "Dude, seriously. The Outfield?"

"What? *Your Love* is a classic."

Dean smirked, shaking his head.

"What do you want from me?" Eugene shrugged. "I'm a child of the '80's."

Dean stood and pulled Sam up with him. He ignored the fact that once upright, they were basically leaning against each other for balance. He looked down at the package Manuelito left him. Lifting his eyes to Eugene he grimaced as he watched him run a finger along his teeth... through his cheek.

"Do you have any idea how disturbing that is?" Dean asked.

"What's he doing?" Sam asked.

Dean shook his head. "You don't want to know." He bent and picked up the package Manuelito had left him. "Too bad you couldn't actually be useful," he commented to Eugene as they exited the hut. "Carry something."

"Sorry, man," Eugene said, trying to make a fist with his remaining fingers. "I'm too busy leaving bits and pieces of myself all over Utah."

Kokopelli Inn, Bluff, Utah, late afternoon

Sam was sleeping.

He'd fallen face-first onto the bed when they returned to the motel and had barely moved since then. Dean sat on the floor next to Sam's bed, back against the wall, eating fry bread and corn. Eugene sat in the chair next to the table, looking at the papers stacked next to their weapons bag. He hadn't stopped talking since they left the reservation.

"...served in all six Marine divisions from '42 to '45," Eugene was saying. Dean heard the word *Marine* and tuned in.

"Who did?"

"The Navajo Code Talkers," Eugene repeated patiently. "I've been here researching them for a book, trying to interview locals, find out more about their culture... what would make them do what they do."

"You mean... talk in code?"

Eugene lifted an eyebrow. "Haven't you been listening to me?"

Dean simply looked at him.

"Fine, okay," Eugene sat back. "I can take a hint."

"Ha!" Dean barked sarcastically.

"It's just that they're amazing—real heroes, you know? Not like these guys you see in movies that get beat to hell and somehow keep going even though you know they should be curled up in a ball and crying. These guys, the Code Talkers, passed messages in Navajo and the Japanese never did figure out how to break it. No one knew about them, but without them... we probably would have lost the war."

Dean nodded, thinking. Sam stirred slightly on the bed shifting his weight away from his arm, and burrowing his face deeper into his pillow. Dean relaxed back against the wall, his head turned to the left so that he could keep his eyes on his brother.

"I don't understand you," Eugene said suddenly, his voice gently curious.

Dean looked over at him. "What's to understand?"

"You're getting sicker," Eugene commented. "I can see it."

"I'm fine."

"I don't get why you are so willing to do whatever it takes to save your brother and you won't do a thing to save yourself."

"I don't need saving," Dean tipped his head against the mattress. "Sammy's the one who's... been marked since he was six months old..."

Eugene sat forward with a creak of the chair, listening.

"All the bad stuff out there... all the evil... he's like a magnet for it. It just goes for him, hunts him down, tries to... to *get* him, kill him, change him..."

"And you're the one that stops it?"

Dean closed his eyes. "I try to. Mostly I just seem to buy us a little more time."

"It's just you two?"

"Our Dad's out there somewhere. Fighting the good fight, I guess."

"How come he's not with you?"

"Long story," Dean yawned.

"You can't call him either?"

Dean shrugged. "I could, but..." he sighed, opening his eyes and looking at Sam. "Sammy's always been... my job, y'know? My responsibility. If I call Dad it has to be when we've killed this demon, not when I've screwed up keeping Sam safe."

"Okay," Eugene sat back. "I'm gonna skip right over that whole demon killing thing because even dead guys have their limits. But from what I saw, Sam's pretty capable of taking care of himself."

"Yeah," Dean nodded, his eyes drooping. "He's good at everything he does. Always has been. And he can be bad-ass when he needs to be," Dean's sleepy smile was proud. "But he's still my brother."

"Huh," Eugene sat back. "I don't have a brother. I don't have anyone, really."

Dean blinked at him, feeling suddenly sad. "No one?"

"Well, don't go getting all weepy on me," Eugene said, scratching at his torn throat. "I never really cared about it before. I have... er, *had* friends. People who knew my name... I think."

"Yeah? Which one?" Dean smirked.

Eugene pulled away more skin. "Ha freakin' ha."

Eugene looked over at Sam and Dean realized that his face was actually a bit bluer—almost purple in the dim light of the motel room.

"Y'know... come to think of it," Eugene continued. "People didn't much listen to me when I was alive, either. Guess that's why I was going to write a book. Kind of a way to..."

"Be immortal," Dean finished his thought.

"Yeah," Eugene nodded. "You think like that, too?"

"Not really," Dean shook his head slowly. "But I think in some ways Sam does. He wants people to know what we do. And my Dad... keeps a hunters journal. Says it's

for us so we know what we're up against, but I think... it's kinda his way to make sure there's a piece of him left behind if he doesn't make it out of this fight." Dean pressed a hand against his side, pushing back the ache. "I miss him," he confessed softly.

"How come you don't trust him?"

"Who, my Dad?"

"Your brother," Eugene clarified. "How come you don't trust him?"

"What are you talking about? I trust him."

"Then why do you hide from him?"

Dean sat up straighter, his sleepiness momentarily forgotten. "Hide? I *don't* hide."

"You sure as hell do," Eugene lifted an eyebrow, his purplish skin making the whites of his eyes look jaundiced. "He knows something isn't right with you, but you won't tell him you're hurt."

"That's not hiding," Dean protested. "That's protection."

"Oh, I get it," Eugene sat back, eyebrow raised, stretching his torn skin over his gaping jaw. The piece of skin separated and he was left with it dangling from his remaining fingers. He sighed and put it in his shirt pocket, then looked back at Dean. "You're protecting him from you."

"Something like that," Dean grumbled.

"So, you take care of him, protect him, and... what... die for him?"

Dean slid his eyes to the side, thinking. *If that's what it takes...* He didn't answer Eugene. Sleep pulled at him with hungry fingers. He leaned his head against Sam's bed, his brother's arm inches from his forehead.

Yawning, he said, "Just gonna... rest my eyes a bit, man."

"Great," muttered Eugene as Dean's eyes fluttered closed. "Not like I can go anywhere... don't mind me. I'll... just sit here and... watch my fingers drop off."

* * * *

"Dean."

Dean groaned. His muscles protested even that slight movement of air vibrating through vocal cords. *Last night couldn't have been worth it...*

"Hey, Dean, wake up."

Sam's voice was clear, insistent. Dean blinked, trying to bring the world into focus.

"Have you been on the floor this whole time?"

Dean's weary eyes sought Sam's face. He realized that he was actually lying on his side, one arm bent beneath him, the other twisted behind his back.

"Time is it?"

"Almost midnight I think," Sam said. "Why didn't you get up into bed? What are you doing down there?"

"Watching out for you," Dean groaned again, pushing himself upright on shaky arms. Sam grasped his shoulders and Dean bit back a gasp as the movement shot a hot poker of pain through his side. He blinked up at Sam's clear eyes. "Man, you look... good."

"Wish I could say the same for you," Sam muttered. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Uhhh, let's see," Eugene's voice suddenly spoke up. Dean closed his eyes. He'd almost forgotten about him. "He got attacked by a wolf and then saved your ass—"

"Just tired is all," Dean said, cutting off Eugene's tirade. "That ceremony really worked, huh?"

Sam lifted him from the floor and steadied him once upright. "Yeah, man, I feel... I feel great. I mean, my arm's a little sore, but nothing like before."

Dean grinned. He felt lighter than he had since Eugene burst into the restaurant last night. "That's great, Sam," he said.

"Why don't you get some rest—on a bed this time—and we can, y'know get our own room tomorrow. See the sights," Sam turned Dean toward the bed.

Dean pulled away, his tired eyes hitting Eugene. He grimaced. In the time he'd been out, Eugene had really started to go to pieces. A flap of skin on his chest was literally hanging by a thread and Eugene was trying vainly to press it back in place. The rest of his skin was drawing back revealing the bone structure underneath. He was a mess.

"We can't, Sam," Dean said rubbing the heel of his hand against his eye. "We gotta go get that skin walker."

"What? Why?" Sam tilted his head. "I'm okay—the ceremony..."

"We got us another problem, man," Dean said, nodding towards Eugene.

Sam turned and stared at what was, to him, an empty room. Then realization dawned. "Aw, crap."

"Yeah," Dean nodded. "And I hate to say it, but... the guy's falling apart."

"You can say that again," Eugene muttered.

"Oh, man, you mean he's like... crying?" Sam's eyes turned soft.

"Crying?!" Eugene protested.

Dean chuckled as Eugene's incensed expression. "No, I mean like he's literally falling apart." Dean pushed his hands away from each other in an imitation of something crumbling.

"Dammit!" Eugene suddenly exclaimed as the piece of skin he'd been trying to reattach fell away. Rolling his eyes, he added it to the growing amount that was now dangling from his pocket.

Dean wrinkled his nose in disgust. He could see into the deep red cavern of Eugene's chest, the white bone of his ribs reflecting the pale light from the bedside lamp.

"Dude... I think that's my... lung," Eugene said, peering down at his chest.

"Seriously, Sam," Dean swallowed and looked away. "We gotta take care of this."

Sam looked from Dean to the empty space in the room occupying Dean's horrified attention. He saw nothing, but it was obvious Dean did and that was good enough for Sam. He shoved his fingers through his hair. "Okay," he sighed, his eyes darting in thought. "Okay, so... we find the wolf and... what? Sneak up on it?"

Dean moved around to the end of the bed, sitting down stiffly and shaking his head. "Nah, this thing, Sam... it's smart. I mean, I think it went after you last night just to mess with me. Besides... we have to cut off its head to kill it."

"You think it can calculate like that?" Sam leaned against the wall next to the door, crossing his arms over his chest, his eyes on Dean.

"Skin walker's remember," Eugene said, looking up from the hole in his chest.

"They know what they're doing. Did you know that to become a skin walker they have to kill—and eat—an immediate member of their family?"

"Man, that's just gross," Dean muttered.

"What's gross?" Sam asked.

"There's no way you guys are going to sneak up on it," Eugene shook his head.

"Is he talking to you again?" Sam asked, looking around the room as if he hoped that he might catch a glimpse of Eugene out of the corner of his eyes.

"Yeah, I think it's calculating like that," Dean said, attempting to speak over Eugene's tireless litany.

"...too fast, too strong, and not only that, they can read minds..."

"So how are we going to get close enough to cut off its head?" Sam asked, rolling his neck.

"...should pay more attention to Native American lore, really, because most of today's horror movies and ghost stories..."

"We just gotta catch it in a cross fire," Dean said loudly. Eugene stepped closer to him and Dean worked to ignore the steady stream of words coming from the half-rotted face. "We'll wound it enough that it can't get away, and then—"

"Dude, why are you yelling at me?" Sam said, his brows pulled together over the bridge of his nose.

Dean closed his mouth, having forgotten for a moment that Sam couldn't hear Eugene. He pointed a finger at Eugene. "Stop. I get it. Skin walker equals bad-ass mother." He pointed to Sam. "Get your stuff together. We're going after a wolf."

Sam nodded, pushing away from the wall. Eugene sighed loudly.

"Cause that worked so *well* last time."

Casa del Eco Mesa, midnight

A screech owl cut through the discordant night sounds as Dean crouched next to Sam in the brush at the edge of the mesa. He could feel his clothes rub against his skin, the weight of the shotgun in his hand, the burn of the cuts on his side. His eyes were gritty, tired, his head ached. He wanted nothing more than to simply lie down and give in to exhaustion, simply allow weakness to win.

Without realizing that he was doing so, he leaned a bit more on Sam, his shoulder against his brother's arm, his knee pressed slightly into Sam's thigh. Sam looked over at him, asking with his eyes if he were okay. Dean nodded, pulling away from Sam and balancing once again on his own. He just wanted to finish this. Get rid of the skin walker, get rid of Eugene. Get on with their lives.

Whatever that meant. *Take a break... sightsee... be normal.*

The night went suddenly silent. Dean felt Sam shift next to him, readying his weapon. Dean pulled the shotgun across his body. He heard a rustle next to him and glanced over to see Eugene crouched low, his eyes peering into the darkness, his purplish skin looking almost black in the moonlight.

It just friggin' figures I get stuck with a ghoul, Dean sighed. He lived his life by a promise, a code, a purpose: keep Sam safe. He'd made it this far by the skin of his teeth. He should have known better than to think that umbrella of protection could be spread over another soul. He hadn't been good enough to protect Eugene and he should have known it.

"It's here." Sam's whisper was a glimmer of air across Dean's ear. He nodded, motioning with the barest flick of his fingers to his left. Sam blinked once that he understood and moved silently into position.

Dean smelled the wolf before he saw it. He recognized the feral scent from the night Eugene died, when the wolf had been perched on top of him, ready to cut him to ribbons, and the man he'd promised to protect had saved his life with the swing of his gun. He pulled that same gun to his shoulder, barrel down, waiting.

The wolf stepped into the clearing, nose up. Dean knew they were in trouble when the skin walker's mercury eyes slid first to him, then shifted in the direction Sam had moved.

No friggin' way... Dean felt the growl build low in his throat. He stood up, drawing a bead and suddenly realized the wolf was no longer in his sites. Dean brought his head up quickly and saw that the skin walker had moved, faster than lightening, to circle behind Sam.

"Sam! Behind you!" He started to move across the clearing, trying to get to Sam. It was like moving through waist-deep water. The sand reached up and grabbed at his ankles, slowing him, pulling him back.

Dean heard a shot, saw the flash of a muzzle not twenty feet from him, heard the welcome sound of the wolf's yelp. He brought the barrel of his shotgun up, focusing on where he saw the flash, but his arms refused to cooperate.

His knees hit the desert sand. The barrel of the shotgun rested on the ground. Dean blinked in the direction he'd last seen Sam and instead saw the black face of the skin walker, its lips pulling back to reveal its deadly fangs, his eyes flashing at him in the moonlight.

"C'mon you freak," Dean gasped. "Let's see who the bad-ass really is..."

In the space of three heartbeats, the wolf moved forward, Sam appeared like a product of the darkness itself to grab Dean's shotgun from him and stepped in front

of Dean, and with grace that would make the director of *Thriller* weak with pleasure, Eugene stepped in front of Sam.

The wolf halted, started at the sight of the ghoul standing before it, arms raised, gaping maw screaming Navajo words at it. The wolf stepped back and Sam raised the shotgun.

Eugene continued to wave his arms, scream and advance on the skin walker. The wolf stumbled back, then as the hammer of the shotgun cocked, it turned and sprinted off into the darkness.

"Yeah, you'd better run!" Sam yelled.

Eugene gave chase, but was suddenly pulled up short, jerked back and immediately returned to the brothers as Dean's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed completely to the ground.

"Dean," Sam gasped, dropping to his knees beside his brother.

"He can't hear you, kid," Eugene said, looking at Dean's pale, lax face.

"Aw, dammit, Dean," Sam reached for Dean's shoulders, pulling him close. "What happened to you man?"

"Oh, right. You can't hear me." Eugene shook his head feeling the skin along his jaw jiggle with the motion. "This is going to work out just friggin' *great*. Life mocks me even in death."

Casa del Eco Mesa, shortly after midnight

The silence of the desert night beat against Sam's ears in the wake of the battle with the wolf. He took a breath; his lungs felt punched flat, his hands trembled, his knees sank deeper into the cool sand that had long ago relinquished the heat from the day. Dean lay before him, legs bent beneath him, arms splayed on either side of his body, empty hands still bent in mimic of holding the shotgun.

Sam dropped the shotgun in the sand, his gun next to it, and grasped Dean's shoulders, muttering.

"What the hell happened to you, man?"

He carefully shifted his hands over Dean's shoulders, head, the back of his neck, looking for a wound, a reason for Dean's collapse. Images scrolled through his mind of the last several months, scenes from the horror show that was their life shaking him from the inside out.

Buried alive, poison bullets, trapping Haris in that ship, vampires on speed, nearly burned to death by a cult, tortured with nightmares, voodoo, amnesia... now this...

"Dean, c'mon, man, you gotta... you gotta give me a sign here." Sam clutched Dean against him, feeling his heart in his throat, panic licking the edge of each beat. Wiping the back of his hand over his lips, he eased his brother back down on the sand.

"Check his side, kid," Eugene said, crouching down on the other side of Dean.

"What did I miss?" Sam whispered, running his hands down Dean's legs, straightening them from their twisted position, and finding nothing. "Dean? Hey, c'mon, I can't..."

"CHECK HIS SIDE," Eugene leaned across Dean's body, his mouth close to Sam, bellowing in his ear.

Sam reached up and laid the back of his hand against the side of Dean's face. "Man, you're burning up," he muttered. Rubbing a hand over his own face, Sam lifted his eyes, searching the empty expanse of the mesa. "I know I hit that wolf, but... it's so quiet, Dean. The thing could be anywhere."

Dean groaned weakly, his head shifting slightly in the sand.

"Dean?"

"Oh, for the love of—" Eugene straightened up, slapping his palms on his thighs in exasperation, bending from the waist to lend weight to his scream. "**SAM! LOOK. AT. HIS. SIDE!**"

As if in echo of the scream Sam couldn't hear, a screech owl pierced the darkness with its cry. Answering sounds of the night returned and Sam found himself breathing easier. The night was only still when danger lurked; the sounds of the desert, the return of the wind, reassured him that for the moment, they were safe.

"Okay, so we're not going to be some skin walker's chew-toy in the next few minutes," Sam took a breath, "but that doesn't help me figure out..."

He suddenly tilted his head, looking at Dean's chest. Beneath the gray T-shirt, he could see a slight rise of something that looked like... bandages. Reaching out to gently lift the edge of Dean's T-shirt, he tightened his jaw when he saw two squares of white gauze taped on Dean's side and colored with seeping blood.

"FINALLY!" Eugene straightened, throwing his arms in the air and letting them drop. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, kid! Took you long—"

"You stupid, stubborn... son of a bitch," Sam interrupted, growling through clenched teeth. "Never touched you, huh? You're *fine*?! Dean!" Sam worked his jaw, looking out into the night, then back at his brother. "You wouldn't know what fine was if it wrestled you to the ground and beat the hell out of you!"

"Well, you got that right!" Eugene's eyebrows shot up. "I think I'm beginning to like you, kid."

Dean stirred weakly, legs shifting in the sand, a shaking hand reaching for his wounded side. Sam curled his fingers around Dean's shoulder, his lips pressed together in a tight line of worry.

"Hey," Sam said softly. "Hey, Dean, c'mon... c'mon, open your eyes."

Dean's mouth worked slowly, his lips parting to pull in air.

"That's it, man," Sam encouraged. "Come on back."

Eugene watched Sam's gentle encouragement of his brother back to the here and now with something close to wistfulness. He silently cursed the skin walker for leaving him his heart; watching this display of emotion, however subtle, coaxed an ache deep in his chest that he thought he would have left behind with the need for breath.

Dean's lashes fluttered against his cheeks as he blinked himself aware.

"Sam?" Dean rasped. *God*, he thought, *this sucks out loud*... He was so hot. The heat rolled over him in rippling waves, washing him deeper into the sand with each ebb and flow. And he was shivering. Sam's hand on his shoulder was too heavy. His shirt was too heavy. His eyes were too heavy...

"You're a friggin' jerk, you know that?" Sam's voice was choked with frustrated emotion.

Eugene's head snapped up and he looked at Sam with abject surprise.

"Bitch," Dean muttered, his eyes closing briefly.

Eugene whipped his head over to Dean, blinking in astonishment. His felt a laugh build in his throat.

"Why didn't you tell me, Dean?" Sam asked, shaking his head. "You could have gotten help... back at the sweat lodge."

"I'll be okay, Sam," Dean whispered, forcing his eyes open. *I'm okay, I just need to get out of the sand, back to my car ... get Sam away...*

"Yeah, you sure look okay," Eugene commented.

Dean's eyes tracked the now-familiar voice, lighting on Eugene's multi-hued skin and jaundiced eyes. He winced. "You're still here, huh?"

"Uh, well, since I don't see any skin walker heads lying around... yeah," Eugene retorted.

"Dean, look at me," Sam said softly, tightening his grip on Dean's shoulder.

Dean slid his eyes to his brother's face. *Damn, it's cold out here...*

"Where else are you hurt?"

"Just my side," Dean whispered. "Wolf... c-caught me when it hit us."

"Goddammit, Dean..." Sam shook his head, jaw working. He pulled Dean's T-shirt down carefully, covering the stained bandages.

"Where'd it go?" Dean's eyes slid around the darkness.

"What?" Sam's brows pulled together in a frown.

Dean twisted his head around, looking across the empty desert. Reaching out, he gripped Sam's forearm and with a grunt of pained effort, used his brother's muscle to help pull himself to a slumped sitting position.

"Where'd the wolf go?"

"I scared it off," Sam and Eugene said in unison. Dean's eyes darted between them, then rested reluctantly on Eugene.

"Sam, we still gotta—" His words were swallowed by another shuddering wave of heat, starting from the four parallel cuts on his side and blossoming slowly across his chest and down through his arms. He knew Sam felt the tremble through his grip.

"Don't worry. We'll get that damn skin walker," Sam grumbled. He stuffed his gun in the front of his jeans, careful to keep his T-shirt between his skin and the still-hot barrel, grabbed Dean's shotgun with one hand, then crouched and wrapped Dean's arm across his shoulders. "Let's just get you taken care of first."

Dean couldn't bite back the cry of pain as Sam pulled him carefully to his feet. He leaned heavily against his brother, his knees buckling.

"Hurts, huh?" Eugene asked, sympathy vacant from his tone. "Maybe you should've... I dunno... said something *BEFORE!*"

"Hey," Dean gasped. "I don't need to hear it from the man who wasn't there..."

"I don't get you, man," Sam grumbled and started walking, shifting the weight of the shotgun in his grip and easing Dean along with him. "After all we've been through, why didn't you just tell me?"

"See?" Eugene said, nodding toward Sam. "Told you. Shoulda trusted the kid."

"Christ, Sammy... y-you're pissed, I get it, but... you'd been bit," Dean said, his voice shaking with the effort to breath. "I thought you were gonna... I was afraid that I..."

Unable to complete his thoughts to their nightmarish end, Dean pulled his head up, his eyes tracking Eugene's panther-like prowl as he circled them, stopping on Dean's other side.

Eugene continued with his tirade, oblivious of Dean's attempt to explain his actions. "Screw that, you should have trusted *me*. I mean, it's not like I studied this culture or anything! I told you the wolf was too fast for you—"

"Doesn't matter, Dean—"

"—it knew you were coming before you even—"

"—protection is one thing, but this is just stupid hunting—"

"—might've had a chance if you were both ready, but—"

"—put us *both* in danger—"

"Enough!" Dean yelled, then pulled up short, his fingers fisting in the shoulder of Sam's T-shirt as his sudden bellow shook his body. "One at a freakin' *time*," he finished weakly.

Sam sighed, waiting while Dean regained his balance, his fingers hooked into the belt loops of his brother's jeans, helping to support his weight. He could feel the shape of his brother's .45—that Dean was very rarely without—pressing into his forearm from its position in Dean's waistband.

"Can he—er, Eugene—hear me?" Sam asked.

"Unfortunately," Eugene grouched. "Both ears are still in place."

Dean cleared his throat, nodding wearily. "Yeah, he can hear you."

Sam lifted his head, looking blankly around them, his blue-green eyes piercing the silvery darkness of the moonlit desert. "Eugene," he said, looking in the opposite direction from where Eugene stood, waiting, on the other side of Dean. "I, uh, need a moment alone with my brother."

"Yeah, well," Eugene grumbled. "I need a million-dollar manicure. Guess we're both shit out of luck."

Dean laughed in spite of himself, pressing his arm against his side.

"What?" Sam asked, looking down at him.

"Nothing," Dean said softly.

"I mean it, Dean," Sam started walking again. "You can't keep doing this... I mean ever since—" Sam stopped talking, the night swallowing his words.

"Since you almost died?" Dean finished for him, the same choking fear he'd felt that moment in the airplane hanger, and again in the desert just the night before, working to stamp out his valiant efforts to breathe. *Too many damn times...*

"Guess you'll just have to forgive me, Sam," Dean managed, frustrated anger giving his words volume. "I mean, maybe I'm just over watching my brother die."

"You guys are killing me," Eugene muttered. "Figuratively speaking of course."

"But I *didn't* die, Dean. You saved me," Sam said.

Dean closed his eyes. Sam felt the effort he was putting into each footstep.

"Not without help, I didn't..." Dean whispered. He could still remember returning to that hospital, seeing the empty room, feeling the cold helplessness wrap around his heart.

"Well, so, we had help, but you stopped Haris from getting us," Sam argued, shifting Dean's increasing weight against him.

"Not for long," Dean said, shaking his head, his short hairs ruffling against Sam's shoulder as his neck surrendered. "Freakin' demon got out somehow..."

"You kidding me? You guys got a demon named *Haris* after you?" Eugene asked, looking at Dean. He barked out a laugh. "How Ivy League is that? He got a cousin named Lance?"

"Dean," Sam tried, concerned with the soft defeat he heard in Dean's contrary words, the heat radiating off of his brother's body as he leaned against him. "If we're gonna win this fight... we gotta work together."

"We do, Sam," Dean said, his head bobbing down once.

"Not if you don't trust him," Eugene pointed out, helpfully.

"Not if you don't trust me," Sam argued. "Dad wouldn't hunt while he was hurt."

"He sure as hell would!" Dean protested weakly, blinking his eyes open and pulling back slightly at the sight of Eugene staring back at him. Dean saw a shift in those eyes, an expression that he was having trouble placing as the world swam around the fuzzy image of the ghoul.

"Yeah, well," Sam scanned the darkness, "we always knew where he was hurt so we could cover him."

"I thought I could handle it, Sam," Dean tried.

"Well, you were wrong," Sam grunted as Dean sagged heavily. "You're lucky I'm not in the mood to mess with Dad right now. He'd kick your ass for this."

Dean didn't reply. His eyes slid closed and he pressed his arm against his side.

"Hey, kid," Eugene said to Sam. "How about giving him a break?"

"He can't hear you," Dean whispered. Eugene stopped walking as they moved on through the darkness, following again only when the connection that bound him to Dean demanded it.

"You can," he said softly.

Kokopelli Inn, wee hours of the morning

"I need to get you cooled down," Sam's voice trembled slightly with worry.

"It... it won't kill me, Sam," Dean managed through teeth clenched in pain. He pressed his head back into the pillow, watching with burning eyes as Sam set the gun he'd removed from Dean's waistband and the shotgun he'd hauled out of the desert on the table next to their weapons bag and Eugene's notes. "J-just makes me sick."

"Oh, well, is *that* all," Sam retorted sarcastically. He left Dean lying on the bed he'd vacated just hours before and barreled his way to the bathroom, forcing Eugene to jump out of his way.

"Tell him about that stuff Manuelito gave you," Eugene reminded Dean.

"What?" Dean blinked blurry eyes at Eugene's form standing just to the side of his bed, partly in shadow.

"The medicine and the... paste stuff to put on your cuts."

"That stuff that smelled like..." Dean grimaced.

"Did you say something, Dean?" Sam called from the bathroom.

"Don't be such a baby. You saw how fast it worked on Sam," Eugene pointed out. "And you don't get your own little sand painting and song and dance. Could take longer for you."

"Doesn't matter—" Dean closed his eyes tightly, his fingers curling into fists in the loose quilt.

"You talking to him?" Sam came back in the room, carrying two damp towels.

"I swear to God if you say it doesn't matter because Sam is okay, I'm gonna—" Eugene took a step forward, but Sam blocked his approach, reaching Dean.

"You're not going to be sick, are you?" Sam asked, remembering how the bite had affected him.

"Hope not," Dean whispered, turning toward the coolness of the damp towel Sam laid over his forehead in spite of himself.

"That makes two of us," Eugene grumbled.

"I gotta clean out these cuts, Dean," Sam said softly. "Can you sit up a minute, help me with your shirt?"

"Sam..." Dean murmured. "Package."

"Huh?"

"C'mon, kid, think," Eugene grouched, and resumed his pacing as he had in the sweat lodge. "I know you saw him carrying that package back to the car."

"On the t-table..." Dean tipped his chin toward the corner of the room. "F-from the... shaman."

Sam nodded, pushing himself to his feet and went to the table. Seeing the plain brown package sitting next to the weapons bag, he pulled out his pocket knife and cut the twine holding it together. Moving the paper aside, he saw a vial of green-colored powder, a note, and a small covered bowl containing a white paste. Reading the directions on the note, Sam went into the bathroom and mixed the greenish powder with water, his nose wrinkling in disgust as the odor breached the glass and wafted upward.

He turned back to the room, approaching Dean, the medicine held slightly away from him. Dean's eyes were closed, sweat slicking his forehead and cheeks, his lips slightly parted and his chest moving in quick repetitions of breath.

"Dean?"

Dean flinched when Sam said his name, but couldn't open his eyes. His lids felt weighted, melded to his face with heat. His head was full of voices: Sam's, John's, Haris'... The loudest, however being his own, mocking him with his failure, with the chance that he wouldn't be enough... *He'll be okay if he stays close... I promise nothing bad's gonna happen to you... long as I'm around, Sammy...*

"Hey, man," Sam gently shook his arm. "You need to wake up for just a minute."

Sam watched as lines folded Dean's brow, his eyes opening to the barest of slits.

"I'll help you, okay?" Sam whispered, remembering how Dean had held him up in the sweat lodge, how he'd not wanted to leave his side until forced to by the shaman. Grasping the back of Dean's head, Sam rested the edge of the cup against his lips, helping him drink.

"Gah, that's nasty," Dean whispered, his head dropping back.

"Well, it'll help," Sam said. "It helped me."

Dean pulled in a shuddering breath, griping the bed in an effort to slow its spin.

"Dean?"

"Mmm?"

“What I said about Dad... I’m sorry. I highly doubt he’d kick your ass,” Sam said softly.

“S’okay, Sam,” Dean slurred.

There was an odd grayish quality about the room as Dean worked to keep his eyes open. In the edges of the gray, he saw himself and Sam. Memories of what they had survived twitched through his fading vision like flickering images from a movie reel. He narrowed his eyes, trying to catch them, trying to hold one of the memories, trying to see... but when he looked closer, the images faded leaving in their wake a darker gray, a deeper silence, and a heat that threatened to burn him up.

Sam stood and returned to the table, preparing the poultice as Manuelito’s note instructed. *How had he known?* The Navajo shaman had known they would need this medicine... he’d seen what Sam had not. *Maybe if I’d paid closer attention...* He turned back to Dean and saw that his brother’s eyes were closed again.

Sighing, Sam perched on the edge of the bed, raising the edge of Dean’s T-shirt so that he could see all of the bandages, and began to remove them slowly.

“You scare me, man. One of these days,” he muttered softly, watching to see if his brother reacted. “I’m afraid of what you’re gonna do to save me...”

“He’ll do whatever it takes,” Eugene said, pacing in a tight pattern at the foot of the bed. “He’ll protect you no matter what, kid.”

“I know you think it’s your job to protect me, man,” Sam winced as Dean jerked slightly when he used the second towel to clean away the blood that had seeped from the shallow cuts. “But you gotta trust that you... you helped raise me right...”

Dean’s head rolled weakly against the pillow as Sam laid the poultice across his chest and he shivered at the contact of the medicine against the cuts.

“You taught me well, Dean. We... we take care of each other.”

“Do you two know how good you have it?” Eugene stepped up to Sam, staring at his profile.

“We still got a fight ahead of us, man... I mean... Haris... he’s still out there.”

Dean jerked slightly as the arms of a nightmare wrapped tightly around him. His lips moved rapidly, his brow furrowing.

“I mean, people just don’t... watch out for each other like you guys...” Eugene shook his head, then frowned. He reached up to the side of his face, scratching. As he pulled his hand away, his ear plopped to the floor. “Dammit!” he said in disgust, retrieving the ear with his few remaining fingers.

“And if we’re gonna stop him, we’re gonna have to do it together. It’s gonna take both of us—trusting each other... no matter what.” Sam dropped his head, staring at his hands lying loose and open in his lap.

“Couldn’t save him... sh-shouldn’t have promised...” Dean muttered, his jaw trembling as he shivered with fever.

Eugene and Sam lifted their heads as one, staring at him as Dean twisted to the side, the towel Sam had lain over his forehead slipping off.

Frowning, Eugene distractedly started to stuff the ear into his pocket, then changed his mind, throwing it across the room with a frustrated growl. He never saw it land.

“Dean,” Sam said, turning the towel to the cool side, and laying it back in place. “You did the best you could... you’ve always done the best you could.”

“Don’t think he agrees with you, kid,” Eugene muttered.

“And it’s not your fault that there’s some... *guy* wandering around... haunting you. Probably talking to me right now...” Sam glanced around the room, his eyes sliding over Eugene blindly. “Really friggin’ bugs me that I can’t see him. Or hear him.”

“Last night as I was going up the stair,” Eugene started to quote, wandering to the other side of the room, looking for his ear. “I met a man who wasn’t there...”

“Keep you safe, Sam... won’t let him get you...” Dean’s words were slurred, his lips barely moving. “Yellow-eyed son of a bitch...”

"He wasn't there again today," Eugene said, giving up on finding his missing appendage, looking back over at the brothers. "Oh, how I wish he'd go away..."

"Nobody's gonna get me, Dean," Sam reached for his brother's arm, his hand hovering just above Dean's wrist, fingers curling into a fist rather than making the connection just yet. "He's not gonna get me," he whispered.

"Won't let him..." Dean's face was pulled into a fierce frown and he started to pant a bit for air.

Sam pulled the towel from his forehead. "You're still burning up." He went to the bathroom and soaked the towel once more in cool water. He grabbed a couple more from the shelf and wet them as well.

"Maybe we need to sing... singing seemed to work for you," Eugene suggested. "Seems like he's more of a '70's rocker, though... I'd offer to do the healing hand tremble routine, but I'd probably just drop fingers all over him." He looked ruefully at his rapidly diminishing digits.

Sam returned to the bed and laid the towels on Dean's forehead, neck, and wrists. Dean's breathing didn't calm, and as he continued to fight for air, his body trembling from the fever and the medicine, sweat ran down the sides of his face, glistening on his chest. Lines of worry dug deeper grooves into Sam's forehead.

"What is with you guys and your aversion to hospitals?" Eugene asked, his eyes pinned to Dean's tortured face. "Then again, what are you gonna say? Hey, my brother is sick from a skin walker scratch?"

Sam sighed and rolled his neck tiredly, then used the towel from Dean's forehead to wipe the side of his brother's face, trying to cool Dean down. "Maybe I should try to take you back to... the shaman..." he whispered as Dean shivered.

Eugene continued his rambling monologue with the non-existent doctor. "What's a skin walker you say? Kinda like a werewolf, only... not. Of course they exist! Do I look like a crazy person to you? Don't answer that..."

"Hey, Dean," Sam said softly, adjusting one of the towels at his brother's wrist and using that excuse to grab Dean's limp hand, thumb to thumb. "Y'know when we were talking before... about Mom and Dad?" He watched his brother's face, watched as Dean frowned, the fever chewing through him.

"I, uh... I missed that. Just... just *talking* like that. Not having to fight a demon, or a vampire, or a spirit..." Sam rubbed his aching head with his free hand. "Sometimes feels like the devil himself is after us ... even though I know that's not possible."

Eugene jerked his eyes to Sam. "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist..." He quoted, shaking his head slowly lest he work something else loose.

"I don't know, man," Sam sighed. "I just... I liked just hanging out with you. It was like... I suddenly remembered that we're a family." Sam continued softly, oblivious to Eugene, focused on the heat radiating from his brother in tremors so strong they shook the bed. "We've always worked really well together, y'know? I mean, Jesus, we face *death* just about every day. Monsters that people don't even... *don't want to* know exist."

Eugene narrowed his eyes, listening for a moment.

"I would die for you, Dean, and I know that you'd do the same for me... but sometimes I think we get so focused on surviving that we forget... well, what all comes with just being... brothers."

Dean twisted slightly on the bed, his free hand fisting in the quilt, his other gripping tightly to Sam's. His eyes closed tighter, a wave of pain rocking through him as the Navajo remedy worked to rid his body of the skin walker's poison.

Sam felt wetness on his cheek, and swiped at it with the back of his free hand, unwilling to release Dean. He was surprised to find tears there.

"Y'know... the Navajo don't really have a word that means *family*... not really," Eugene said, his face softening as he watched Sam.

"Being brothers is... well, it's remembering things that the other one can't... like how you remember Mom for me." Sam sniffed, rubbing at his tired eyes. "It's... carrying the weight that the other one can't carry... and listening to what's too hard to say... and..." Sam trailed off, tiredly.

"But there are actually two Navajo words that mean *brother*," Eugene finished.

"You're my best friend, man," Sam whispered. He laughed softly. "I don't know why I can't tell you this when you can actually hear me." He lifted his eyes to Dean's flushed face. "Talk about a chick-flick moment."

Eugene grinned slightly. "I was thinking after-school special, but chick-flick works, too."

Sam released Dean's hand and adjusted the towels. Dean groaned softly as the coolness was pulled away, sighing when it was returned. Sam checked the poultice, noting that the redness and swelling around the cuts on Dean's side had already subsided. *It's working...*

"Sam..." Dean whispered, his brow smoothing slightly.

"I'm here, Dean," Sam said, patting his brother's shoulder. "I'll be here when you wake up."

As the first rays of the rising sun crept silently through the crack in the heavy, brown curtains, Sam sat on the floor next to Dean's bed and watched his brother's green eyes blink open, clear, and fever-free.

"Hey," he greeted.

"Hey, yourself," Dean returned, his voice sandpaper rough. "You been sitting there all night?"

"Seemed as good a place as any," Sam replied, pushing himself up and reaching for the now-dry poultice on Dean's side. "How are you feeling?"

"Uh... good," Dean admitted. He smacked his lips together as if tasting the air. "Hungry, actually."

Sam grinned when he lifted the poultice away and saw that the four identical lines crossing his brother's ribs had faded to simple scratches. "Yep, that's the Dean Winchester I know."

Dean slowly eased himself up in the bed so that his back rested against the headboard. "And I didn't even have to sweat my ass off this time."

Sam gathered the towels and turned toward the bathroom. "That's what you think."

Dean watched him go and his eyes caught on Eugene sitting silently in the corner. "Hey," he said. "You been here this whole time?"

"Huh?" Sam stuck his head around the edge of the bathroom, saw Dean staring at the empty chair and sighed. "Oh, *him*."

Eugene didn't reply.

Dean couldn't clearly see Eugene's face, but the parts of his body that weren't hidden by shadow had become rather tragically tattered over the past few hours.

"Eugene... hello... Earth to Mr. Eastwood..." Dean waved a hand in the direction Eugene was sitting. "Did your tongue fall out?"

"No," Eugene finally said.

"Well then—"

"Hey, Dean," Sam interrupted. "I think I saw a convenience store attached to this place. I'm gonna go get us some food."

"Okay," Dean nodded, starting to push himself out of bed.

"Hey, wait, just—just wait, okay?" Sam crossed the room and pushed Dean back against the headboard. "I was exhausted when the fever broke... remember?"

"Yeah, Sam, but you were—"

"Just lay here for a little bit longer," Sam said. "Please? Just until I come back."

"Fine." Dean rolled his eyes and sighed. "But don't take too long."

Sam glanced around the room. "Make sure he stays put, Eugene."

Dean blinked at Sam, hearing a soft chuckle from the corner of the room. "Can you... did you... see him?"

Sam shook his head.

"I could have lit myself on fire and he wouldn't have noticed... oh wait... you already did that," Eugene commented from the shadows.

"But I kinda... knew he was there last night," Sam shrugged. "It was... comforting in an extremely creepy kind of way."

Dean laughed softly. "Hurry up, Stretch."

Sam grabbed the room key and started out of the door.

"And bring me coffee," Dean called after him.

"Coffee, right."

"And p—"

"Dean," Sam stuck his head around the edge of the door. "I am *not* bringing you pie."

"Nazi," Dean frowned.

"Stay put. I'll be back," Sam pointed at him, then left the room, pulling the door close behind him.

Dean shifted his denim-clad legs over the edge of bed, easing up his T-shirt to look in amazement at the healing wounds on his side.

"Thought you were supposed to stay put."

"I'm not going anywhere," Dean grumbled. "Why are you hiding back there, anyway?"

With a sigh, Eugene leaned forward so that the morning light hit his face. Dean glanced up and did a double-take, letting his breath ease out slowly. The night had not been kind. Eugene's slashed face had started to cave in; the area of skin around one eye was gone, leaving the yellowed orb almost completely exposed. The opposite side of his face hadn't fared much better: his cheekbone was prominent giving his other eye a sunken look.

"Holy shit," Dean breathed. "What happened to... your, um, ear?"

"Your brother talked it off," Eugene reached up and brushed two of his remaining fingers across the hole where his ear had been.

Dean ran his index finger over his lower lip, then scratched distractedly at the days growth of stubble along his jaw line, wanting to look away, but compelled to stare at Eugene at the same time.

"What do you suppose happens if I fall apart completely before you kill the skin walker?" Eugene asked calmly. "'Cause... I didn't exactly get that far in my research before, y'know, *dying*."

Dean felt a cold lump at the base of his stomach. Eugene may be haunting him, but Dean recognized suffering when he saw it. This half-life, this waking death, was torture—and not just to Dean.

"Eugene, I—" Dean swallowed, bracing both hands on the mattress on either side of his legs. "I'm sorry."

Eugene lifted a shoulder. "I know." He looked down. "Sam was right, man. You did the best you could."

"Sam said that?"

"Last night," Eugene looked up at him and Dean tried hard not to grimace. "He said a lot of stuff that you probably should've heard... but, I think you already know."

Dean shook his head. "Aw, Sammy... full-on chick flick moment, I bet."

"Pretty much," Eugene nodded. "But... in a little-brother, don't-make-fun-of-me-for-this kind of way."

Dean felt the corner of his mouth tick up. "Yeah," he glanced down. "Listen, Eugene, we'll get this thing, okay?"

"You promise?" Eugene lifted a teasing eyebrow.

Dean looked over at him. "Funny." Feeling suddenly tired, he leaned back against the headboard. "We'll figure something out, though. We always do."

"Y'know... listening to Sam last night, I realized something."

"That my brother needs to watch less Lifetime Television for Women?"

Eugene grinned, the effect gruesome in his ravaged face. "That, and... you guys are a lot like the Code Talkers."

Dean frowned. "You mean those guys you said were heroes?"

"Those are the ones. I mean it, man," Eugene leaned forward, his tone earnest. "The only people who knew about them were the soldiers assigned to protect them. They fought in secret and they did the impossible... and it wasn't until long after the war was over that they were given credit for saving our collective asses."

"Eh," Dean waved a dismissive hand at Eugene. "We aren't heroes, man. We just have a job to do, like everyone else."

"Uh, yeah, but unlike my job, which was making sure that the numbers in the ledger added up so a rich guy could stay that way, you guys use... silver bullets and... hell, I don't know... crosses and holy water to make sure some poor schmuck doesn't... well, doesn't end up like me."

Dean looked down at the motel carpet as Eugene spoke, tracing the pattern of colors—that strangely resembled the design from the sand painting in Manuelito's sweat lodge—with his eyes. He sighed. "Listen, Eugene..." He looked up, drawing Eugene's haunted gaze. "Seriously, *listen*."

Eugene looked at him, silent.

"We aren't heroes, okay? I mean... the guys that go in to a job every day so that their kids can... play soccer or go to college... those guys are heroes. They don't get thanked, they don't get medals, but they keep doing it." Dean clenched his jaw and looked out at the sliver of the world he could see through the crack in the curtains. "If they screw up... no one dies," he said softly.

He shook his head, looking back at Eugene. "Sam and me... and our Dad... we're just doing the only thing we know how and we do our best but... we're not heroes. And you sitting there staring at me like that just proves that our best isn't always good enough."

Eugene looked down. "I think you might want to ask Sam if he agrees with you."

Dean opened his mouth to reply but Sam stopped his retort as he returned carrying a bag of food and a container of coffee. His grin at seeing Dean still sitting on the bed lit up his face.

"How 'bout that—you *can* sit still for two minutes." Sam set the bag of food on the table, pushing Eugene's notes to the side. He turned to Dean, holding out a coffee. "You look better, man."

"I feel better," Dean stood up, his legs slightly shaky. He crossed to the table, took the coffee from Sam and breathed deep. "Oh, my *God*..." he sighed, closing his eyes with pleasure.

"That sounds... vaguely dirty," Eugene commented.

"Good?" Sam grinned as Dean pulled off the plastic lid and inhaled a mouthful of the black liquid.

"Oh, yeah," Dean nodded, then began rifling through the bag of food. He grinned when he pulled out a yellow bag of peanut M&Ms. "Nice."

"Yeah, well," Sam shrugged, grabbing container of orange juice, popping off the top, and taking a big swig. "I was going to hide them from you if I came back and you were... cleaning our guns or something."

"Believe me," Dean said around a mouthful of chocolate, digging deeper into the grocery bag. "I was gonna get up, but Eugene distracted me."

"Maybe we oughtta keep him around."

Dean looked over his shoulder at Eugene, who had stood and was holding his hands—fingers now numbering a total of four—out in front of him.

"Nah... I'm not so sure about that," Dean turned back.

"Why?" Sam asked, pulling the plastic wrapper off of a pre-made sandwich.

"Let's just say it's a good thing I can't smell him," Dean remarked.

“Hey!” Eugene protested. “Right here, man.”

“Speaking of smelling...” Sam lifted an eyebrow and plucked at his T-shirt, tucking his nose into the material and grimacing. “We’re... kinda ripe, man.”

“Dude, it’s been a helluva couple days,” Dean said, taking a large bite from the other sandwich he’d found in the bag.

They took turns showering and eating, both agreeing that hot water and food could cure just about anything. Eugene paced, noting rather loudly that he could benefit from neither, so they should just hurry the hell up already and figure out how to solve his problem before he lost a leg and was just dragging along behind them by some invisible puppet string.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Sam commented, tying his boots as Dean fished out a clean T-shirt from his duffel bag.

“Well, that’s never a good thing,” Dean commented good-naturedly.

“We need to actually trap the wolf—not just catch him in a cross-fire,” Sam said. “It’s the only way we’ll be able to slow it down long enough to wound it—or get close enough to it to decapitate it. They’ve gotta have animal traps around here, yeah?”

“That’s not gonna work,” Eugene commented, leaning against the wall in the corner of the room.

Dean turned to face him, his back to Sam, black T-shirt bunched up in his hands. “Why not? Makes sense to me.”

“Good, so maybe we can ask the front desk lady—” Sam started, then realized that Dean wasn’t looking at him.

“*Why not?* Are you serious? Didn’t you listen to a friggin’ word I said?” Eugene pushed away from the wall.

“Oh, jeeze, excuse the hell out of me if I couldn’t filter through all the crap to find the one *piece* of information that might come in handy here,” Dean snapped, pulling his T-shirt over his head and tugging the edges down over the waistband of his jeans.

“Here we go again,” Sam muttered, slouching, his forearms resting on his knees as he watched his brother argue with thin air.

“Dude, they say skin walkers can read your thoughts...” Eugene stepped up until his rotting, purplish face was inches from Dean’s. Dean squared his shoulders, refusing to back down as Eugene continued his tirade. “They *remember*, okay? You’ve already tried to trap it once... it’s not gonna fall for that again!”

“Hey, you’re the one that needs us to kill this bastard, okay?” Dean poked Eugene’s shoulder with his index finger, wincing slightly as his finger squished in further than he expected. “Why are you so determined to shoot holes in all of our plans?”

“Don’t give me that whole *I’m doing this for you* crap. You need this thing dead as much as I do,” Eugene turned away from Dean. “Unless you really want some mute... skeleton following you around everywhere.”

Dean looked over at Sam, jerking his hand in Eugene’s direction. “You believe this guy?”

Sam lifted his eyebrows, his hands falling open between his knees, his expression a question mark.

“Listen, you have got to be smarter than the creature, here, okay?” Eugene turned back to Dean. “It’s not an animal!”

“Well, what’s your brilliant idea then, Einstein?” Dean yelled at him.

“Trap the man, not the wolf!” Eugene yelled back.

Dean opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “Huh,” he said, turning to Sam. “That... actually makes sense.”

Sam darted his chin out, his shoulders back. “Gonna let me in on the plan?”

“Oh,” Dean glanced back at Eugene, then turned to Sam. “We, uh... we trap the man.”

“Not the wolf,” Sam nodded slowly. “Yeah, that... that might work.”

Eugene shook his head. "How you guys survived this long without me, I'll never know."

Bluff Free Clinic, mid-morning

"Why do you think he'll come here?" Sam asked as they sat in the Impala, across the street from the Bluff Free Clinic. "Not that I don't love stake-outs, but..."

"Well, he's Navajo, so when Sam shot him, he should have gone to his father to be healed, but... it seemed pretty obvious that Manuelito didn't approve of his son's... choice," Eugene mused from the back seat.

"Yeah," Dean huffed out a merciless laugh, his arm on the open window sill, eyes on the clinic door. "Considering he told us how to kill him."

"Dean? Hello?" Sam waved his hand at Dean's profile. "I don't speak ghoulish, remember?"

"Oh, right," Dean turned to Sam. "So... if you wound a skin walker in their animal shape, it has to turn human to heal or be treated, and since he couldn't go to the shaman to get his bullet wound looked at, this was pretty much his only choice in town."

Sam shook his head. "How do you know all this stuff?"

Dean jerked his thumb behind him where Eugene sat, resting his chin on the back of their seat. Dean grimaced.

"You better not leave... *pieces* in here, man," Dean grumbled.

"Oh, pipe down," Eugene said. "You know... it's almost too bad this guy's not a werewolf."

Dean glanced at him in the rearview mirror, his eyes curious.

Sam spoke up. "I think I could have actually felt sorry for the guy if he'd been a werewolf, you know?"

Dean's look of surprise mirrored Eugene's as their heads whipped in Sam's direction. Sam blinked back at Dean.

"What?" he asked innocently. "I'm just saying... lycanthropy seems like it's almost as evil to the person suffering as to the victims. They don't remember what they did as werewolves... but skin walkers..."

"Skin walkers remember," Eugene echoed, nodding in agreement.

"You two are weirding me out on so many different levels," Dean muttered, straightening as a tall, dark-skinned man with raven-black hair approached the door. He was holding his left arm crooked against his chest, a pained expression on his face. "Is that him?"

"How the hell should I know?" Sam asked.

"Yep," Eugene confirmed. "That's my Indian guide."

"That's him," Dean said, watching as the man waited while someone else exited the building, then moved to enter, shielding his wounded arm from the swinging door. A horn blared in the distance and the man glanced over his shoulder, his eyes flashing like quicksilver.

Sam shuddered. "Reminds me of..."

"The shape shifter," Dean finished softly.

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "Now what?"

Dean sat back. "Now... we wait."

"Oh, fun," Eugene groused. "At least pick something better to listen to. Any Oingo Boingo? Oh! Wait! I know... how about George Strait?"

Dean glared at him in the rearview mirror, reached over and turned up the volume. AC/DC's *Shoot to Thrill* filled the interior of the car.

"Swell," Sam shook his head, watching Dean stare down an empty back seat.

"What did he ask to listen to? The Fray? Bon Jovi? Barry Manilow?"

"Worse," Dean said, looking out of the window. "Country."

Sam chuckled, glanced toward the empty seat, then laughed harder. "I think I'm beginning to like this guy."

Four Corners Tours Airplane Hangar, afternoon

Following the skin walker's exit from the town of Bluff at a discrete distance in a large, black car when the desert road is empty for miles in either direction was a near impossibility. Dean's hands wrapped tighter on the wheel as each mile passed, tension building quietly inside of him as the sun began its decent across a cloudless blue sky. Sam remained quiet, his eyes pinned to the silver Honda that was far enough ahead that it was basically just a glint in the sun. Eugene, however, sat back, humming along to the music, purposely off-key.

"Does that look like a... runway? An airport maybe?" Dean asked, squinting at the images of buildings shimmering in the distance.

"A really small one, yeah," Sam nodded. "Think that's where he's headed?"

The silver glint turned left just as Sam spoke.

"Guess so," they said in unison.

Dean continued on, slowly passing the metal, pre-fabricated buildings and the weed-infested runway. Sam and Eugene craned their necks to take in the layout.

"Okay, so, his car is there," Sam said, sitting forward once more. "And it looked like there were two of those small, shed-like hangars—"

"Three," Eugene corrected.

"—spread out along the runway. Not like back in New Jersey. Much smaller. Almost... maybe a storage area for planes? I don't know."

"See any planes?" Dean asked, glancing to either side of the road for a safe place to pull off.

"Couldn't tell," Sam shook his head.

"I saw four," Eugene said.

Dean glanced at him in the mirror. "You suddenly get X-ray vision or something?"

"Just at a better angle is all," Eugene said. "Didn't have to look through your thick head."

"Nice," Dean smirked.

"What?" Sam asked, his head tipped forward.

"There were at least four planes—" Dean started.

"Cessna's," Eugene supplied.

"Cessna's—"

"Twin engine," Eugene said.

"*Alright*," Dean snapped. "There are four, twin-engine Cessna's back there."

Seeing a rock formation large enough to hide the Impala, he pulled off the side of the road and stopped in the shade of the rock. They'd traveled about three-quarters of a mile beyond the airport. Shutting off the engine, they piled out and gathered at the trunk.

"So, you think he's... what? Gonna fly somewhere? Change hunting grounds?" Sam opened the trunk.

Dean shrugged. "Maybe we scared him—I mean, you shot him..."

"What's Eugene think?" Sam asked grabbing his gun still loaded with silver bullets.

Dean looked over his shoulder. "Well?"

Eugene's eyebrows shot up so suddenly that his exposed eyeball protruded slightly.

"Ugh, careful, man," Dean scrunched up his face in an effort not to grimace. "No sudden movements, okay?"

"You... you're asking what I think?"

"Sam is," Dean said, grabbing his shotgun and checking the rounds. "See, Sammy here," Dean clapped a hand on his brother's shoulder. "He needs to know why the

bad guys do what they do. Me?" Dean spread his hand over his chest. "I just shoot 'em. Reload. Then shoot 'em again."

Eugene looked at Sam. "I think you're right, kid," he said. "I think he's changing hunting grounds. I think he turned his back on his people and didn't realize what it was like to live like a lone wolf when his pack was so close by... not until he needed help and couldn't get it."

"Uhh..." Dean blinked, then turned to Sam. "He says you're right."

"Well, then," Sam grabbed the machete and closed the trunk. "We'd better hurry. Don't think you're gonna want to fight this guy while he's flying a twin-engine Cessna."

Dean started shaking his head before Sam had finished his sentence. They took off south across the open mesa, heading for the tiny airport. The late afternoon sun hit their right sides, warming their faces. A slow, steady wind ruffled Dean's short hair and blew Sam's long bangs into his eyes. Dean glanced at Eugene. Sand was actually collecting in the open crevasses from the rotting claw marks on his face and neck.

"If he's looking... there's no way he's *not* going to see us," Dean grumbled.

"Well, let's hope he's not looking," Sam said. "He knows he hurt both of us... maybe he's banking on the sickness taking us out by now..."

"He saw Sam last night," Eugene reminded them, flicking at the particles of sand on the loose flaps of skin at his neck. "Y'know... not dead and all."

"Don't think we can count on that, Sam," Dean said, hefting the shotgun.

They reached the first hangar, pressing their backs against the corrugated steel wall. Dean ducked his head around the corner and saw that the man was actually parked at the last hangar. He ducked back and looked over at Sam.

"He's two down," Dean whispered.

"I hate airplane hangars," Sam grumbled, pulling out his gun. He looked over as Dean lifted the barrel of the shotgun and started to move around the back of the hanger. "I can't believe you brought that thing, man."

"Now is really not the time to take exception to my choice of weapons, Sam," Dean shot back in a whisper.

"I'm just sayin'—"

"Yeah, well, don't just say," Dean replied as they moved swiftly between the opening between the first and second hangar. "This thing has a kick—more power than anything else we own."

"So that guy said, anyway... At least I remembered the machete," Sam snapped as they paused along the backside of the second hanger. "Unless you were figuring on *shooting* his head off..."

Dean tilted his head at that. *Good point.*

"You know, the whole reason I—" Eugene started, his voice loud in the quiet of the afternoon. Dean jerked, startled, then grabbed the front of Eugene's ruined shirt and shoved him back against the hangar with a soft *thump*.

Sam blinked at the ridiculous looking image of Dean's hand fisting in air, his brother's angry face staring at the side of the hangar.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dean whispered fiercely.

"What's your problem?" Eugene whispered back. "You're the only one that can—"

"Are you crazy? The *wolf* saw you, remember?" Dean pushed Eugene away, resisting the temptation to wipe his hand on his jeans.

"The wolf saw him?" Sam asked.

Dean ignored his brother. "Manuelito said that his family all had... sight or whatever. Even his son."

"Oh." Eugene blinked at him. "Right. Uh, sorry."

Dean glared at him. "You just wait here."

"You know I can't do that," Eugene argued as Sam ducked around them and scooted to the end of the building, peeking around the edge.

"Dean," he said in a low whisper. "He's heading to his car."

Dean pointed his finger at Eugene. "Stay."

He slid up next to Sam, darting his head around the corner to see the rear of the silver Honda not ten feet away, the skin walker flipping his keys around his fingers.

"We can't let him get out of here," Sam whispered in Dean's ear.

"I know," Dean snapped.

The car was parked in front of one of the four planes Eugene had seen from the road. Thinking quickly, Dean stepped out from the protection of the building, bringing the shotgun up. *Take out your tires... you won't be going anywhere...*

Before Sam could say anything, Dean aimed at the rear tire and fired both barrels. The force of the gun literally blew Dean off of his feet, slamming him hard against the side of the building, his head hitting the corrugated steel with a resounding *crack*. He slid to the ground in a pile of legs, arms, and gun smoke.

"*Holy shit!*" Eugene exclaimed.

Sam had stumbled back at the sound of the blast and tore his eyes from Dean's still form to the skin walker. The blast from Dean's cannon had hit the rear tire of his car. In fact, it had obliterated the tire, part of the trunk and some of the back seat. That car was going nowhere.

The Navajo man had fallen back either in surprise or by the force of the blast and was sitting on the other side of his car, a look of shock frozen on his dark features.

"Dean!" Sam dropped to a crouch beside his unconscious brother, stabbing the machete into the ground and pulling the shotgun from Dean's loose fingers. He reached down to check his brother's pulse, exhaling when he felt the strong *thrum* of Dean's heart against his fingers.

Sam looked back over his shoulder as the skin walker clambered to his feet, his eyes on Sam and Dean, then darted into the hanger. Sam reached behind Dean and grabbed his .45 from his brother's waistband.

"I'll be back," he said to Dean's lax face, pressed against the sand. "I swear." He stood, glancing around blindly. "Eugene, keep an eye on him."

"Hey, wait—" Eugene's protest fell on deaf ears as Sam cocked both weapons and ran toward the opening that the skin walker had disappeared through.

Eugene crouched in front of Dean's inert form, reaching out and poking his shoulder with one of his tenuously attached fingers. "Hey, man, you gotta wake up... gotta go... y'know... save the damn day and all that..."

Dean began to stir.

"That's it!" Eugene bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. "You're not gonna let a little shotgun blast take you down, right?" Eugene looked over his shoulder at the hanger. "C'mon, Dean. I got a bad feeling about this..."

I friggin' hate airplane hangars...

Sam heard the *snap-bang* of a bullet as it ricocheted just above his head. Ducking low he dodged around the nose of a plane, scrambling below the wing. Another bullet sailed above his head, shattering a window.

Using the body of a Cessna for cover as best he could, Sam stuck one gun over the top of the tail and fired three quick rounds. He heard glass breaking and ducked low to see a man's legs running between the planes. Sam gave chase, firing as he ran between the planes, working to herd the skin walker into the open, while he stayed behind cover.

"My fight's not with you!"

The Navajo's voice was deep and it surprised the hell out of Sam.

"Yeah, well," Sam darted his head out quickly, checking to see where the man had stopped moving. He saw his boots near one of the propellers of the plane nearest the entrance. "You should have thought of that before you bit me!" *Freak...*

"I only wanted the writer! He knew of my kind."

Shots pinged off of the metal wheel braces near Sam's legs. *Son of a—*

"Well, you screwed that up!" Sam yelled back. "Turned him into a ghoul—he's pissed as hell, about it, too!"

Sam stuck his arm around the nose of the plane, firing two quick shots, then pulled back behind cover and checked his rounds. Two bullets left in his gun, eight in Dean's. He twisted his neck to look toward the opening of the hangar, knowing the skin walker was closer than he was now. *C'mon, Dean... I could really use your help right about now.*

"You should just let me go," the Navajo yelled.

"So you can go hunt somewhere else? Kill more people?" Sam brought both guns up and took a breath. "Don't think so."

He gripped the guns, his fingers playing lightly on the outside of the trigger guards. *See, Sammy here... he needs to know why... Me? I just shoot 'em... Dean's voice played in his head. Dammit, Dean... you and that damn gun...*

He wanted Dean *here*; his brother's swagger, bravado, his outright confidence made doing what had to be done something Sam could handle. It made their partnership work.

But Dean wasn't here. He was in a heap outside the airplane hangar. And the skin walker was going to get away. *It's now or never...*

Sam swung around the nose of the plane, bringing both guns to bear on where he last saw the skin walker. Nothing. Air. Brow creased in worry, he hurried forward, approaching the opening, his heart rate increasing, his blood thundering in his ears.

"Where the hell..." he whispered.

"Son of a BITCH!" His brother's voice shot through his head again, only this time it wasn't with the tease of a memory, but with the heat of rage and the sound of struggle. "I swear to freakin' GOD I'm gonna ki—"

Dean's voice was choked off, and Sam cleared the last of the planes, stepping into the opening. The site that met his eyes made his blood run cold. The Navajo skin walker stood, framed in the opening of the hanger, the light of the dying desert sun behind him, glinting off the silver of his gun, which was pressed tightly against Dean's temple.

His strong arm was wrapped around Dean's throat, and his brother's feet shuffled at the sandy ground, his hands pulling ineffectually at the arm crushing his windpipe. Sam took a breath, his arms dropping to his sides.

"Sam, don't you—" Dean's breath ceased, cut off by the man's muscular arm, ending whatever command he was about to hand his brother. Sam heard Dean wheeze as he fought for air.

"You really should just let me go," the skin walker repeated.

Sam shook his head helplessly. "I... can't." He swallowed, then brought his gun up with his right hand, pointing the barrel steadily at the skin walker.

The Navajo pulled the hammer back on his gun, pressing it tighter against Dean's head. "How 'bout now?"

Four Corners Tours Airplane Hangar, late afternoonish

The sound of the hammer, the cold steel of the barrel against his aching head, and the insanely strong arm working to separate his head from his shoulders combined to trigger an instinctive fight or flight reaction inside of Dean. And *flight* was simply not in his vocabulary.

Curling his fingers in an iron grip on the Navajo's arm, Dean stepped back, hard, driving his heel onto the top of the skin walker's foot, simultaneously forcing his right elbow back against the man's ribs. He succeeded in off-setting the skin walker's balance for a fraction of a second. The arm that was wrapped around his neck tightened, the muzzle of the gun bruised his temple with the pressure, pushing his face to the side.

"Ni'we'!" *Don't.* The Navajo's voice was a deep rumble against Dean's ear.

Pulling in a thin breath through his tingling lips in an attempt to feed his oxygen-deprived muscles, Dean locked eyes with Sam long enough to see the scary level of determination swimming in his little brother's blue-green gaze. Sam was *not* going to lose this fight. Dean wasn't going to let him.

"Let him go," Sam said, his voice low and dangerous, his finger hovering calmly on the outside of the trigger guard.

The barrel of the gun was aimed at the Navajo, but the skin walker's head was so close to Dean that both brothers knew if Sam pulled the trigger, Dean was as good as dead. The skin walker didn't move, his silverfish eyes flashing at Sam in the waning light of the day.

"NOW!" Sam bellowed, dropping his chin, checking the sight on his gun.

"You have killed him," the skin walker said, pulling his head back slightly as his finger curled around the trigger.

"Adóó shanántíní!" *Leave him alone!*

Eugene's voice echoed through the hanger like a portent of doom.

It was raspy, it shook with anger and rot, and it was the most beautiful sound Dean had ever heard. The skin walker jerked, startled, turning awkwardly to the side and giving Dean the leverage he needed to twist loose enough to shoot the palm of his hand up and knock the gun away from his head just as the skin walker pulled the trigger.

Dean gasped for breath, the deafening roar of the bullet leaving the chamber ringing through his ears, his lips, fingers, eyes tingling as air rushed into his tortured lungs. In disbelief he watched the bullet slice a hot furrow through Eugene's chest and bury itself in the steel wall behind him.

Eugene blinked at Dean, dropping his eyes slowly as smoke curled up from the perfectly round hole in his sternum. Dean and the skin walker froze, staring at the ghoul in shock and horror.

"Dean!" Sam's voice shook them all out of their stupor and instinct overtook Dean.

He grabbed the skin walker's wrist, violently twisting his hand and pushing him back against the interior of the hangar. The skin walker's eyes were still pinned to Eugene in shock.

"Eugene!" Dean called, blood rushing to his pounding head as he worked to hold the Navajo in place.

"Y-yeah..." Eugene's voice shook; death was charging a toll for the extra time he'd been afforded.

"You still with me?" Dean forced out as the skin walker came back to himself and struggled against Dean's restraining hands.

Eugene didn't answer for a beat. "He still got his head?"

Dean grunted as the skin walker managed to gain an advantage in the struggle. He turned Dean to the side, slamming him against the wall as they wrestled for control of the gun.

"U-unf-fortunately..." Dean managed, catching Sam out of the corner of his eyes as his brother moved to get into position for a shot. He'd dropped one gun in the dirt and was supporting the other with his left hand tucked under his right.

"Then I'm not going anywhere," Eugene called back.

Dean growled, pulling free a fist and cracking it hard across the Navajo's jaw. It was like punching a brick wall. The impact jarred Dean, reverberating back through his arm and zinging his shoulder. He stumbled back and away from the skin walker, holding his fist and blinking in astonishment.

"You're doing great!" Eugene called from the doorway. He hadn't moved since the bullet perforated him. "Keep it up, champ!"

When the skin walker reared back an arm to return the blow, Dean knew without a doubt that it would break his jaw. He took a breath and ducked beneath the swing, dropping to the ground and rolling on his side, then jumping up behind the Navajo. He shot his eyes over to Sam.

“What the hell are you waiting for?!” He bellowed, voice cracking with effort as he dodged another blow.

“A clean shot!”

“What do you call this?!” Dean bobbed away from the big man’s fists, turning him in a circle.

“You—getting in the way!” Sam yelled back. Every time he was able to draw a bead on the skin walker, Dean’s struggles brought him directly in the line of fire.

Dean glanced once at Sam, momentarily breaking his pattern of avoidance and the Navajo took advantage. His fist caught Dean on the jaw, lifting him off the ground and landing him in a heap nearly at Sam’s feet.

Sound ceased. He was wrapped in darkness. He floated in an airless vacuum.

And then suddenly life returned with a roar of light and the distinct sound of Sam’s rage-filled voice.

“...shape-shifting son of a *BITCH!*”

“Yeah, kid! Kick his **ass!**”

Eugene’s echo of Sam’s scream brought clarity back with a vengeance and Dean shook his head roughly.

He was laying on his back, staring at the dark gray corrugated roof of the hangar, the coppery taste of blood filling his mouth. Rolling to his side and spitting, he brought his dizzy eyes up, catching sight of Sam held fast in the skin walker’s grip. In the space of a heartbeat, the Navajo lifted Sam by the front of his T-shirt, rushing past him toward the side of an airplane.

“Sam—“ Dean started, working to push himself up. His voice was a strangled cry and his jaw felt like loose glass beneath skin stretched too tight.

“Ah!” Sam cried out as he was slammed, hard, against the side of the plan.

“Oohh... not good,” Eugene commented from his position at the opening of the hanger. “Gotta keep your fists up, kid.”

Dean made it to his knees, looking over at Eugene. Golden light from the setting sun shone through the hole in Eugene’s body like a spotlight, narrowing the focus of the light on Sam’s struggle with the skin walker.

As the skin walker pulled his massive fist back, intent on burying it in Sam’s dazed face, Dean shot to his feet. With a growl he launched himself at the skin walker’s back, wrapping his arms around the man’s neck and using his own muscle to lend weight to his grip as he pulled the Navajo back and away from Sam.

Sam dropped in a loose-limbed heap to the hangar floor, pressing the flat of his hands on the ground and pulling in great lungfuls of air as the earth slowed its crazy rotation. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Arrrggghhh!” Dean yelled as the skin walker worked to dislodge his unwanted passenger. He swung his arms on either side of his body, smacking Dean, hard, on his sides. The Navajo backed up swiftly toward the wall and slammed Dean between his muscular body and the steel wall. With a massive *uuufff*, air emptied from Dean’s lungs.

“Sam—“ Dean gasped, gripping his right wrist in his left and wrapping his legs around the skin walker’s side. “Sam...”

“Hey,” Eugene broke free from the safety of the hangar entrance and hurried over to Sam. “Kid, get up, c’mon,” he clapped his hands in front of Sam’s unseeing eyes. “Let’s go,” he stood, sweeping his arms toward Dean. “Sam to the rescue! HEY! C’mon, Sam. *GET THE HELL UP!*”

“Sam!” Dean called again, desperately this time as the Navajo began to press him back against the wall. “G-get up!”

Eugene glanced over at Dean. “Seriously, kid, or... your brother’s gonna be a whole lot thinner...”

Sam coughed once, his hand clumsily grabbing for one of the discarded guns on the hanger floor. Using the wheel braces of the plane for support, Sam managed to get to his feet. He blinked bleary eyes, searching the increasing darkness of the

hangar and found his brother struggling to hold on to the skin walker's neck, the man's supernatural strength slowly getting the best of Dean.

"Hey," Sam tried, his voice a thin mockery of its normal strength. He raised the gun as he approached on rubbery legs. "Hey!" He forced out again.

"Atta boy," Eugene and Dean whispered in unison.

"You should have let me go," the Navajo snapped at Sam, venom dripping from each word as he tightened his grip on Dean's arms, still clinging to his neck. "I will kill you *all*."

"All two of us, huh?" Sam swallowed, steadying the gun. "Step away from the wall."

"Or what?" The Navajo sneered. Dean groaned as the man worked to crush him into the hangar wall. "You are no match for me... and that abomination cannot touch me."

"The...wha—" Sam ticked his head to the side, trying to track the direction of the skin walker's eyes.

"HEY!" Eugene barked in affronted outrage. "That's *me* you're talking about! *You* created this abomination, you sick bastard!" Eugene stepped away from the plane and crossed the hangar, stepping between Sam's gun and the skin walker. "*You* did this!"

"S-sam... shoot him," Dean pleaded, his face scrunched up tight in a grimace of pain.

"Where?" Sam's eyes darted to find a place that wouldn't also hit his brother.

"Anywhere!" Dean gasped.

Sam aimed at the skin walker's chest, his jaw tightening. He changed his mind and shifted his aim to the man's legs, afraid the bullet would crash through the Navajo's chest and into Dean. *He's too close...* Dean's legs shifted behind the skin walker trying for leverage. *I'll hit him!* Sam started to move again when the Navajo suddenly screamed at what appeared to be... air.

"You are unnatural!" The skin walker bellowed at Eugene. Sam blinked as he leaned forward with the effort. "You do not belong here!"

"*I'm* unnatural?!" Eugene stepped forward, his decaying face inches from the Navajo's angry features. "What the hell are you then? Mama Skin Walker's bouncing baby boy?"

Sam steadied the gun as the Navajo suddenly stepped away from the wall. He heard Dean pull in a breath, watched as his brother's grip loosened, then tightened once more with a renewed effort.

"You shame your people," Eugene's voice dropped dangerously low and he took a step back. "You are nothing but a killer. You have no honor. You don't belong here anymore than I do."

"You tell 'im, Eugene," Dean gasped.

With a frustrated snarl, the skin walker reached behind him and with an inhuman display of strength, grabbed the back of Dean's T-shirt, pulling him forward and ducking as he sent Dean flying over his head with a cry of surprise, landing him in a heap on the hangar floor.

Directly on top of Sam's discarded gun.

"NOW SAM!" Eugene screamed.

As if he heard the ghoul's cue, Sam fired, his bullet catching the Navajo on the shoulder and sending him stumbling back. Dean rolled to his knees, grabbing his gun as he came up, and fired. The Navajo jerked again, Dean's bullet hitting his leg.

Sam reached for Dean's arm, helping his brother to his feet. They started to approach the wounded skin walker when a howl split the half-light of the evening. Dean froze, thrusting his hand out to stop Sam's advance. In the shadows of the hanger, the Navajo began to writhe.

Bones cracked and twisted, skin stretched, fingers extended, and teeth drew down, long and lethal.

"*Holy shit...*" the three witnesses breathed in unison.

Dean took a step back, pressing Sam with him by the flat of his hand. Man turned to wolf before their eyes. Staring in silence-inducing shock, Dean continued to move Sam away until the wolf stood before them, soot-colored coat blending with the shadows, wild eyes staring out at them with hatred.

Dean brought up his gun, firing twice. The wolf bounded away, disappearing through the open hangar door.

"What the hell?" Dean looked after it, incredulous. "Is the freakin' thing bullet-proof?!"

Sam shook his head, staring after the escaped creature. "We hit it—I know we hit it."

"We hit the man..." Dean ejected his clip, checking the load. "We still gotta catch the wolf." He slammed the clip back into the butt of his gun.

"Dude, that was—" Sam swallowed, shaking his head. He reached up slowly, blinking wide eyes, and rubbed at the lump swelling on the back of his head. "I've never seen anything like that."

"THANK YOU!" Eugene suddenly spoke up. Dean jumped, looking over at him, raising his gun before he realized what he was doing. "Now do you get why it freaked me the hell out?! Swear to God it was like... *American Werewolf in London* or something!"

Dean huffed out a shaky laugh. "You did good," he said, lowering his gun. "For an abomination."

"Really freakin' funny," Eugene grumbled. "You should be kissing my ass... since I saved yours." He stepped past Dean and headed to the hangar entrance.

"Whatever," Dean replied, following. Sam watched him go, shoving his gun in to his waistband. "I had him right where I wanted him... was just waiting for the right moment."

They headed out of the hangar and moved swiftly past the destroyed car, tracking the massive paw prints as best they could. The darkness grew thicker, broken with shimmering light from the myriad of stars climbing through the black.

"Eugene distracted it—er, him—didn't he?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," Dean replied, reluctantly. "But... we had him..." he continued half-heartedly.

"Dude, we were getting our asses handed to us," Sam said. "You should see your face."

Dean brought his hand up to his bleeding mouth. "What's wrong with my face?" He spit out more blood, touching the tender edge of his jaw.

"Nothing a little humility won't fix," Eugene grumbled, then suddenly stopped walking.

"What?" Dean asked, puzzled when Eugene simply stood beside the end of the hangar.

"Well, unless you're planning on revealing your superpowers to the world tonight and... *ripping* its head off with your bare hands..." Eugene sneered, one side of his mouth splitting back to join the gaping hole in his cheek with the motion, "you're gonna need this." He kicked at the machete still implanted in the earth where Sam had left it.

"Oh, good," Sam said, bending down and picking up the machete. "I was afraid we wouldn't be able to find it."

Dean stared at Eugene a moment more, then sighed, stuffing his .45 in the front of his waistband and bent over to pick up his shotgun. "Eugene found it," he said.

Sam glanced around, staring into the darkness to his left. "Thanks," he called.

"Sam," Dean bumped him with his elbow.

"Yeah?" Sam looked over at him. Dean pointed with the barrel of his shotgun to Sam's right. "Oh. Um... thanks, Eugene," Sam said, looking at the ghoul.

“Okay, that’s just weird,” Eugene muttered, waving his clump of a hand slowly in front of Sam’s eyes. Sam didn’t even blink. “Nothin’...”

“He says you’re welcome,” Dean said. “C’mon. It can’t have gotten far.”

They took off across the open expanse of desert, following the paw prints illuminated by the welcome starlight, their steps in tempo, their breath panting out in a symbiotic rhythm, one clutching a shotgun, then other a machete. Eugene followed, his bond with Dean making it effortless to stay close. The now-brilliant starlight shone a pale blue-white light on their faces, accenting the bruises and the blood, illuminating the determination in their eyes.

Eugene felt the sudden, eerie, warning silence of the desert only seconds before the brother’s did. He stretched out an arm to grab Dean’s arm and stop him, but before he could wrap his remaining fingers in the cloth of Dean’s T-shirt, Dean pulled up short, grabbing Sam and stopping him.

Dean’s green eyes were intent on something in the distance, his chest heaving with the effort to keep his body fueled with air. Eugene followed his eye line and saw a rock outcropping bordered by several Joshua Trees. Standing at the base of one of the trees, hackles raised in warning, lips pulled away from its deadly teeth, stood the wolf.

If Eugene had need for air, he would have gasped. If his flesh still responded to stimuli he would have felt goosebumps crawl along his arms. If the heart that the skin walker had not taken still beat, it would have been pounding at the base of his throat. *This is it...*

He looked back at the brothers and watched with fascinated awe as their bodies dropped into a crouched approach, their movements practically synchronized. Dean dropped the shotgun to the dirt, wisely deciding against the firepower this time. Without looking at Sam, he reached out his left hand and Sam slid the machete into his grip.

Sam pulled his gun from his waistband, and Eugene could tell by the set of the kid’s jaw that he knew exactly how many bullets his weapon of choice held, how many times he would need to fire to give his brother the opportunity to end the skin walker’s bloody reign of terror.

It’s all gonna be over...

Eugene felt the now-familiar pull as Dean approached the wolf and he followed, watching with admiration the near-telepathic communication that signaled Sam to approach from one direction as Dean moved in the other. Eugene kept his eyes on the man he’d been bound to, the man who had promised to save him.

Dean moved like the wolf—each movement purposeful, smooth, deadly. He gripped the machete in his left hand, held low and steady, his right poised above the butt of his gun, ready to switch weapons at a moment’s notice. His legs were slightly bent as he moved, causing his shoulders to roll in a stealthy cadence, the black of his T-shirt pulling as he curled his shoulders forward. As Eugene tracked him, he watched Dean’s bruised profile harden, his jaw a granite line, his eyes intent on his prey.

He was a hunter.

Dean’s eyes shifted once across the flat land to Sam as his brother ducked behind one of the prickly Joshua Trees, his gun ready, his eyes on Dean. Eugene wanted to breathe. He wanted to pull this moment in. He wanted to remember as the skin walker remembered. He wanted to know these two when he was no longer falling apart. When he was... whatever he would become when it was over...

The wolf howled. It wasn’t the wild, lonely cry of an animal, but a desperate keen of a creature that knew its time was at hand. A creature that wasn’t ready to go.

“Careful,” Eugene whispered, his voice barely a breath of air. “Be careful...”

Dean’s shoulders shifted. He’d heard him, Eugene realized. He’d *listened* for him. He’d actually fought for him—sure, he’d lost, but he’d fought for him. Eugene had never known anyone like these two before. He swallowed, eyes darting from Dean’s

coiled poise to Sam's steady stance. *I'm... actually gonna miss them*, he thought. *Dammit... talk about a chick-flick moment...*

With a snarl, the wolf moved from the shelter of the Joshua Tree. Toward Sam. "Sammy!" Dean called.

"I see it," Sam replied, lowering his gun, aiming.

The wolf lunged at Sam and with that leap, Dean was motion. He pulled his gun, firing on the run. The wolf slammed into Sam and Eugene watched as he rolled with the creature, yelling as he struggled. Dean echoed his brother's cry and as Sam rolled free, Dean fired again. The wolf yelped this time, moving off—slowly—into the dark.

Eugene knew it wasn't going far. He could feel it. He could *feel* time speeding up. He could feel the beating of the skin walker's heart in his own chest. He stumbled slightly with that realization, pressing what was left of his hand against the hole in his chest.

"Sam!" Dean barked, fear manifesting itself in anger as he reached for his brother's arm.

"M okay," Sam panted, grasping Dean's wrist and using his brother's strength to gain his footing. "I'm okay, Dean."

"Did it bite you?" Dean was checking his brother's arms, shoulders, neck, face with quick hands and searching eyes.

"No, I'm okay," Sam shook his head. "I swear—no new holes."

Eugene watched Dean swallow, watched a tiny bit of the tension that roped his face into a clenched, bruised knot ease slightly with the knowledge that Sam was okay. Sam was okay. He was standing. He was here.

You get it... Eugene thought, watching as Dean drew in a shaking breath. You know how good you have it... you know what it means to have each other... to have someone out there watching your back...

"Better not be," Dean grumbled, turning toward the rock outcropping. "I'm not going into that damn sweat tent again for you."

Eugene looked between Dean and the shadow that was hiding the wolf. He stepped closer, inadvertently putting himself between Dean and Sam. He felt the beat of the skin walker's heart increase. *It's watching...*

"It's watching you," Eugene whispered, surprised to find that he couldn't force more volume. Dean heard him, though. He was listening for him. Eugene watched as the green eyes shot around the dark, finding him, searching him. "It's waiting... for... something."

Dean frowned. "What? You get a tremor through the Force?"

Eugene nodded, pressing his lump of a hand to the hole in his chest once more, feeling the hard thrum of fear and pain from the skin walker as he'd never felt fear and pain before. He didn't react in sympathy to this pain; he wanted Dean to end it. *To end it all...*

Dean's frown turned from cynical to concerned when Eugene didn't snap back a quick retort. "Eugene? What's—"

The flash of silver eyes caught Dean's attention. The wolf was closer than any of them had realized. It moved in slow, halting steps. Their bullets had slowed it enough that running was no longer an option. It was trapped. Its time was over, and Dean knew that it planned to take one of them with it.

"Now, Dean," Sam said.

With a flick of his wrist, Dean dropped the .45 in the sand, raising the machete like a Louisville Slugger over his shoulder. The wolf's eyes shifted from Dean to Sam and Dean took a step forward. This had to be done *just right* or he could make their situation a whole lot worse.

The wolf's eyes shifted to Eugene and Dean saw it crouch, its shoulders shifting, rolling, preparing to launch. He heard Sam pull back the hammer of his gun and he shifted his weight to his inside leg preparing to swing.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Sam's urgent whisper shot through him and Dean lifted his eyes.

But instead of Sam's familiar green-blue eyes, he saw Eugene's jaundiced, protruding orbs, sunken in a decaying, tortured face. *This is it...* Dean realized. And oddly, his breath hitched in his tightening chest. With one swing, he would finally keep his promise.

"It's okay, man," Eugene reassured him. "I'm going to pieces anyway."

"Dean!" Sam's voice was frantic as he darted his eyes from the wolf about to pounce on one of them and his brother's seemingly frozen stance.

"You know," Eugene said softly. "It's ironic. I looked for a hero my whole life and I had to die to find one."

Dean tightened his grip on the machete. "Bye, Clint."

Eugene smiled. The wolf leapt. Dean swung.

The blade of the machete cut cleanly through the neck of the skin walker. As the wolf's head flew free of its body, Dean felt fire shoot through the cuts on his side, shaking him violently and dropping him to his knees. He cried out in surprise, grabbing instinctively for the pain, his gaze taking in the image of Sam also going to his knees, clutching his arm to his chest, and Eugene...

Eugene cried out, a sound of release and redemption, of denial and peace, of curiosity and trepidation. His arms flung wide, his head falling back, a blinding white light emanating from each torn bit of skin and missing appendage culminating in a brilliant, pearly-white beam from the hole through his chest. For a moment, Dean thought he heard the beat of a heart, quick, loud, powerful.

And then darkness took him down to the sand, wrapping him in a cloak of stillness.

Desert somewhere outside of the Four Corners Airplane Hangar, night

There was sand in his mouth. He pulled in a breath through his nose, his mouth hurting too bad at the moment to try to open it. Sand shifted with that breath, following the air into his nose. With a low groan he turned his head slowly, feeling the cool grit of sand dig into his forehead. His head felt muddy, sounds were muted, and his whole body ached. *What the hell...*

Blinking his eyes open, Dean reached up with a clumsy hand to brush the sand from his lashes and eyebrows. It was dark; starlight tickled his dazed eyes with false promises of warmth. Licking his dry lips, he felt the ache that had been dispersed evenly through his body suddenly culminate at his jaw line, causing him to move his hand swiftly from his eyes to his mouth.

Blood had dried there and the side of his face felt as if pieces of a jigsaw puzzle had replaced bone and then scattered. He gingerly touched the wounded area, swallowing, working to bring the world into focus.

Like flashes from a ViewMaster, the last few moments of consciousness returned with ferocity. *Shape shifting... stalking through the desert night... lunging for Sam... Eugene... decapitating a wolf...*

"Sam?" His voice was low, gravely, slurred with the struggle to open his lips wide enough. He cleared his throat and tried again, turning his head to the left, looking through the starlit night for his brother. "Sammy?"

The answering silence was like a shot of adrenaline. He pushed himself to rest on his elbow. Sam lay in a heap several feet away, face-down in the sand. Dean tried to roll to his knees, but the world shifted beneath him, denying him that leverage. Never one to give the world more of a break than the world gave him, Dean started to pull himself toward his brother by his arms, hitching his legs through the sand like a gecko.

He reached Sam's still body, wrapping his fingers in the sleeve of his brother's T-shirt and managed to pull himself to a sitting position. He gently rolled Sam to his back, brushing the sand from Sam's face with the tips of his fingers. This motion teased Sam's eyes open; he blinked up with confusion at Dean's face.

"Dean?" Sam's voice was an echo of Dean's rasp.

"Bout time, Princess."

"Wha—" Sam blinked, coughing sand from his mouth. He pushed himself up on trembling arms, managing to come to a slumped sitting position, his shoulder against Dean's. "What happened?"

Dean shook his head mutely and started to look around them. Not far from Sam's feet lay the naked body of the skin walker—in human form. Dean looked back over his shoulder, feeling Sam twist as he did the same. Behind them lay the skin walker's head, eyes white, mouth open, blood soaking into the sand beneath it.

"Eww," they breathed in unison.

Realization struck Dean and he looked around again, scanning the darkness behind them, on the other side of Sam, back by where he'd woken up. *Nothing... he's gone... it's over...*

"Dean? What..."

"He's gone," Dean whispered.

"Who?" Sam blinked, confused. Then realization dawned. "You mean Eugene?"

Dean nodded, feeling an odd sort of pang deep in his chest. He rubbed at his ribs distractedly.

"Your side okay?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," Dean looked over at Sam's punctured arm. "Your arm?"

"Yeah," Sam nodded watching Dean rub his chest. "Did you... are you hurt?"

Dean pulled his head back, confused by Sam's query, then looked down, realizing that he was still rubbing at the ache in his chest. "Oh," he dropped his hand into his lap. "Nah, I'm alright."

"You're gonna miss him," Sam said, wonder coloring his tone.

Dean didn't say anything for a minute. Sam waited, leaning against Dean even as he supported his brother's weight.

Dean snorted. "Miss a rotting corpse that tagged along with me everywhere... never shut up?" He dropped his eyes. "Yeah," he finally confessed. "I think I am."

Sam huffed out a soft laugh. "I guess it just goes to show..."

Dean shifted around until he was on his knees, pushing himself slowly to his feet. He held a hand out to Sam. "Goes to show what?"

Sam reached up and grasped his brother's hand, using Dean's counterbalance to haul himself to his feet. "No telling who you might care about."

Dean rolled his eyes. "That's it, I'm monitoring your daytime TV," he grumbled looking down at the body.

"Y'know... we need to stop chasing bad guys into the middle of nowhere." He looked up at Sam and watched as his brother brushed some of the sand from his jeans. "We always have to go back for supplies to burn the bodies."

Sighing, Sam nodded, twisting his arm to look at the fading bite marks. "Just once I'd like to walk away. Let someone else worry about it."

Dean dropped his eyes. *I looked for a hero all of my life...* The corner of his mouth pulled up in a tiny smile. "That's not what heroes do, Sam," he said softly, his voice directed at the sand, his hands hanging loose at his sides, his eyes years away.

"Yeah, I know." Sam said. He looked around. "Any idea where the car is?"

Dean brought his head up. "Huh," he turned in place. "Any idea where we are?"

"Oh, great," Sam grumbled, following Dean's rotation. "That's just great, Dean."

"Hey, don't put this on me," Dean looked at him. "I didn't see you grabbing your compass when we left the hangar."

Sam sighed. "You're right," he rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, so..." He looked over his shoulder. "So we just... face the rock, right? And the hangar should be behind us..."

Dean turned, following Sam's stuttered instructions. "Okay, so if the hangar is back that way... that means that the car is..."

They turned in opposite directions, Dean pointing west, Sam east.

"Over there," they said, then jerked their eyes over their shoulders toward each other.

Dean started to laugh.

"This isn't funny, Dean," Sam protested, dropping his arm and facing his brother, a scowl bisecting his brow.

Dean laughed harder, his bruised jaw relaxing with the motion, his eyes twinkling in the starlight.

"I'm serious!" Sam tried, but he was crumbling in the face of his brother's genuine mirth.

Tears started to gather in the crinkles at the corners of Dean's eyes and he bent slightly at the waist, his laughter stealing his breath. Sam chuckled, resting a hand on his hip and looking off into the distance with a shake of his head. Dean drew in a breath, worked to sober up, and then looked over at Sam.

"Go on," Sam said. "Get it out of your system."

Dean felt the laughter bubble up from some place inside of him that he thought had atrophied long ago. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hands. "S-sorry, Sam..." he tried, then bent again, leaning his hands on the tops of his knees.

He didn't even know what was so funny except that... they were lost in the middle of the Utah desert, the decapitated body of a skin walker at their feet, no way to finish the job... and he found himself listening for the voice of a dead writer to cut in with a dry jab or sarcastic observation.

Fanfriggintastic... I got used to the guy, dammit...

Finally, Dean straightened, took a breath, and grinned at Sam. "Okay," he said. "I'm good. We can go."

"Go?"

"Pick a direction," Dean said, waving his hands on either side of his body. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Uh..." Sam tilted his head, his eyes snapping in the starlight. "We could get lost, die of thirst, bake in the sun, get bit by a snake, get eaten by desert animals..."

Dean felt his mouth quirk with barely suppressed amusement once again.

"Don't you start that again," Sam said, shaking his head. "This is serious, Dean."

Dean bit the insides of his cheeks. "Serious. Right."

"Stop laughing," Sam's lips quirked.

"No laughing," Dean shook his head, his lips ticking up in a grin. "Zero laughter. Hunts are serious business..." Then the rest of his sentence was lost.

Sam shook his head and dropped down in the sand, watching as Dean grappled with his sense of humor, working to get control of himself again.

"It's hysteria, that's what it is," Sam said. "You're hysterical."

"I know," Dean wheezed. "I am..."

"No, I meant... oh, forget it." Sam shook his head, but he was smiling. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Dean laugh... genuinely, honestly, *laugh* until he was weak from it. He didn't know what brought it on, but he decided to shut up and enjoy it while it lasted.

Soon, Dean was able to take a breath, his grin still haunting the corners of his mouth, but the laughter under control. He moved slowly around the body of the skin walker and gathered their weapons, stuffing his .45 in his back waistband, Sam's gun in his front, hefting the machete in his left hand, the shotgun in his right.

Thus burdened, he turned to Sam, holding the shotgun and machete up. "Ready?" Sam closed his eyes, shaking his head. "Okay, Mad Max..."

“Don’t worry, Sammy... I got a sixth sense when it comes to finding my baby,” Dean grinned, tapping his temple with the blood-stained tip of the machete. “We’ll be okay.”

Sam pushed himself to his feet and walked over to Dean. Giving him a look of tolerant frustration, Sam took the machete from him.

“Gonna poke your eye out,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

Dean turned, heading west. Sam followed, silently. They walked in single file for about five minutes until Dean purposely slowed his stride to match Sam’s weary one. The night sounds enhanced the quiet between them.

“It’s really dark out here,” Sam finally said. The starlight seemed to diffuse light as they continued on, making the dark seem darker, taunting them with the idea of shadows.

“Scared?” Dean teased, unwilling to admit that he was scanning the desert floor with wide eyes, looking for anything that would be rather... unpleasant to step on.

“Course not,” Sam replied. “Just... pointing out the lack of... light—watch out!”

Sam grabbed Dean’s arm just before he walked directly into the side of rock formation. Dean skidded to a halt, looking up and the looming figure—oddly suffocating in its size and sudden appearance in the darkness.

“Holy shit, Sammy,” Dean breathed. “How the hell did you see that?”

“Dunno,” Sam said. “But... it looks... familiar...”

Dean’s eyebrows went up and he put one hand on the side of the rock, using it as a guide, traveling carefully around until he reached the other side. There in the starlight, its black body dulled slightly by the desert sand, sat the Impala.

“Oh, baby,” Dean practically groaned, stepping up to the side of the car, pressing himself against the door and laying his head on the roof. “I promise I’ll never leave you again.”

“I can’t believe you found her,” Sam said, shaking his head with awe.

Dean straightened, turned and grinned. “You gotta have faith, man!”

Sam stepped up to the trunk. “Right,” he said. He looked up at Dean. “Keys?”

Dean tossed him the keys and Sam opened the trunk, dropping in the machete.

Dean joined him and set the shotgun in the trunk.

“Gee, I’m so glad we brought that shotgun, Dean. I mean, it really came in handy.” Sam’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Oh, shut up,” Dean said, reaching for the lighter fluid and matches. “Took the car out of the equation, didn’t it?”

“Damn near took *you* out of the equation,” Sam shook his head, grabbing the shovel. He chuckled suddenly. “You were like one of those stunt men in a John Woo movie... *BAM!* Right off your feet...”

“Funny,” Dean grumbled, ruefully rubbing the tender spot at the back of his head from where he’d slammed against the side of the hanger. He stepped back from the trunk and closed the lid.

They turned from the car and took two steps into the darkness. Suddenly Dean stopped, staring at the matches in his hand. Sam stopped, looking over at him.

“What the hell are we doin’?” Dean asked, exasperated with himself.

He looked at the shovel in Sam’s hands. Sam looked at the lighter fluid in Dean’s. Shaking their heads, they turned back to the car, dropped the supplies on the back seat, and got into the car.

Sam rubbed at his aching head. “We aren’t thinking straight, man.”

“Just need some real sleep is all,” Dean said, rolling his neck.

He started up the car, backed away from the rock formation and headed slowly back in the direction they’d just walked from. Without thinking, he glanced into the rearview mirror at the back seat, empty except for the shovel, lighter fluid, and matches. No Eugene. Dean shook his head. Sam didn’t notice.

After a bit, the Impala’s headlights hit the Joshua Trees and Dean stopped the car. He flipped the toggle on the dashboard, turning on the spotlight fixed next to the

side view mirror. Shutting off the car, but leaving the lights on, Dean stepped out and opened the passenger door. Sam joined him, retrieving the lighter fluid, matches, and shovel once more. As they stepped back around the car, Dean paused at the spot light and began to adjust the beam to find the body of the skin walker.

The light hit the figure of a man, standing over the body.

"Jesus Christ!" Dean yelled, jumping back and bouncing off of Sam.

The man looked up at them, his face in shadow, but Dean still recognized him.

"You!"

"You have finished it," the shaman's voice was low and sad.

"How the hell did you know—" Sam's voice cracked slightly with surprise and disbelief.

"I have been watching," Manuelito said, looking back down at the headless body that had once been his son.

Dean frowned, moving forward. "You were... watching?"

"He knew I was watching," Manuelito said. His lips barely moved, but his voice seemed to fill the night.

"You watched," Sam said, stepping forward. Dean shot his eyes to the side, sensing indignation in Sam's tone. "You *watched* him?"

"I am his father."

Sam thrust his chin forward. "He almost killed us!" He pointed to his chest. "He killed Eugene—cursed him to haunt my brother!" He pointed to Dean.

Manuelito raised his head, his eyes directed at Dean. "It was the writer's destiny to be bound to you," he said softly.

"Yeah?" Dean pulled his head back. "And what if your son had killed my brother, huh?"

Manuelito lifted his shoulder. "It would have been his destiny."

"Yeah, well," Dean shook his head, tightening his sore jaw. "I'm pretty damn sick of destiny..."

Manuelito looked back down at the body.

Sam's shoulders dropped slightly. "We... we have to finish this, man."

"No," Manuelito shook his head. "I will take care of him."

"I'm not so sure..." Dean said, shifting his stance slightly so that the lighter fluid and matches were both in his left hand, his right free to grab the gun tucked in the front of his waistband. "You knew what he was doing. You didn't do a thing to stop it."

"It was not my place."

"Your *place*?" Sam bleated.

"It was not my choice. My son had to live after his own purpose."

"What, killing people?" Sam scoffed.

Manuelito looked up at Sam, the light from the Impala's spot beam catching his eyes. Sam involuntarily gasped as he saw the quicksilver flash. Dean pulled his gun at Sam's gasp, holding it out, but low.

"You?" Dean said, disbelief hardening his voice. "You're one of *them*? But... you... healed Sam..."

Manuelito looked at him. "To live a life where you see all... hear all... and not be able to truly do anything about it... it is nothing short of hell on earth."

Dean's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to the side, waiting, listening, ready to bring the gun up and do what had to be done.

"My son had to taste the power, but in the end... he couldn't contain it. The power controlled him," Manuelito finished sadly. "I healed your brother to balance that power."

Dean's eyes darted in thought. "You've... you've been there every time, haven't you?"

Manuelito nodded, looking from Dean's bruised face to Sam's angry eyes.

Without warning, he opened his mouth and let out a screech. Before Sam and Dean could do more than draw breath, Manuelito's body began to shift, suddenly

bending, twisting, snapping. His widespread arms became wings, his nose and mouth elongating and hardening, eyes widening. With another shrill cry that shook through the brothers, Manuelito assumed the form of a huge screech owl, powerful wings lifting, beating the air as he disappearing into the night.

Dean blinked, lowering his gun.

Sam took a shaky breath, looking over at him. "Do you believe that just happened?" he asked, his eyes suddenly very young.

Dean looked over at him, shook his head wordlessly. His eyes moved back to the body on the ground. Hesitantly, they started forward, intent on finishing the job. As if a product of the night, the screech owl swooped low, screaming at them. Holding their hands up in surrender, Dean and Sam backed away from the body, leaving the skin walker to his father and returned to the car.

Dean started the engine, turning off the spotlight. He looked over at Sam.

"Which way?"

Without hesitating, Sam pointed to Dean's left.

"You sure?"

"Trust me, Dean," Sam grinned, tapping his temple with his index finger. "I got a sixth sense when it comes to finding motel rooms we stole from dead guys."

Dean chuckled, rolled down his window, and headed in the direction Sam indicated. He was tired. More than tired. Weary. Exhausted. He reached over and turned up the radio. *AC/DC's Shake a Leg* echoed through the otherwise silent interior of the car.

Dean blinked heavy eyes, letting the soft night air flow like a wave over the back of his hand as it rested on the windowsill, travel up his bare arm, and fill his T-shirt sleeve. He felt it caress his bruised jaw and he'd almost closed his eyes in pleasure when Sam's voice suddenly called him back to the present.

"How bad did it get?" Sam asked.

"How bad did what get?"

"Eugene and his... uh..." Sam moved his hand up and down the side of his face.

"Oh, Dude, seriously..." Dean shook his head. "Bad."

"He was really falling apart, huh?"

Dean grimaced. "Yeah, but... y'know he kinda... rolled with it."

"Well, what choice did he have, really?"

"Good point."

"Think we should," Sam shrugged. "I don't know... call someone?"

Dean sighed. "I've been thinking about that," he said. "There's no body to bury, but... someone's gotta be out there... wondering what happened to him."

"We'll look around his room when we get back."

Dean nodded. "I never even knew his last name, man."

"Wasn't it... Eastwood?"

Dean chuckled. "No... no that was his..."

"Alias?" Sam supplied, smiling softly.

Dean nodded. "We have his wallet, though."

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "Forgot about that."

They continued on letting the music fill the silence, too weary to talk.

Kokopelli Inn, dawn

The sun had begun its slow ascent to take over the edge of the horizon as they entered the motel room. Dean closed the door, leaning against it, dropping his head back. His eyes felt weighted.

"I could sleep for a week," he sighed. "Wonder how long Eugene had this room?"

"No offense, man, but..." Sam moved over to the table and grabbed a bottle of water from the bag of food he'd purchased the morning before. "I want out of here as soon as we've caught a few hours of sleep."

Dean nodded, his hair rubbing against the door. He looked at the bed in front of him. What was that, five feet? He could make five feet. He proved that fact to himself, dropping down heavily and toed off his boots. He started to slump to the side when Sam's voice caught his attention.

"Dean." Sam held out his hand. "Guns."

"Oh, right," Dean sighed, pulling the gun from the front of his jeans and handing it to his brother. Sam tossed it in the weapons bag then held out his hand. "Oh, right," Dean said again, reaching behind him and pulling free his .45 and handing it to Sam.

He looked at Sam, his eyes burning with the desire to close and stay that way for hours. "Happy?" he said, flopping sideways on the bed, pulling his legs up and groaning as he straightened his weary body onto the bed.

Sam nodded, toeing off his own boots where he stood, leaning on the table for balance. As he straightened, his hand brushed the edge of papers Eugene had stacked on the table. Picking up the sheet on top, Sam sat on the edge of Dean's bed.

"Listen to this, man," Sam said. Dean lifted an eyebrow to indicate he was still conscious.

"...Navajo Code Talkers... ranks exceed 400 during the course of World War II... Were eventually credited with saving countless lives and hastening the end of the war... during the time they served, they were silent, invisible. They fought for people who knew nothing of their struggle, they protected people who had no knowledge of their existence... they were essential and yet unseen..."

"Yeah," Dean said softly, eyes still closed. "He told me about them. He was writing a book."

"He has a lot of notes here, Dean," Sam said. "He'd done a lot of work on this."

Dean rolled to his side, opening his eyes. "Sam," he said. "Hand me his wallet. It's there, on the table."

Sam grabbed the leather wallet and handed it to him. Dean sat up slowly, working his sore jaw.

"Your face is a mess, man," Sam said softly, watching him. "You look worse than Apollo Creed in *Rocky IV*."

Dean glanced up, his eyebrows quirked. "How much TV have you been watching lately, man?"

Sam just shrugged.

Dean looked back at the wallet. "Finch."

"Finch?"

"Eugene Finch. From Indiana." Dean looked at the picture on the driver's license of an awkward smile overshadowed by thick, black-rimmed glasses. "Nice to have met you, Eugene."

"There an address?"

"Yeah," Dean nodded.

"We could have Bobby find his family, ask the motel lady to send his things," Sam suggested. "At the very least his book, anyway."

"Immortality," Dean said softly.

"Huh?"

"It was his immortality," Dean said. "That book."

Sam was quiet for a moment. "Like Dad's journal," he said softly.

Dean brought his head up, surprised. "Yeah," he said. "That's what I thought, too."

"You think anyone will remember us, Dean?" Sam asked, his back to his brother, his shoulders curved forward.

"I don't know, man," Dean said, watching Sam. "Maybe. Maybe not. But... you know it... it doesn't mean we stop. Bobby was right, Sam. There's a war coming and... well..."

Sam turned his head, not quite looking at Dean. "We have to keep the code, huh?"

Dean felt a small smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "Something like that."

"Would still be nice if someone knew what we did once in awhile," Sam said, standing and pulling his T-shirt off, dropping it on top of his boots, then heading to the second bed.

"I don't know, Sam," Dean lay back on the bed, resting one hand on the flat of his stomach, tucking the other under his pillow. "I think sometimes that the less people know about what we do... the safer we are. There are a lot of bad guys out there..." He yawned.

"Get some sleep, man," Sam said softly.

Three days later, Four Corners Monument, noonish

"The Four Corners Monument was originally surveyed and established by the US Government Surveyors and Astronomers in 1868 with the survey of Colorado's southern boundary. Surveys followed of New Mexico's west boundary and Utah's east boundary in 1878," Sam stopped reading and looked over his shoulder.

Dean was standing on the raised platform of the monument, shifting his feet from Arizona to Utah to Colorado to New Mexico. He looked up when Sam stopped reading, the grin on his face denying the reality of his years.

"Are you even listening to me?" Sam asked.

"Sure, Sam," Dean said, scissoring his feet and spinning around slightly like an extra from *Fame*. "Surveyors and Astronomers did some looking around and something about borders... Dude, this is *awesome*... I'm standing in two states right now."

Sam shook his head. "Who are you and what have you done with my brother?"

"Hey mister," came a voice from their left. Dean turned as a dark-haired boy of about eight came up the sloping steps and headed toward him. "Watch this."

Dean's eyebrows bounced up as the boy dropped into a push-up position, one hand in Arizona, the other New Mexico, and each foot in Utah and Colorado.

"Sweet!" Dean grinned. "Let me try."

"Dean!" Sam called him away, shaking his head with a tolerant grin.

Dean jogged to the edge of the cement platform and looked out across the mesa to the mountains in the distance.

"Sam, you wanted to sight see? Well... look around, man!" Dean tossed his arm across his body, glancing back to see Sam approaching him. "I mean, we drive all over this freakin' country, hunting evil, getting our asses kicked, and I can't remember if I've ever just... *looked around*."

He turned to face another direction, shaking his head. He couldn't seem to get his eyes wide enough to take in what there was to see. It was vast, almost unimaginable. It was hard to believe that he was looking at something real.

"Look at this... the mountains... the mesas... I mean, dude, the sky goes on for freakin' ever!"

Sam chuckled, watching Dean more than the scenery. "You okay?"

Dean turned to him, his green eyes alight with something that Sam hadn't seen in a long time... not since... not since Missouri, before Haris' eyes stared out at them from their father's face. That moment had been the beginning of Dean's tailspin.

That moment, when Haris had started to slowly break his brother down, ripping him up from the inside out, Sam had watched *hope* begin to disappear. It vanished further when Haris took Dean again, torturing him, possessing him, trapping him. It left Dean completely when that poison bullet ripped through Sam.

But standing here, in the center of God's country, surrounded by nothing but openness, Sam saw *hope* shining in Dean's eyes again. It took his breath away.

"We've been through hell, Sam," Dean said. "*HELL*, y'know?"

Sam nodded silently.

"And we're still here," Dean pointed at Sam's chest. "We're still standing."

"Yeah, well," Sam cautioned. "It's not over yet, Dean."

Dean shook his head, frowning slightly. He turned from Sam and started down the steps toward the stone plaques that surrounded the raised Four Corners seal.

"It's never going to be over, Sam," Dean said. "Not really. Even if we do manage to kick Haris' ass back to Hell... there will always be something to fight... something to hunt. Maybe even worse than that yellow-eyed bastard, but..." Dean pulled up short, forcing Sam to stop or run into his back. He turned to face Sam. "Eugene had a point."

"This I gotta hear," Sam said.

"He waited his whole life to see something and only saw it after he died," Dean shook his head. "Sam, I... I just wanna *live*, man. Live our lives. Whatever that means for us. I don't want to... wait to live until whatever it is we gotta stop or gotta kill or... I don't want to wait until it's over to find out that... it's *over*."

Sam blinked, speechless. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard honesty like this pour from Dean that hadn't been brought on by fever or pain. *This was Dean. This was his brother.*

Sam smiled. He looked over his shoulder at the mountains in the distance. "This make you wonder what the Grand Canyon looks like?"

Dean's eyes lit up. "Dude! We so gotta go to the Grand Canyon!"

He stepped up next to Sam, following his brother's gaze across the scenery. Breathing deep, he closed his eyes, holding the moment, pulling it in.

Living is easy with eyes closed...

The lyrics from the old Beatles song flitted through his memory, a quiet reminder that time was an illusion, reality was filled with rough edges, and life enjoyed tossing the Winchesters around. But for this moment, he was happy. He had his brother, they were both breathing, and he planned to keep them that way.

As he opened his eyes, he realized that he could smell... food. Hotdogs, to be exact... and... *onions*. His mouth instantly watered and he turned, eyes scanning the Native American food vendors set up around the monument until they caught the hotdog stand.

Sam noticed his search and turned. He saw the hotdog stand at the same time as Dean. *Five, four, three, two...*

"Dude, I'll be right back," Dean said, moving forward. He looked over at Sam, quickly. "You want?" He asked, gesturing to the stand.

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by the ring tone on his cell phone. Holding up his hand, he fished the phone from his pocket, looking at the name of the caller.

"It's Bobby," he said.

"Good—maybe we can see if Eugene's stuff made it back to Indiana," Dean said, heading to the hotdog stand. Sam followed at a distance, the cell phone pressed to his ear.

Dean approached the food vendor, grin firmly in place. Food, freedom, his car, his brother... for Dean Winchester, for this moment, this was real. *This was his life.*

And he planned on living the hell out of it.

The End