

Episode Twelve: Valhalla
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Part One

**Abandoned Hangar,
Teterboro Airport, NJ.**

“He said you’re gonna die, Sammy.”

Sam pulled away slightly as Dean repeated the death sentence apparently imposed upon him by the mysterious sniper who had been shooting at them only moments earlier.

The cavernous hangar that had once housed Ross Air Freight but was now largely unoccupied save for a few rats and the odd pigeon up in the rafters, seemed suddenly small and oppressive, crushing Sam with its nearness, restricting his airflow as he tried to drag in shallow breaths.

“Sam?”

Dean steadied him with a hand on his shoulder as the world suddenly lurched sideways, Sam’s ears buzzing as he tried to focus on the anxious face of his big brother.

He was going to die...

After everything. After the Deal, after Haris, after making it to his birthday...

He’d been shot and he was going to die.

Just a flesh wound...

Who would want to shoot him? Who would want to poison him?

You’re going to die, Sammy...

“But it’s *not* gonna happen.”

Suddenly Dean’s voice was loud and determined in his ear, grip tightening on his shoulder as he dipped his head to look into his younger brother’s dazed eyes. “You hear me, Sammy? It’s not gonna happen. I’m not gonna let it.”

Sam’s world slowly began to right itself, Dean coming back into focus as the walls of the hangar started to recede.

“Sam? You’re not gonna die. Because I’m not gonna let you.”

Sam held Dean’s gaze for a long moment, the absolute conviction in the older brother’s eyes almost frightening in its intensity. Sam took a slow even breath, still not breaking eye contact with Dean, feeling his firm fingers still gripping his shoulder, finally beginning to feel some semblance of control seeping back into his brain.

“I believe you, Dean,” he said slowly.

Because in the end Dean was all Sam had left to believe in.

Dean managed to smile at him a little hesitantly before gritting his teeth and clapping him on the shoulder. “You’d *better* believe me. Because you know I’d never lie to you, Sam.” If Sam heard a slight tremor in his voice he didn’t acknowledge it. “Now come on. Enough of this chick flick crap we gotta –”

He was interrupted by the distant wail of police sirens, and it took a second before he realized the sound was getting closer. His brow furrowed in confusion. “What the hell?” he said. “I never got the chance to call the cops.” He began to clamber to his feet, carefully pulling Sam up with him as if he might break if he pulled too hard.

“Maybe – maybe someone heard the gunshots?” Sam hazarded, abruptly listing to the side as the world made another bid for horizontal.

“Whoa there, Sammy!” Dean caught him before he could fall, carefully avoiding his injured arm as he braced him with one shoulder before grabbing him around the waist, eyes darting around the hangar as he tried to keep his brother upright. “Maybe try a little more water with that next time...” His focus shifted to the gantry where he’d secured Ferinacci’s sniper after knocking him unconscious, swearing copiously when he noted the broken cable ties dangling from the railing and the gunman nowhere to

be seen. "Goddamn it!" he burst out. "I thought those damn things were supposed to be inescapable? Who the hell was that guy? Houdini?"

"Dean, we need to get you out of here," Sam reminded him as the sirens drew ever nearer. He inclined his head toward Haris' former host who lay dead at their feet, unseeing eyes still raised to the ceiling. "Who d'you think the cops are gonna blame if they find us, a dead dude, and no actual bad guy?"

Dean shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I'm the original usual suspect these days," he agreed, shifting slightly to better distribute the burden of Sam's weight against him. "I think it's time we got the hell outta Dodge –"

He began to push Sam in the direction of the hangar doors, but Sam resisted, body stiffening as a little strength began to return. Dean looked up at him questioningly as an incongruous grin crept across the younger brother's face.

"Sam –?" Dean glanced over to the partially-open hangar doors where blue and red lights flashed against the concrete outside and the blare of the sirens was now way too close for comfort.

"It's my birthday," Sam pointed out.

"I'll buy you a cake later, dude, let's just –"

"Haris has gone and I'm still alive."

A shadow passed across Dean's face and he swallowed hard. "Damn straight," he said, not sounding quite as confident as he would have liked – not sounding quite as confident as Sam. He squared his shoulders and raised his chin a little, the look on his face reminding Sam of when they were kids and he'd watched his big brother stare down schoolyard bullies twice his size. "And we're gonna keep it that way," he insisted, voice strengthened by the expression of absolute faith in Sam's eyes.

"Yes we are," Sam agreed wholeheartedly. "Cause I'm not ready to go just yet."

"And I'm not ready to go to jail," Dean agreed. "So maybe we oughta – y'know – get the hell outta here before we find ourselves up close and personal with half of New Jersey's Finest."

Sam jerked his head toward the rear of the hangar. "Back door," he said, grinning again. "Spotted it earlier."

Dean sighed audibly. "And you never thought to tell me?"

"You never asked."

Dean frowned at him, reaffirming his grip around Sam's waist before trying to propel him toward the rear exit. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that right?"

"Yeah I know," Sam returned, leaning into his brother as he tried to force his legs to obey commands.

"A *heavy* pain in the ass," Dean added as Sam stumbled. "Man, you so gotta lay off the Gummi Bears –"

Sam snorted. "You wouldn't have me any other way."

Sam meant it as a joke, but Dean just stopped dead and looked sideways at him, expression completely unreadable. "No I wouldn't," he admitted. "And I'm gonna get you out of this."

Sam swallowed. "I know you are," he said softly. "I know you are, Dean."

"But we're gonna do it together this time," Dean added, push-pulling Sam with him as he made for the exit. "Right?"

Sam nodded, not entirely sure whether Dean was supporting him or he was supporting Dean. "Right," he agreed. "Together. We can do this together."

Sleep EZ Motel

Dean didn't really remember the ride back to the motel. He didn't recall getting in the Impala, turning the keys and hitting the gas, or the fact that he'd run at least two red lights in his haste to get his brother to safety.

Safety.

What the hell was that, anyway? It was a word that no Winchester seemed to carry in their vocabulary, of that the elder hunter was sure. He didn't quite know why they deserved such special treatment from the powers that controlled the universe, but it seemed like if there was a short straw to be given out, the Winchester boys were right at the top of the list.

Not that Dean really believed there was any higher force at work. Not really. How could there be when the likes of Haris were always allowed to escape, always given second chances when the good guys weren't?

Second chance; now there was an irony if ever there was one.

Sammy had been given his second chance, only to have it snatched away again by Ferinacci and his freaky poison. The bullet wound he could have gotten over, but the thing now traveling through his veins, eating at his system, Dean wasn't sure there was any getting over that. Not if the sniper was telling the truth.

"Okay, Sasquatch, can you work with me here?" Dean carefully moved his brother's arm over his shoulder in an effort to pull him from the Impala. "Dude, I don't think we got all day..."

Sam flinched, finally hearing his brother's words. The trip from the airport had been a silent one. A time for him to reflect, to think about what had happened, and now it all seemed like a bad memory, far away in the distance of time and space. A bad memory he could forget.

It was his birthday.

He was alive.

He didn't really need to worry about all the details, did he? The small insignificant stuff that had happened out at the airport had gone now; he was free.

Some part of Sam knew it wasn't true, that he had bigger problems now, but it was easy to just gloss over them for the moment. Easy to just want to flop onto his bed and sleep.

"Sorry," he slurred slightly, looking into his brother's hazel eyes as he pushed up from the Chevy's bench seat, teetering a second until he steadied himself on the door. "Long day, dude."

"Yeah, too long, already," Dean admitted, taking Sam's weight as they crossed the small lot to the still wide open door to their room.

Casting a cautious glance inside, Dean checked for any obvious signs of Haris' cult buddies before easing Sam over the threshold and onto the nearest bed.

The younger hunter collapsed down onto the aging mattress and let his body crumple back until his head met the soft, inviting pillow. He could have slept right away, letting the past few hours fade into oblivion. Hell, his body wanted to, needed to. His muscles were screaming already with a strange kind of ache that told him he'd been asking too much of them recently.

Or had he?

Reflecting back, Sam couldn't really remember doing anything out of the ordinary. Getting kicked around was just a regular day at the office for a Winchester, so why did every sinew in his lanky frame suddenly burn until even his hands had begun to tremble?

"He said you're gonna die, Sammy."

Just a flesh wound...

Sam ignored the word "poison," ignored the sniper's less than veiled threat, because big brother was here, right? Dean wouldn't let anything happen to him. Dean would patch him up, hand him a few painkillers and they'd be back on the road again in under a day.

"C'mon, big guy, time to stick Humpty Dumpty back together again."

Sam opened one eye just a crack until light from the bare bulb above the bed illuminated his brother's stocky form hovering over him, first aid kit in hand. Dean's eyes had dark rims under them, and it wasn't from lack of sleep – the hunter was far too used to that particular hindrance to let it bother him.

And yet, something was bothering Dean, the light reflected in those hazel eyes and long lashes held no mirth. There was no sarcasm in his voice, no witty cracks. *Just a flesh wound...*

Sam still wanted to believe it as he tried desperately to haul his body into a sitting position, frustration mixing with an abrupt fear as Dean had to put a hand under his back and give him much needed support.

"Dean, what happened back there? Why the hell would a sniper be after my ass?" Sam wasn't really sure he cared. He just felt the need to talk, to talk until he couldn't talk anymore. It was something to focus on, something to think about other than, other than...

"He was one of Ferinacci's goons," Dean clarified as he cut away the remains of his brother's shirt sleeve to reveal the garish, purple-edged bullet wound – a wound that had spiky tendrils of discoloration around its perimeter, still seeping further and further outwards from the original puncture.

The hole Dean could clean and fix, but the toxin – well, that was way beyond his skills. He suddenly found he had to look away from the sight of its presence, leeching into Sam like some demonic time bomb.

Sam saw his brother flinch as he attempted to clean where the slug has torn through his arm. Funny, how it didn't even seem to hurt anymore. "Okay, so Haris's goon said Ferinacci put a hit on us; that, I get. But why didn't he finish us? He only winged me, and he missed you more times than I can count. I'm so not buying Ferinacci employs someone who shoots that bad. And Haris? Why would some mob boss put a hit on him?"

Sam ran his good hand through his hair, letting his mouth run in overtime mode rather than accept some of the answers his own brain was offering up. "And the thing that gets me the most?" He let his eyes lock with Dean's. "When the sniper broke free of those ties, why didn't he come after us again? He had to know we still have the Seal, but he never once tried to take it. Oh, and not to mention why did Haris just leave?"

"The Seal business, I got no clue, Sammy," Dean admitted, dropping the blood-soaked swab he'd been using into a bag. "But the whole letting us go thing..."

The hunter turned away, quickly rubbing a hand over his mouth as the truth finally sank in. The truth that Sam still wasn't accepting what had happened – the truth he was going to have to break all over again until Sam understood they had a new deadline.

The clock was still ticking, and Jack Bauer wasn't coming to save their asses.

"Sam, Ferinacci's guy let us go because he'd done enough." Dean turned back, watching his brother's reaction, watching that pale puppy dog face take the reality of it all in for the second time in just an hour. "I saw the bullets, dude. Hollow points...even had some weird satanic mumbo jumbo markings etched into the casings..."

Dean felt moisture begin to fill his eyes again like it had back at Teterboro. He was hard, dammit, but not when it came to Sammy. He fought the urge to turn away again, to not let his little brother see him crack, but Sam needed to see it, *needed* to accept it before they could make any kind of plan.

The broken, soul-shattering look that seemed to drain Dean's features of all color was enough to bring Sam crashing back down to earth. Enough to make him see that if Dean was reacting this way then maybe he needed to stop all the stupid denial and acknowledge the facts.

I'm dying, and nothing can stop it.

"Haris left because he didn't need to kill me...Ferinacci took me out of the equation for him, didn't he?" Sam put a hand on his stomach, abruptly feeling nauseous. Was it the poison taking effect already? Or the shock to his system that he had hours, maybe less, to continue drawing breath?

"Pretty much," Dean agreed, his voice low, docile, somber. "He doesn't need to finish the deal if you're gonna..." He inhaled deeply, biting his bottom lip, but refusing to finish the last part of the sentence. "If you're gone there's no one to be a potential leader to oppose the yellow-eyed bastard's plans."

Sam's hands began to shake again, this time the tremors snaking all the way up his arms as muscle tissue began to uncontrollably spasm. He tried to hide it, tried to stop the shuddering sensation that was rapidly spreading through every part of his body.

"So, I mmmake it to my birthday after all," he stuttered pensively. "Onlly for some pissed off mob boss to take me out because he lost face. Man, even Buffy has better luck than m...me on her birthdays..." He groaned, finally succumbing to the pain the rogue muscle contractions were causing as he slouched back onto his pillow.

Compared to this, the still undressed bullet wound was like a paper cut.

"Don't talk like that, Sam," Dean snapped out the rebuke before he'd even thought about how it sounded. He hated seeing Sam this way, hated watching his brother give in all over again. "Now you listen to me," he barked, not caring that his abrasive tone made Sam start. "We're gonna fix this, just like we always do."

Sam swallowed, head flopping sideways to stare at his sibling. "How, Dean? How?"

And Dean didn't know.

Ghosts he could deal with. Zombies he could kill. Demons he could exorcise, but an honest to God medical problem and he stood no chance – even if the toxin hadn't been something special.

Special.

Just what the hell did that mean? The sniper had hinted the poison in the bullets had some supernatural taint, and the markings on them supported that, didn't they?

"No human doctor can save your brother, Dean Winchester."

No human doctor. Did that mean there was something out there in the dark that could save Sam?

That was when it hit.

When Dean realized without a shadow of a doubt what they had to do. What he had to do.

"We have to find Haris again." Dean was frantic, his heartstrings torn to shreds a thousand times more viciously than when he'd first found out about the deal.

"Sammy, we have to offer that mother what he wants. He sent the cult dude after us for the Seal. We have to trade him, swap the damn ring for your life."

Sam didn't know how, didn't know where he was drawing the unexpected strength from, but he jerked spasmodically upright, anger helping fuel his fading body. "No, Dean! Making deals is what put me here."

Dean tossed the dressing he'd unwrapped onto the bottom of Sam's bed, angry that his sibling wasn't prepared to listen, wasn't prepared to try *anything*. But then, was this about what Sam wanted, or was it really about what Dean wanted?

"Dammit! He's the only thing out there with the power to save you. What am I supposed to do? Huh, Sammy? What am I supposed to do? Just go take his ass out knowing I'm destroying your only chance?"

Sam's face remained stoic, unyielding even for Dean. "If killing Haris means I have to die too, then yes." The young hunter licked his lips, his boyish features suddenly taking on the age and wisdom of Methuselah. "Besides," he added, observing his brother's pain, "the Seal is supposed to have healing properties. Once you can his ass..."

"Are you freakin' *real*?" Dean didn't let Sam finish. For some reason his brother still didn't seem to understand they had no way of knowing how fast acting the poison was. What if Sam only had minutes left?

Dean had read the reports on the poisonings in the New Jersey restaurant, and Sam had already lived longer than those poor bastards had. What if he was already running on borrowed time? *Just like I was back in Nebraska...*

Firmly grabbing his brother's shoulders, Dean fixed his eyes on Sam's. His pleading, desperate, *panicked* eyes. "Sammy, we don't know how the hell to use that damn thing, or how long we've got. To hell with killing Haris, I don't care anymore. Let the bastard go. If it meant saving your life, I'd let the fiery-assed freak escape a thousand times over..."

And Sam knew without doubt, without even a tiny reservation that Dean meant it. "No more deals." Sam closed his eyelids, listening to the silence that instantly enshrouded the room. It was Dean's turn for denial, Dean's turn to try and make the best of a no win situation when there really was only one true answer. And knowing Dean, it was going to take a lot to convince him of what he needed to do.

"You're not thinking straight." Dean ruffled a hand through his already tousled hair and began to pace. "Hell, *we're* not thinking straight. I should have taken you straight to the nearest hospital, not brought you here. What if there is a cure? What if that jerk was just screwing with us?"

"Poison tipped bullets that don't carry a fatal load? Kinda redundant, Dean."

Dean took a breath and scooped up the Impala's keys, determination filtering back into his uptight timbre. "Dammit, Sam, we have to try. Maybe you didn't get the full dose. The bullet passed through —"

"Leave me behind while you sneak off and make the deal, you mean?" The look of disappointment on Sam's face was unmistakable. If anyone had the strength to kill Haris, it had always been Dean. He was unyielding, relentless, and now he was going to shy away from the task just to save his dying brother. "No hospitals, Dean." It was a statement, not a request, and it produced yet another moment of silence from the elder Winchester. In the end, his brother's solemn mood was more than Sam could take. "I'm so not gonna die in a hospital where the nurses probably aren't even hot, anyway."

Dean scratched his head and huffed, a small, strained smile playing over his face as he remembered the all-too-familiar line he'd once tossed at his brother in a similar situation. Trust Sammy to turn his own one-liners against him. "Okay, no hospital," he mumbled unsure how much more he could promise and actually go through with.

"And no deals, Dean."

"Sam —"

"*No* deals. *Promise* me, Dean." Sam emphasized the word "promise" so heavily there was no way to misinterpret his meaning. He had to make his brother understand that this was more than just saving one life. More than just saving *his* life. "If you trade the Seal with Haris he can continue his plans, continue with a war against humanity we probably can't win. I'd rather die than risk that. If that ring can give a mortal the power to control demons, what the hell might it do for that freak?"

"Maybe it won't work for demons like Haris," Dean weakly argued.

"And maybe it will. Dean, don't you see you could be handing Haris exactly what he wants?" Sam swung his legs over the edge of the bed, feebly trying to reach for the dressing Dean had tossed in temper.

Seeing his brother's weakness, his pain was more than Dean could take, and he hurried forward, snatching up the dressing to finish off the job of bandaging Sam's arm. If only he could bandage everything so easily. "No doctors," he acquiesced. "And no deals."

"Promise me, Dean?"

"I promise."

Sam leaned forward, carefully peering behind his brother's back with one brow raised.

"I got something pinned on my ass here?" Dean frowned, sticking the last of the dressing in place and looking curiously over his shoulder.

“Just checking,” Sam smiled, wincing as he flexed his arm and felt a tight twinge in his muscles. “Thought you might have had your fingers crossed like the time you swore you never stole my bike.”

“Dude, you were freakin’ five! And besides, I needed wheels!”

“And now I need yours.” Sam’s face wrinkled as he tried to stifle another fit of tremors, his whole body shuddering with the effort. “We need to find Haris, Dean. Not to make any deals, but to use the Seal to finish him.” Sam drew in a ragged breath and fumbled with two tiny pictures he’d tugged from his wallet. One of his mother, creased and tattered with the passage of time, and one of Jess. “Consider it my last wish.”

“Dude, don’t talk like that.” Dean began to chide his brother, but when he saw the look on Sam’s face he cut short the rebuke. Sam wasn’t ready to die, but he wasn’t ready to carry on living either.

They’d been through so much together, seen so much together, and now, this final hunt was maybe all they had left. Just a few short hours to kill the thing that had ruined their family. Just a few hours to find Haris and make him pay for everything he’d done.

Pay for Sammy. Pay for Mom and Jess.

And the bastard will pay. If I have to die right along with Sam to make it happen.

Because really, Dean didn’t care anymore, not without Sam.

Dean picked up Sam’s laptop and stuffed it into his brother’s holdall. Swinging it over one shoulder, he held out a rough palm to Sam, offering the ailing hunter a hand up. “Okay, Samantha, let’s go kill some demon ass.” He smiled, keeping up the façade, the cheery front, even though his insides felt like Haris had torn into him, like Missouri all over again.

For Sam, Dean would be strong and he would try to keep his promise. But when he finally faced off against the demon, for once in his very tormented life, he really wasn’t sure what he would do.

* * * *

“You remember my tenth birthday?” Sam asked suddenly, eyes never straying from the laptop even as Dean took a corner a little faster than was strictly necessary and Sam was shoved against the Impala’s passenger door with a thud.

Dean frowned at the non-sequitur, scowling up at a traffic signal that had the temerity to turn red on him, causing him to hit the brake a little too hard. He glanced sideways at Sam, who was still staring fixedly at the laptop, the sickly glow from the screen causing his face to look even paler than it actually was, a thin sheen of sweat coating his forehead.

“You might have to narrow that down for me,” Dean replied, trying to ignore the way his guts twisted at the sight of his brother’s pasty complexion.

“We spent the whole day in some stinking Louisiana swamp while Dad hunted an ‘evil spirit’ that turned out to be marsh gas. Remember?”

Dean smiled slightly at the memory. “You tripped and went head first into the ooze, right?”

Sam nodded, chuckling weakly. “You tried to make me feel better – swore it’d stop me getting pimples later – and then Dad yelled at you for letting me get so messed up.”

“Hey, I did you a favor. You had absolutely *no* dress sense back then...” The sudden image of Sam’s hideous purple t-shirt with the whippet – or whatever the hell that thing was – emblazoned across the front popped into Dean’s head and he snorted. “Some things never change.”

Sam made to swat him with an annoyed hand, but the half-hearted movement only revealed how weak he was becoming. He frowned and turned back to the laptop as Dean gritted his teeth and pretended he’d not noticed. “Anyway,” Sam said

awkwardly. "I always thought that would be my all-time worst birthday ever." He glanced up at the light as it changed to green. "Guess I was wrong."

Dean turned back toward the road, jaw clenched so hard it hurt. "We'll find Haris," he insisted, stomping on the gas and causing the Impala to roar away from the lights with a squeal of tires. "And when we do, we'll figure out a way to force him to heal you. Before we can his ass. We will. You just – you just need to get into Geek Research Mode and figure out what the hell we're supposed to do with the Seal when we *do* find that yellow-eyed bastard."

"Dean," Sam said quietly, still staring listlessly at the laptop. "We've been looking for – for *hours*–"

"*One* hour," Dean corrected him.

Sam frowned, glancing quickly at his brother. "One hour? That's it? Feels like we've been driving around for *days*!"

"Well, finding a demon when you have no clue what he even looks like ain't exactly child's play," Dean pointed out defensively.

As if to reinforce the point, the EMF meter lying between them on the bench seat remained conspicuously silent.

Sam shook his head tiredly. "It's like trying to catch vapor," he said. "Literally. Haris could be anyone. Anything. He might not even have taken corporeal form again. Dean, we're never gonna find him. Not before –"

"Sam." Dean's tone held an implicit warning: *Don't mess with me right now because I'm not talking about this.*

Sam took a breath, unable to pretend to be looking at the laptop anymore.

"We'll find him," Dean said finally. "We have to. Look, he's always hanging out with those damn cult weirdos. We find them, we find him."

"And how do we find *them*?" Sam demanded. "Dean, you've got to start being realistic –"

"*Sam.*" Dean was clearly losing his patience, fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly it was a wonder his knuckles didn't break. "Look. You worry about finding out what the hell we're supposed to do with the Seal. Let me worry about finding Haris."

"We're not dealing with him," Sam insisted stubbornly.

"Your big brain figures out what to do with the Seal, we won't have to," Dean replied. "He'll have to heal you. He won't have any choice."

"That's always supposing he *can* heal me."

"Sam, would you stop being such a Negative Nancy for one second?" Dean snapped, turning sideways to glare at his brother, who returned the look with a surprised glare of his own. Before suddenly bursting into a snigger.

"*Negative Nancy?*" he echoed.

Dean shrugged. "Nelly. Norah. Nadine. Take your pick."

"Better than Frances I guess."

"I'm in a benevolent mood," Dean returned. "It's your birthday after all."

"Gee thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now. The Seal. Look, even if Haris can't fix you up, he'll know some supernatural freak who can, right? He's a *demon* for crying out loud! What kind of pansy-ass demon can't rustle up a little healing mojo?"

Sam sighed loudly. "Yeah, I guess," he agreed at length, retrieving his cell phone from where Dean had left it on the dash after Sam had abandoned it in the motel room.

Dean cast a quick glance in his brother's direction. "Who you calling?" he asked uncertainly.

Sam sighed, hitting the speed dial and only half-listening to the phone ringing in his ear. "Well I'm not getting anywhere on the 'net so I figure maybe we need some human help."

"Bobby?"

Sam nodded. "For starters."

"And then?"

Sam purposely didn't look at him. "Dad," he said. "If Bobby can't help us, then maybe Dad..." He trailed off and Dean's shoulders slumped slightly.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Maybe."

An awkward silence filled the space between them as Sam waited for Bobby to answer. "Come on, Bobby, you're not telling me you're tucked up in bed at one in the morning!" He frowned as Bobby's voicemail kicked in, ending the call quickly without leaving a message.

His finger hovered over the button that would speed dial his father, hesitating for just a second before punching the digit. Three rings and John Winchester's gravelly voice cut in, "*This is John Winchester. If it's urgent, leave a message...*"

"Dammit!" Sam tossed the phone over his shoulder and onto the back seat in impotent frustration, hands balling into fists at his sides. "How come he's *never* there when – when we – when I –" He broke off abruptly, raking a hand through his hair as he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"He called," Dean said quietly. "After you left. I checked your messages."

Sam didn't reply, just nodded tightly.

"Sam, if he knew – if he knew what you're... He'd be here. I know he would."

Sam turned angry eyes on his brother. "Like he came when you got electrocuted?" he snapped. "Like he came when you were *dying*?"

Dean whipped his head back toward the road, gritting his teeth to avoid saying something he'd regret. "That was different," he said quietly.

"How? How was that different, Dean? You were dying – just like *I'm* dying –"

"You're *not* dying, dammit! I told you! I won't let you –"

"So you have some dominion over life and death thing going I don't know about?" Sam's eyes flashed angrily. "Because if you don't then as far as I can see I'm *going to die*, Dean!"

Dean slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "Goddammit Sammy will you *stop* with the dying crap? For the last time, you are *not* gonna die! If I have to –"

"What? Make some kind of deal with Haris? Like I did? You'd do that? After all the crap you gave *me* about doing that?"

"Sam." Sighing, Dean yanked the car over onto the side of the road, shifting into park before turning to face his brother. "Sammy, listen," he began slowly. "Panicking isn't going to help us here." He reached out a tentative hand and touched his brother's arm. "I know this looks bad, man –"

"Yeah, it looks bad," Sam agreed, voice calmer, a little more subdued, staring darkly through the front windshield.

"But we still got time," Dean insisted. "Look, we didn't even think you'd be around a minute into your birthday, let alone an hour!" he said.

Sam turned to face him. "So I'm living on borrowed time," he pointed out, eerily echoing Dean's earlier thought.

Dean squeezed his arm. "Maybe," he said. "But at least you're *living*. That means we've still got a chance. There's still hope. We can't give up. *You* can't give up. Not now. Not yet."

Sam took a slow breath, eyes drifting slowly back to the laptop. "Yeah," he muttered, trying to concentrate on that, trying to concentrate on breathing. "Yeah, okay."

Dean nodded. "So we just have to figure out what we have, what we know, and what we can do with what we've got. Most importantly, we've got the Seal. Haris wants it; Ferinacci wants it. But we've got it. So what do we know about it?"

Sam took another breath. "Well," he began carefully, voice shifting almost imperceptibly into Research Mode. "We know that Solomon, and others he allowed to wear the Seal, used it to command demons, right? Trapping them, banishing them,

enslaving them – generally forcing them to yield to his will. Hell, he even got them to build a temple for him.”

“Cool,” Dean commented, nodding appreciatively. “Next time the Impala needs detailing I’ll make sure to summon old Yellow Eyes for the job. What else?”

“Well,” Sam continued, eyes flicking to the screen of the laptop, “Solomon was supposed to have ordered a whole legion of demons into a copper bottle which he then sealed with lead and stamped with an impression of the ring. The bottle was then thrown into a lake to ensure that the demons, or djinn, couldn’t escape. That’s where the whole ‘genie in a bottle’ myth’s supposed to have come from.”

“A whole legion, huh?” Dean sounded impressed.

“Well that kinda depends on which version of the story you believe.” Sam inclined his head a little apologetically. “Other sources only mention a single djinn.”

“Well,” Dean said, “I only need to control one demon and I only got one wish, so that all sounds pretty good to me. Apart from the whole ‘copper bottle’ thing. Don’t happen to have one o’ those lying around in the trunk.”

“Another myth has Solomon just throwing the Seal at a demon in order to brand it and render it controllable.”

Dean blinked disbelievingly. “So we just *throw* the thing at Haris? Why didn’t I think of *that* before?” He shook his head. “Somehow, Sammy, I don’t think that’s gonna work. Even though I do still have a pretty good pitching arm.” He sighed, scrubbing a hand across his face before frowning as something else occurred to him. “And besides, if the bastard’s still smokin’ how the hell would the Seal brand *vapor*?”

Sam shrugged. “Hey, don’t shoot the researcher,” he protested. “It’s not like I invented the damn myth!”

Dean snorted wryly. “Yeah, well, fascinating as all of this stuff is, we’re still left with the slight problem of *finding* the sonofabitch before we can do anything to him. Which would be a helluva lot easier if you’d just let me *summon* the sucker –”

“No. No summoning,” Sam protested immediately. “Dean, you promised me. It’s too dangerous. We gotta figure out exactly how to use the Seal to control Haris before we try to take him on. That’s the only way to go. We’re *not* gonna make a deal with him. We’re not. Not even if it means...” He didn’t finish the sentence because he knew the effect the words he hadn’t spoken would have on his brother. “If we want him to heal me, then we gotta use the Seal against him. It’s the only way.”

Dean nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, okay Sammy. Your way or the highway, I get it. But don’t you think –”

The sentence remained unfinished as Sam suddenly let out a heart-stopping scream before reaching up to grab his head with both hands. “No! Dean! No!”

Dean froze for a split second as Sam started to thrash around in his seat, the laptop sliding sideways onto the floor as his whole body stiffened and his long legs began kicking out at the dashboard.

“Sam!”

Dean tried to grab Sam’s flailing arms to at least stop him hurting himself, but Sam swatted him away as if he wasn’t even there, eyes scrunched tightly shut, as if he was watching a movie playing out on the insides of his eyelids.

A movie he really didn’t want to see.

“Dean! No!”

“Sam, I’m right here!” Dean tried to reassure him, making another futile attempt at stilling Sam’s jerkily desperate movements. “I’m right here, man!”

“You have to – *no!* It’s not – it’s gonna – it’s gonna *sink!* You gotta – you gotta get out! Dean! You gotta get out!”

Dean glanced around himself in something approaching panic, little voice in his head screaming at him to get Sam some help *now*. But the nighttime streets were deserted, the only moving thing a black cat sniffing around a couple of overflowing trash cans on someone’s front lawn.

If this was a vision, then it wasn't like any vision Dean had seen Sam get before, the violence of his movements and his seeming insensibility to the real world around him causing Dean to wonder whether maybe this was something else; something to do with the poison invading Sam's system.

He needed to get Sam to a hospital.

Right now.

"Dean?"

Dean hesitated at the sound of Sam's voice, the tone suddenly less frantic and more confused than anything else. He paused, fingers still reaching for the Impala's ignition, as Sam's breathing began to even out, unfocused eyes blinking open in disorientation.

"Sam?" Withdrawing his fingers from the Impala's key, Dean placed a tentative hand on his brother's shoulder, squeezing slightly as he tried to gauge his condition. "You with me, man?"

Sam blinked, eyes struggling to fix on anything as they failed to adjust to the murky darkness surrounding them. "Mmm..." he managed uncertainly, jaw clamped shut as his fingers tensely gripped the edge of the bench seat.

"Vision?" Dean asked, voice breaking slightly as he tried to fight back the fear welling deep inside him. "Or – or something else?"

Sam shook his head slightly, narrowing his eyes as he managed to slide them over in Dean's direction. "Not like – anything –" he whispered breathlessly. "Not like anything I've ever..." He trailed off, and Dean suddenly realized his brother was trembling.

"Hey," he muttered, voice lowered soothingly. "Its okay, kiddo –"

"No." Sam was suddenly looking at him. *Really* looking at him. "It's *not* okay, Dean." His eyes had widened, pupils blacking out his irises. "It's not okay." He raised both palms to his face, pressing the heels against his eye sockets. "It's not okay..."

"What did you see?" Dean asked hesitantly, not even sure he wanted to know the answer.

Sam gingerly removed one hand from his eye before cautiously removing the other. "Not so much 'see' as 'feel,'" he managed with a deep sigh. "I've never had a vision seem so – so *real* before. Like – like I was actually there. Like I could have reached out and touched you –"

"Me?" Dean interrupted. "You had a vision about me? A – a *death* vision?"

Sam blinked at him. "The poison," he stalled. "Maybe the poison's making me – hallucinate – or – or – something..."

"Sam."

Sam raised his eyes reluctantly to his brother. "Yes, I had a vision about you."

"And?" When Sam didn't answer, Dean added, "Sam?" impatiently.

"There – there was a lot of water," Sam managed at length.

"Doesn't sound so bad."

"And a ship –"

"Better than a plane –"

"And it was sinking."

"Oh."

"And you were on the ship, Dean."

Dean swallowed. "I was, huh?"

"The ship that was sinking."

"Yeah, I got that part."

Sam fixed his brother with a shaky gaze, drawing in a ragged breath before managing, "I saw you drown, Dean."

"Okay," Dean said at length, taking in a breath as he returned Sam's frantic gaze. "So we're sitting in a car in the middle of New Jersey in the middle of the night." He cast a wary glance around the deserted Newark street before re-establishing eye contact with his brother. "I don't see any ships, or oceans, or lakes or anything bigger

than a puddle nearby, and I'm not planning on going on any great sea voyages any time soon. So how could you have seen me drown, Sam?"

Sam's pallid face was drawn into a tight mask of something midway between pain and concentration as he bent stubbornly over the laptop balanced precariously across his trembling knees, the eerie glow bathing his face in a sickly green.

Dean wasn't even sure where they were headed anymore as he took a corner into a dimly-lit residential street, glancing in the rearview absently, more out of a desire not to look at Sam than any other reason, squinting slightly as bright headlights reflected briefly in his eyes.

The EMF meter nestled between them beeped feebly and Sam seized on the sound with something that Dean could only equate with desperation.

"There, you see?" the younger brother burst out, voice wobbling slightly as his teeth tried to clench together of their own accord. "We – we m-must be heading the right way –"

"Sam," Dean interrupted, sighing. "We need to get you to a hospital –"

"No human doctor can help me," Sam choked out, eyes never straying from the laptop. "That's what Ferinacci's sniper said. So our best hope is to find Haris. Use the Seal. Compel him to undo this somehow... Stop you from drowning..."

"Sam, how the hell am I gonna drown on dry land?" Dean reiterated his earlier question. "Your vision's screwed up, man. Maybe the poison..."

"No," Sam objected. "N-not the poison. Gotta save you. M-make sure you don't – can't let you –" His head fell sideways against the passenger door, eyes drifting shut as Dean made a grab for his sleeve.

"Sam?" Dean pulled his brother upright, trying not to jar his injured arm at the same time as he tried not to plow the Impala into any of the trees lining the road. "Hey – Sam? You hear me?"

Sam blinked his eyes open again, a confused expression on his sweat-soaked face. "Gotta find the ship," he said, squinting at the laptop as the screen swam in and out of focus. "Gotta find the ship from my vision. Gotta save you –"

"Sam," Dean's voice held more than a hint of desperation. "We need to get you to a doctor. Maybe the sniper lied! Maybe there is a cure! Maybe Ferinacci just wanted to mess with our heads!"

"No, Dean. You saw – Haris' host. He was –"

"He was shot in the *chest*, Sam! He wouldn't have survived even if he'd been shot with ordinary ammo!" Dean turned frantic eyes on his brother, barely aware of the road in front of him and the Impala's proximity to a line of parked cars. "*Please* let me take you to a hospital. I'm *begging* you, Sammy..."

"No, Dean," Sam ground out stubbornly. "No hospital. Have to save you –"

"Okay," Dean conceded. "You can save me. But you need to let *me* save *you* first!"

Sam didn't answer, falling against the passenger door once more as Dean realized he was at an intersection almost too late to do anything about it, drifting into the oncoming lane as he took the corner belatedly.

Headlights in the rearview caused him to look up as he righted the Impala's trajectory, the same black sedan he'd noticed a few blocks back having taken the turn with them.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, glancing about him nervously, noting the vehicle behind them was the only other thing moving in any direction.

"What?" Sam slurred weakly. "Dean's wrong?"

Dean's attention flittered to the rearview again. "I think we got us a tail," he explained. "Black sedan been behind us for a few blocks now. Nothin' else on the road. Seems kind of a big coincidence he should be headed in exactly the same direction as we are – especially as we've been pretty much driving in circles for the past half hour."

Sam blinked, head slumping back against the bench seat. "Ferinacci?" he hazarded, voice becoming weaker by the second.

"Well, Winchester luck being what it is," Dean commented, "it's a fair bet it ain't Haris. Just 'cause we *want* to see that fiery asshole."

Checking the rearview one more time, Dean began to slow the Impala, the sedan behind matching their speed until Dean pulled in to the curb and brought the Chevy to a dead stop. The driver of the car behind seemed to hesitate before overtaking them at a crawl, and Dean drew in a breath when he momentarily locked eyes with Stefan, Ferinacci's goon who had run off when Bruno took the nosedive into his own acid bath.

Dean held his breath, mentally counting to ten as the big sedan sailed past them, crossing the next intersection before finally turning off down the next street.

Slamming the Impala into gear, Dean wasted no time in swinging the big Chevy around in a U-turn, accelerating back the way they'd just come and turning off down another darkened side street.

Dodging down street after street until he was satisfied there were no signs of trailing headlights in the rearview, Dean blew out a nervously held breath before glancing sideways at his slumped over brother.

"W-we lost them?" Sam asked, barely able to keep the computer from sliding off his lap.

Dean frowned slightly at him. "Yeah, I think so," he managed, fingers tightening on the wheel. "I recognized the driver – one of Ferinacci's henchman – the one who freaked out when his boss got sizzled."

"W-why didn't they stop us?" Sam asked, even half out of his head still able to spot the illogicality of their pursuers' actions. "If – if they're after the Seal – why j-just follow us? Why not jump us and take it from us by – by force? They must know I'm – I'm sick. That there's just the two of us... We're easy targets."

Dean shook his head. "Beats me, man," he said. "Maybe they wanna see what we're planning on doing with the thing. Bet we're really confusing them with the brilliance of our whole Drive-Around-Aimlessly-Looking-For-A-Demon-We're-Never-Going-To-Find plan." He brought his hand down hard against the steering wheel, causing Sam to startle and the laptop to once again slide off his knees. "Sam, we're wasting time!" Dean burst out angrily. "Time you don't have! For God's sake, either let me get you to a hospital or let me summon Haris and make a deal with him – the Seal in exchange for a cure. We can worry about everything else once you're fixed up. That's all that matters now."

"No, that's *not* all that matters –" Sam began to protest, but suddenly bit off the rest of his argument as his eyes rolled back in his head and he began to convulse violently, clawing at his throat as he struggled for every breath he managed to drag down into his lungs.

"Sam!" Dean cried out, frantically swerving the car into the curb. "Sammy!"

Sam didn't seem to hear him, back arching up off the seat as he kicked at the dashboard, eyes squeezed shut and lips tinged with blue.

Dean twisted in his seat, gripping Sam's shoulders as he tried to hold him down, his own face a mask of panic and terror to equal his brother's. "Just breathe, Sam," he said, unsure whether the kid even knew he was there. "Sam? Is it – is it a vision? Or – or –?" Dean couldn't even voice the other possibility. What if it was the poison? What if this was it? What if Sam's time was finally up?

No. That wasn't an option.

"Sam!"

Dean was on the verge of considering CPR as Sam's lips began to turn a deeper shade of blue, but just as he was about to begin, his brother drew in a huge breath before releasing a terrified cry.

"Dean!" he screamed. "Dean, help me! Help me!"

“Sam, I’m right here!” Dean put a shaky hand against Sam’s clammy forehead, willing him to open his eyes, to see that he was only an arm’s length away. But it was as if Sam was totally insensible of his presence as he continued to thrash against the seat, screaming fragments of sentences that made little sense to Dean, but were obviously of vital importance to Sam.

“No, Dean – get away! Get away from him! Get off the ship – it’s sinking! Can’t you see it’s sinking? Dean, get off the ship!”

Dean hesitated, chewing on his lip as he watched Sam’s suffering through helpless eyes, completely at a loss how to fix this, how to fix Sam.

If this was a vision, then it was killing him.

If it was the poison, then that was killing him just as certainly.

Dean took a breath, steeling himself as he came to a decision.

He might not be able to do much to help with Sam’s visions, but whether the sniper’s pronouncement of hopeless doom was true or not, he might be able to get Sam some help with the poison.

Shifting the Impala into gear, he stamped on the accelerator, pointing the big car in the direction of the nearest hospital, face set into a grim mask of determination as his little brother screamed himself hoarse by his side.

A human doctor might not be able to help Sam, but right now Dean was desperate enough to try anything.

And if that didn’t work?

Then there was only one other alternative.

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

St. James had been serving the local New Jersey community since the turn of the century, but despite its age, the hospital was a hive of modern technology and activity. Somehow, as he sat perched on a chair in the waiting room, that did little to relieve Dean’s hopelessness.

Waiting was the hardest part.

All the hunter could think of, all he could see was the frail form of his brother struggling to suck down air until his lips were tinged a deep azure. Sam had remained that way on the journey to the hospital, struggling for every breath, his less than lucid ramblings striking fear into his elder brother until Dean’s hands shook as he gripped the Impala’s wheel.

Even after the sniper had given his deadly message, Dean hadn’t really believed it. He knew it was true, but until Sam began to actually exhibit signs of the toxin he had allowed himself the lie that Sammy was going to be fine.

Sammy was always fine.

Dean began to twirl the thick silver ring on his finger round and round, wishing it was the Seal. Wishing he knew how to use it to save his brother. But the real heirloom remained in his pocket, concealed, useless.

May as well be some friggin’ trinket out of a box of cereal...

Dean remembered the countless arguments he and Sam had gotten into as kids over breakfast and who was going to get the last of the *Lucky Charms*. Right now, he’d give Sammy every damn box in the universe if it would make him whole again.

He’s gonna die, because of me. Because I let my sorry ass get possessed.

Because I can’t figure out how to use the damn Seal...

“Dean Wilkinson?”

At first Dean ignored the voice, forgetting just what name he’d signed Sam in with. It was easy to forget the trivial things when your only brother might be dead already.

“Mr. Wilkinson?”

Dean glanced up, taking in the round features and blonde hair of the doctor addressing him. There was no comforting smile. No reassuring nod to let him know that Sammy was going to be okay.

Was this how Sam had been greeted at the hospital in Wisconsin all those months ago?

I didn't die then. Sam's not gotta die now!

Except somehow, Dean knew the amulet that hung around his neck had played a part in *his* salvation. There was no magic trinket for Sam. No last reprieve from an ancient bauble, or even a rogue Reaper.

I could give Sam the amulet.

It would be easy to slip the thick cord from his neck and place it on Sam's. Dean didn't care what the consequences might be, even though he knew being parted from the ornate brass talisman would eventually be fatal. The problem was, he'd learned enough about the amulet to know that it was bound to only one Winchester – the guardian – and to that end, it only protected one Winchester.

I could try...

The blonde cleared her throat, realizing Dean was the one she needed to speak with, even if his thoughts were entirely elsewhere. "If you'd like to follow me to somewhere more private--"

Dean's head bobbed in agreement and he tugged his weary body from the small plastic chair he'd been calling home. It had been a long night already, and he didn't want to think where it might end. He didn't speak, not yet, for fear what answers his questions might bring.

The doctor was equally silent. Maybe she sensed his pain, maybe she was used to telling people bad news every day, every night until she was numb to the mental trauma it brought.

The pure white of her coat swaying as she sauntered into a small side room reminded Dean of purity, an untainted thing in a world of darkness – just like Sammy – and it was more than he could take.

"Doc, I need to see my brother." The sure, cocky voice that usually flowed from Dean's mouth was replaced by an edgy, almost fearful plea. He felt a lump rise in his throat and he swallowed, trying to drive his panic back down into the pit of his stomach – where it had been residing for the last few hours since the hanger confrontation.

"Sam's resting." The doctor pulled out a small padded seat, but instead of sitting she offered it to Dean, suggesting he might need to be seated for what was to come next.

The hunter shook his head. "How bad?" he dared to ask, his mind in denial despite the sniper's jibes.

"We've analyzed your brother's blood work and the contents of the unspent bullet you provided us, and we seem to be dealing with a strychnine-based poison."

"You can fix him, right?" Dean began to pace, running his fingers through his hair as if he could will there to be a cure. "I mean, I've heard of that stuff. It's pretty old. Modern medicine can deal with it, right, Doc?"

The doctor let her hands glide into her coat pockets, but she didn't speak until Dean stopped wearing a hole in the carpet and actually looked her straight in the face. It was hard to give bad news to someone when you knew they weren't going to accept it. In her profession, it was an everyday occurrence, but that didn't mean it got any easier. She needed to look Dean in the eye to make sure he took in what she had to say.

"Ordinarily there are treatments we can try, depending on how the poison got into the patient's system, how long it's been in their body without any kind of intervention – basically depending on the variables in each separate case. But there really is no antidote, no cure."

Dean let the explanation sink in and his legs abruptly didn't want to hold him. He'd been driving around with Sam, wasting time when he could have been getting his brother treatment.

My fault. AGAIN!

"But you can give him the pills, the treatment, whatever, now, right?" Dean stammered, hearing the hesitation in his words and not caring. It didn't matter that he sounded like a damn wuss.

Nothing mattered except his brother.

"We're doing everything we can, but I'm afraid in your brother's case it's not that simple. Strychnine can kill in just a few hours if ingested. Even in Sam's case where the poison entered his bloodstream via a bullet merely passing through, I'd have given him no more than twenty-four hours without medical intervention."

Dean frowned, his brow creasing so much he had ridges a professional climber couldn't even wish for. "Lady, I'm sensing one huge 'but' here?"

The doctor sighed and checked the results on the chart she was carrying just to convince her that this was no mistake. "The tests we ran show the toxin isn't your common or garden variety of the poison. It's been altered somehow, other chemicals added to the mix – primarily sulfur – although there are other strange organic elements too."

"Sulfur? You gotta be kidding me." It was one thing for his brother to have taken a tainted slug, but just what the hell did it mean when said bullet tip was filled with a heady concoction of hell's finest brimstone?

"It sounds impossible, and believe me, it should be. My colleagues and I have never seen anything like it." The doctor looked uncertainly at the door, wondering for one second just why her patient should have been shot with such a mixture. She was no fool, and sometimes weird things like this happened when the local gang lord was pissed at someone. Ferinacci had a penchant for poisons, and right now that made her jittery to be in the same room with someone who might be on the mob boss's wanted list.

"How long?" Dean's hazel eyes flashed up at her, and she instantly saw the love, the determination, the undying loyalty that lay beyond the handsome, yet rough exterior.

"Honestly, we don't know yet. According to the results from the first batch of tox screens, your brother should be dead already. He may have some immunity to the poison, especially as we know so little about it's makeup at this point. We'll know more when we have the second set of results in."

Dean pushed up from the chair he'd been given, ignoring the trembling sensation in his leg muscles. He was just over-tired, too much time behind the wheel. Maybe he was getting a cramp. Anything but admit the truth.

"Can I see him?" He looked at the nametag on the doctor's white coat, only now putting a name to the bearer of bad tidings. It read Dr. Faith Hoffe. The moniker brought a frown to the young hunter's features.

Faith.

He had little of that, even if Sam did.

"Just for a few minutes," Hoffe nodded, making her way back out of the door and into the next corridor. "Sam regained consciousness a little while ago. We've given him something for the pain and sedatives to help with the convulsions, but you have to understand at this point there's very little else we can do." She stopped, pointedly waiting for Dean's response.

Dean's eyes danced not with despair, but with determination. He'd made Sam a promise, and he was going to keep it. All he had to do now was convince Sam to fight and stay alive long enough and he'd walk into Hell to find Haris if he had to. "Does Sammy know?"

Hoffe nodded. "Your brother is no fool, Mr. Wilkinson. He's prepared for what comes next."

"Doc, nobody is ever ready for what comes next, trust me on that one." Dean pushed past the doctor and slid through the door into Sam's room, but even Hoffe's warnings couldn't prepare him for what awaited him there.

Sam was propped up with a multitude of pillows, but he was lying on his side, still struggling to keep his spasming limbs motionless despite the drugs he'd been given. He was pale, and yet his brow was lined with fresh pearls of perspiration. His tall frame looked somehow withered in the thin hospital gown he wore, the monitors and oxygen cannula under his nose completing the morbid portrait of death that had been so mercilessly painted for Dean to witness.

Dean paused at the bottom of the bed, words failing him as he realized Sam looked even worse than he had after he'd been electrocuted hunting a Rawhead. It was crazy, but it was like their whole lives were carbon copies of each other.

He didn't let me die then. I won't let Sammy die now.

"Found any cute nurses yet?" Sam tried to smile, but even the muscles in his cheeks weren't quite cooperating. When the attempt brought on fresh pain he tried to bite down, hiding it from his brother.

"When I find one you'll be the first to know, bro." Dean pulled out a chair and dragged it to the side of the bed where Sam was lying. He hated seeing his brother like this. Hated having to go through the ritual of pretending everything was alright when he could be out finding the bastard demon that had caused it.

Sam took an unsteady breath. "Yeah, well don't take too long searching. I'm not the kinda guy who can hang around for the right girl."

"Don't talk like that, Sam—"

"Dean, I'm *dying*. Enough of the hope crap. It's not what I need to hear right now." Sam placed a trembling hand on the railing at the side of his bed. Apparently, the staff thought it possible he could convulse so hard he'd end up on the floor if there was nothing there to stop him. "We need to talk about you, not me..."

Dean's face contorted into desolation. He didn't want to talk about *his* future. He wanted to make sure Sam *had* a future. "Forget my sorry ass," he unintentionally snapped. "I'm not gonna let you go, Sammy. It's not your time. You've got to fight this thing. Give me a chance to find that freak and make him fix you!"

Sam's lower lip quivered and he couldn't stifle a short gasp of pain. "Dean, I'm sick. It's over for me. You have to go on. Saving people, hunting things, remember?"

"Who says I want to?" Dean looked away. There was no going on without Sam, and yet he couldn't add to his brother's torment by telling him that. This wasn't fair. Sam was supposed to find a pretty girl, have kids, grow old. If any Winchester should go out young, it shouldn't be Sammy.

It should be me...

"Just fight, Sam, that's all I ask. A Winchester never gives in." Dean balled his fists, taut inner emotions making him want to punch something, anything, to gain some relief.

Sam swallowed thickly, as if even that simple task was becoming hard to control. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna make you promise to look after my laptop and then threaten to haunt your ass if you don't." His lips curled into a faint smile.

"I guess you're not gonna bitch about daytime TV or Snuggles the friggin' bear either?" Dean tried to smile back, thinking of how he'd behaved at the news of his own impending doom once, a long time ago. "Then again, knowing your wuss ass you'll probably fall in love with the damn bear and live happily ever after."

"Nah, I'm strictly a Muppet fan."

"I always knew you had a secret crush on Miss Piggy." Dean feigned a mock punch, careful not to actually do any damage to his already ailing sibling. "Dude, so not cool to have a pig fetish."

"Dean—"

"Yeah?"

"Promise me you won't go near any water?"

Dean shifted on his seat. They should be finding a way to track Haris, maybe even discussing making some kind of deal. It was against everything he believed, but for

Sam it was their only option – and time was running out. “I promise not to go near any water if you promise not to stop breathing while I can some demon ass.”

Sam wriggled as every sinew in his body felt like it was going to tear in two. It was hard holding it together this long for his brother. How much longer he could stand to fight the worming, writhing sensations within him was anybody’s guess. “I don’t know if I can keep that promise,” he stammered, gripping the bar on the bed so tightly he thought his knuckles might pop with the strain. “Listen, Dean, the ship I saw in my vision, its real, and you’re gonna drown on her.”

“You actually saw me dead? ’Cause I’m telling you, I swim better than Daryl Hannah in mermaid mode.” Dean made the shape of a perfect hourglass with his hands for effect and then winked. Given Sam’s condition, it was just about all the humor he could muster.

The effort didn’t go unappreciated. “Don’t you ever think of *anything* but girls, sex and beer?” Sam coughed, but pushed himself to keep up a jovial expression. “Oh, wait, *and* cars.” He took down another ragged breath, lungs painfully fighting the poison affecting their ability to work. “I didn’t see you dead,” he eventually conceded, mirth pushed aside. “But I get *death visions*, Dean. And I saw you on the ship, and it was sinking fast. When she went under, there was no time...no time...”

Sam began to cough again, his back arching slightly on the bed as he fought the bucking motion his body wanted to make. After agonizing seconds he settled back on the pillows, even more drained than before. “I...kno...know the name of the ship. You have to find her, Dean. Fff...find her before it’s too late.”

Dean hadn’t missed the deterioration in his brother, the slurred words, the desperate breaths he dragged down like a hundred-year-old chain smoker. “I thought you said you wanted me to *stay away* from the water, Sam?” he protested, confusion giving way to impotent anger. “I don’t need to waste time on this, Sammy. I need to find Haris!” He pushed up from the chair, making its spindly metal legs scream across the tiled floor.

As he turned to head for the door, Sam’s hand shot out, catching his brother’s arm as another fit of tremors took hold.

Dean could feel the quake within his sibling like a ten on the Richter Scale, and he instantly whirled back, unsure whether to call for help or try to calm his brother. “I’ll find the ship,” he promised, slipping his cell phone from his jacket to access the built-in net browser. “Just take it easy, dude, okay?”

Working the buttons with one hand, Dean slipped the other over the top of Sam’s, hoping the physical bond would be enough to calm his brother’s racing heartbeat and flailing limbs. “I’m here, Sammy. Just breathe. Breathe nice and slow, Sam.”

Sam closed his eyes, willing his gangly body to obey him one last time. “The ship’s c...called The Last Hope,” he managed to gasp.

Dean’s eyes widened at the irony, and he wanted to ask Sam if he was sure this wasn’t some toxin-induced fantasy. But then, Sam was rarely wrong when it came to visions. Tapping in the name and hitting search he waited as the pitifully slow connection did its magic.

He rubbed absently at the stubble on his face, realizing that in only a few hours it would be morning. A new day, but what would the dawn’s radiance bring with it? Hope, like the ship’s name? Or something much grimmer?

“Well I’ll be damned, lil’ brother...”

“Is it close?” Sam didn’t wait to be told the ship was real. He already knew it was. His nightmare vision had allowed him to walk her corridors, investigate her very bowels, and it had allowed him to see his brother, and Haris, deep inside some inner chamber while the ship was sinking deep into the ocean.

Dean pursed his lips, scrolling on the tiny phone to get all the information onto the limited screen. “Says here the old girl is causing quite a stir. Seems like the local tree huggers and fish lovers union are protesting because the ship is gonna be towed out

at first light and scuttled in the Atlantic. Something about the owners not wanting the ship to go for salvage even.”

“Where’s the ship now?” Sam’s words were clipped, to the point – fraught with the knowledge he could have just given his brother the pink slip to his own demise.

Dean glanced at Sam, even deeper worry lines appearing on his brow. “The Last Hope is moored in Newark Bay – Port Newark. She’s right here.” He scratched at his head. “But I don’t see how this is gonna help you. We need to find Haris not some rusted tub that’s being sent to the big shipyard in the sky tomorrow.”

“Find one, and you find the other,” Sam answered cryptically. “Just don’t go on board her, Dean, and no deals. Promise me?” He sighed, letting his head droop on the pillow so lopsidedly it looked like he was about to slip into unconsciousness again. “I just need this to end, Dean. One way, or another...”

“It will end. I’ll make that son of a bitch demon fix you, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Sam’s eyes snapped open, even though their lids had been slowly creeping to a close before. “No, Dean. *Please*, no deals. Don’t even force him to try and fix me. You have to banish him. For me, for everyone.” He looked up, reminding Dean of so many times when they’d been kids. It was like Sam had reverted to that now – a pleading little brother who could not be denied. “Think about it, Dean,” he begged. “If you make a deal, Haris will still be out there. He can go after the other kids. He can finish what he started. The world, not just us, could be at stake...”

Dean began whirling the ring on his finger again. He couldn’t look at Sam. It was too painful. Too *real*. “I don’t care about the world, Sammy. I care about you.”

“If you care, you’ll promise.”

Dean waited, unsure if he could answer. He couldn’t lie to Sam, but he couldn’t swear to something he might not go through with, either.

Luckily, the hunter was given a brief reprieve.

Faith Hoffe tapped on the room door and then entered, a fresh set of results attached to her clipboard. She smiled at Sam, but both brothers knew it was out of sympathy rather than good news. Was there really ever good news for a Winchester?

“I have the second set of results.” Hoffe pointedly looked at Dean with just enough eye movement to suggest they talk outside. It was subtle, but not covert enough for Sam not to pick up on.

Sam shifted carefully on the bed so that he could see both his brother and the newly arrived physician. “There’s no need to hide anything from me. I already know what station the train I’m on stops at.” He gulped down a breath and then fixed his gaze on Hoffe. “How long?”

The doctor looked apologetically at Dean, knowing he would have preferred Sam not to know. “From the poison’s basic chemical structure, we think a few hours at most. No longer than sunrise.” She turned to Dean sensing he felt partly to blame. “Given the nature of this poison, even if you’d gotten your brother here minutes rather than hours after his exposure, the outcome would have been the same. I’m so sorry...”

“Doctors can be wrong. Tests can be wrong-” Dean wouldn’t, couldn’t accept that Sam had just hours to live. Sunrise was just too close.

Too final.

“Dean, remember when we were kids and you tried to explain to me why we had no mom?” Moisture glistened in Sam’s eyes, but he fought it, fought the poison for Dean. “I used to think Mom had left us because I was bad or something. Then you sat me down one day and told me she hadn’t left because she wanted to; that she’d done it *for* me, not *because* of me.” Sam paused, composing what little self-control he had left. “You said she’d gone to a better place and one day we’d meet again.”

“Yeah, well I was full of crap, Sammy. You know I don’t believe in any of that.” Dean gripped his brother’s hand, but Sam didn’t even have the strength to squeeze back. The only time his muscles worked was when the toxin took control of them. “Sammy, you fight this, dammit! Don’t you dare give in. You’re not going to Mom.

You're not going *ANYWHERE!*" The last words built into such a crescendo of sound half the wing could have heard him, but Dean didn't care.

"I can't ff...ight anymore, Dean. Can't..."

Sam's hand began to slide from his brother's then clenched so hard Dean thought his fingers might break. With the grabbing motion came a succession of muscles spasms so fierce they turned Sam's body into a bucking bronco that threatened to bust loose from the corral that was a bed, despite the side rails.

Dean instantly reacted, trying to keep Sam's flailing limbs still enough so that he didn't do them damage during the convulsions. "C'mon, *Sammy...*"

It was hard to hold his brother with just the right amount of strength. It was hard to see Sam's back arch and his body shake so hard the seizures almost stopped him breathing. It was hard watching as a thin foam frothed from the edge of Sam's mouth, knowing that without help he could easily bite through his own tongue.

But most of all, it was hard for Dean to accept he may have spoken his last words to his little brother.

"Mr. Wilkinson!"

Dean could hear the name over and over, and he could feel hands tugging at him, trying to pull him away, but he didn't want to leave yet. He couldn't leave yet. What if he let go of Sam and this was it? What if the one time Sam needed him he wasn't there because he'd allowed the hospital staff to usher him out of the way?

"Mr. Wilkinson! We need room to work..."

This time, a burly hand clamped around his shoulder and Dean felt his body virtually lifted out of the way. He dug his heels in, punching at the white clad figure that had torn him so callously away from his brother, but the six-foot-four behemoth didn't appear to feel the impacts.

Dean attempted to spin in the man's grasp, all kinds of crazed ideas spiraling through his dazed psyche.

"Hey, hey...he's in good hands. Just calm down there, bro."

Bro.

Dean stopped punching, kicking and all the other moves he'd tried on the muscular black orderly and finally looked up into his eyes. The man was older than both Winchesters, a small growth of beard encroaching on an otherwise unblemished, roguish face.

There was absolutely no reason why the hunter should have felt compelled to tell the stranger anything, and yet he felt the sudden urge to tell the man *everything*. It was like needing to open the floodgates on a dam before it burst. And right at that moment, Dean's floodgates had been holding out for far too long.

Still, he held fast, fighting his emotions like he fought the supernatural.

"I can't leave him. He needs me." Dean dodged sideways, trying to duck past the orderly. The big guy was a deceptively fast mover, however, and easily blocked his path.

"He needs *medical* help. Give them room." Big Guy crossed his arms across his chest in a Superman style pose that on any other day would have made Dean laugh.

Instead, he peered around the orderly, watching as a group of nurses tried to hold Sam while Hoffe slipped a needle into his IV. After several long, excruciating minutes Sam's seizures began to calm and his arms became limp in the nurses grip.

A small dribble of blood intermingled with the saliva ebbing from the corner of Sam's mouth, and it made Dean flinch involuntarily as he watched one of the medics wipe it carefully away.

Sam was dying.

And part of Dean was dying too.

A lone tear escaped from the corner of Dean's right eye before he even had chance to register the moisture, but he didn't try to wipe it away. He simply stood at the edge of Sam's bed, his mind feeling like it might shatter into a myriad of pieces at any moment.

Sam was broken.

But Dean was breaking in another, far more subtle, far scarier way.

The orderly noted the change in the young man he'd been restraining and he placed a hand on Dean's shoulder. "It's always darkest before dawn, bro. But nature sometimes has a way of surprising you. The darkness always passes, just like a storm burns itself out."

The anecdote was meant to be comforting, and maybe it would have been to anyone but a Winchester. The problem was, the storm that was coming had no clouds, no rain, and no wind, only a dark and evil militia with Haris as its leader.

To fight that – hell, to even *try* – Dean needed his brother.

Ignoring the still-working medics, ignoring the orderly that finally allowed him to push past, Dean stepped to Sam's bedside. Hunching over, he looked on Sam's fitfully sleeping form and he shuddered in sudden fear.

Pushing aside his own desolation, forcing away the nausea that hit him every few seconds, he whispered a last message to his brother, because when sunrise came he may not be in the land of the living if he succeeded.

"I'm gonna save you from this thing, Sammy. Even if it means going on that damn ship. Even if it kills me...."

Port Newark – Elizabeth Marine Terminal

Dean looked across the harbor, fearing the minor change in the night sky as a vampire might fear the coming of the dawn sun. The slight tinge of daylight beginning to permeate the darkness meant Sam was running out of time – if he hadn't already.

The coming of the new day also meant the ship Dean was here to find would soon be lost forever, drowned in the darkest bowels of the Atlantic where no one save the ocean's inhabitants would ever see her rusting hulk again.

"Why here? Why now?" Dean mumbled to himself as he shifted the weight of his duffel bag on his shoulder. It wasn't all that heavy, but it was a constant reminder of what he was here to do.

Or was it?

Even Dean wasn't sure what was going to happen despite Sam's foreboding-filled warning. All the hunter was sure of was that he trusted his brother's instincts. Sam had seen the Last Hope and he had seen Haris. That was enough for Dean to know that he needed to find both if he had any chance of saving his brother.

No deals.

Sam had begged – no *pleaded* – that he banish the yellow-eyed demon, but if this ship brought the freakish thing out of its hiding place, could he really waste the chance of bargaining for his brother's life?

As Dean searched among the myriad of ships docked at the terminal, he wasn't sure that he could. But then, he had to find the aging ship first, and she was proving as elusive as the demon hiding within her steel compartments.

Ahead, a group of workers had congregated and seemed to be arguing about the morality of what they were about to do. The tallest of the group pointed towards the rusting frame of a nearby vessel and began to rant that Greenpeace would be on their asses all the way out to the drop off point.

Hearing the word "Greenpeace," Dean squatted behind a container and peered carefully at the ship drawing all the attention. She was a cargo ship that had seen way better days. Corrosion marked almost every section of her fore and aft sections, the steel rivets that held her together oozing a thick red slime where salt water had bitten into her body.

Beneath the flaking grey and red colors was a barely distinguishable name that had long ago been forgotten by all but her crew.

This floating wreck that had served her owners for over thirty years was the Last Hope.

To Dean, seeing the ship this way was somehow strangely fitting and yet frightening at the same time. She was truly Sam's "Last Hope," but she was also the place where Sam believed Dean would drown. Looking at her crumbling panels, it wasn't exactly hard to believe.

"Sister, you better hold it together for just a little while longer, 'cause I got an appointment with a freak to keep." Dean eyed the still-jabbering workers and then stealthily skirted them, dodging on board the Last Hope as if he were a professional cat burglar.

Once on deck, he dropped the duffel to peer over the side, being careful to remain out of the dock workers' view. His entrance had gone unnoticed, and the Last Hope had already been tethered to the tugs that would haul her to her final resting place.

Time for this old lady was running out as surely as it was for Sammy.

Dean felt the breeze from the Atlantic hitting him in the face, salt air refreshing him, urging him to venture into the depths of this cavernous steel tomb. The Last Hope was a floating Venus Flytrap, and he was the helpless human insect being lured into her maw.

For Sam, it didn't matter.

Re-acquiring his bag, the hunter scanned the empty deck for a doorway that would probably lead him to his doom. Only one portal presented itself and Dean headed for it, ever-cautious that any noise might alert the port's crews of his presence.

The metal doorway lay open as he reached it – inviting, alluring in some bizarre nautical fashion. It was like the ship *wanted* him to enter her.

"Sweetheart, you're not the kind of gal I normally open my heart to." Dean patted the cool metal of the ship. "But, Lady, I sure need your help today."

The Last Hope seemed to groan in response, an eerie clanging echo reverberating through her metallic walls. The sound repeated, each clang resounding like the tolling of some sinister death bell.

Dean turned, instinct telling him to leave, to run towards the light of the portal he'd just entered through, but he couldn't – not today.

It's just the crews working to tow this sucker out to sea. That's all it is. Gotta hurry. Gotta do this for Sammy...

Letting a hand probe his jacket pocket, Dean retrieved a small flashlight and flicked it to the "on" position. In an instant, the beam illuminated the ship's corridors, making the continuing noise seem less fearsome.

Dean waved the ray in an arc, washing the shaft of light over the Last Hope's interior as he moved forward, deeper into the ship's infrastructure. Reaching an intersection that had once been a thoroughway into the cargo area, he paused, playing the flashlight over a double-thick hatch welded into the decking.

The hatch had once been a portal into the lower storage compartments, and it still appeared to be a perfect seal.

Dean's staid features almost cracked into a smile, but he held back. This was what he had hoped for – hell, almost prayed for – had he been a praying man.

The hunter stooped, rubbing a rough hand over the curved, hinged hatch. It reminded him of the hatch that had been "oh so important" in *Lost*. Except this was no TV show, and there was more than an exploding island at stake – at least to Dean.

Sucking down a breath, Dean realized the air here was stale, the odor of rotting metal, corrosion – death infusing the atmosphere until it was almost too much to inhale. He endured the sensation, picturing Sam in the hospital bed, deathly pale, *dying*.

It kept him focused.

It kept him alert.

Dean dropped the duffel bag from his shoulder and let the light in his hand play over its opening. With his free hand, he rummaged inside until his fingers met a small

box. Tugging the tiny wooden container into the light's beam he flicked open the lid with his thumb and then retrieved a small slab of white chalk.

"Alright, you bastard, this one's for Sammy..."

And Dean began to draw.

Careful, long strokes that intersected one another until a familiar shape began to form on the metal plates beside the hatch.

A familiar shape that formed the sigil for the Winchesters' nemesis, Haris.

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

Sam stared upward, fingers clutching the crisp hospital sheet beneath him as the first rays of early morning sunlight stole in through the tiny gap at the top of the curtains and tentatively crept across the ceiling tiles.

He'd fought at first when the nurses had tried to cannulate him, pushing the breathing tube away with flailing, panicked hands; but now he barely noticed it, barely noticed the constant constriction in his chest; the way his lungs struggled for every breath; the way his body spasmed continually as it fought a losing battle for more oxygen.

When he'd first awoken from his last bout of unconsciousness, he hadn't noticed any of this: All he'd noticed was that Dean wasn't there.

As he stared up at dawn's first light, he couldn't help but wonder why Dean had left him here to die alone. Because he was surely going to die soon. The doctor had given him till sunrise at best, and here, creeping across the ceiling in streaks of beautiful golden light, was his last deadline. A few hours' reprieve was his only reward for the years he'd spent saving other people's lives at the risk of his own.

He took a labored breath, blinking back the moisture fogging his eyes. Why wasn't Dean here? Why would he leave him now, of all times?

Then it hit him, and for a brief moment he began struggling to get himself up and off the bed.

The only possible reason Dean would have had for leaving Sam when he was this close to death would have been if he had gone off to do something stupid; if he had gone off to summon Haris and try to make some kind of deal for Sam's life.

It was the only thing that made sense, the only motivation Dean would have had that could have torn him from Sam's side, the only reason Dean would have left when Sam was unconscious – because he knew his little brother would never have let him go had he been awake.

Dammit! Why the hell did Dean *never* listen to him?

And then with a jolt Sam remembered.

Dean *had* listened to him.

And suddenly Sam knew what Dean was doing as surely as if he could see right into his brother's head.

Dean was acting on the only code of conduct from which he had never deviated his whole life: Follow orders. Protect Sammy. Protect his family.

Sam had *told* him, *begged* him to go find that ship, go find Haris – even though he'd foreseen Dean's death on that very vessel.

And Dean was just following orders: *Sam's* orders.

And yet Sam knew there was more to it than that. Because while the importance of obeying orders was something Dean had had drilled into him from a very early age, Dad's single, most important standing order had always outweighed any other in Dean's mind: Protect Sammy. So while Dean was following Sam's orders, he was also following *Dad's* – he was protecting his brother and he was protecting his family. Like he always did.

And he was going to get himself killed doing it.

Sam struggled to sit up, trying to kick the bedclothes off his legs, trying to get his body to do his bidding when all it really wanted to do was lay down and die.

Sam wasn't having that. He wasn't going to lie here while Dean risked his life – and maybe his afterlife – to save him.

Because Sam was under no illusion that Dean was motivated purely by the desire to save the countless hundreds, *thousands*, who would suffer should Haris unleash his unholy army on the world. Dean wasn't going after Haris to save them; he was going after Haris to save *Sam*. And it was Sam's fault. Sam had told him to go.

Sam had to do something. He had to –
Couldn't breathe.

His lungs screamed for air as his body was once again wracked with painful convulsions, and he collapsed back against the pillows, gasping for breath and gritting his teeth against the agony torturing every last muscle.

He closed his eyes against it as he tried to even out his desperate breathing, each inhale more painful than the last, clenching his jaw as he fought to hang on to consciousness.

Gradually, the agony began to subside, and he was able to open his eyes again, the image of the hospital room swimming in and out of focus as he squinted about himself, looking for... Looking for... What was that?

Sam concentrated on his breathing, lying very still as he slowly scanned the room. He was completely alone. No doctors. No nurses. No anyone.
And yet...

Just for a second he'd thought – he'd felt – someone – *something* – else in the room with him.

Something he'd felt before.

In Nebraska.

When the Reaper had come for David Wright; when the Reaper had come for Dean...

There! A blur of – *something* – just out of the corner of his eye. Gone when he looked directly at it.

He didn't understand. If it was a Reaper – if it was here for *him* – then why couldn't he see it? When it had come for Dean, Dean had been able to see it...

"Hello?" His voice sounded weak, foreign in his own ears. "Is there someone there?"

He didn't expect a response, so wasn't disappointed when he received none.

"If you've come for me, you'll have to wait," he insisted stubbornly. "Cause I'm not going anywhere until my brother gets back here!"

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, silently praying for Dean to be safe, for Dean to get back here soon.

For Dean to get back before the Reaper took what it had undoubtedly come for...

Compartment inside the Last Hope

Blood dribbled to the floor, making a tiny splatter pattern that Gil Grissom would no doubt have loved to analyze. The bright red liquid seemed somehow alien on the drab oily metal floor of the ship, a stark contrast that stood out like a beacon, calling Haris to its tempting iron tang.

Dean clutched at his hand where he'd sliced it open, pressing against the cut now that enough of his blood had painted over the sigil on the floor. He felt no pain, only a longing for this to be over.

"Come on you bastard. Show me those ugly ass yellow eyes of yours..." The hunter's fractious timbre bounced from the walls like a ping pong ball until it finally petered out, replaced by another familiar tone of voice.

"My last host had the audacity to die on me. Maybe I should take you as his replacement. Make you mine for all eternity." Someone moved in the shadows, making patterns dance across the gloom without quite moving into the dull light that would afford his features to be seen. "But then, that wouldn't be much fun, would it, Dean? Not when in my true state I can take any form I choose, any form at all..."

The tall, gawky figure stepped from the shade, finally allowing Dean to see who he was talking to.

The glistening hazel eyes, the boyish, dimpled cheeks, the towering yet unassuming frame – all Sam – even though it was a physical impossibility.

“S... Sammy?” Dean almost let go of the flashlight in his hand, stepping back from the thing that could not be his brother, even though some part of him wished it could be. “You, you can’t be here...”

Sam laughed; a deep cackle that resounded through the Last Hope like Lucifer himself had gotten on board for an early Halloween ball. Eyes flashed in a show of brazen orange and yellow shades that almost resembled flames as they flared in the darkness.

“Haris,” Dean spat out the name, wanting, *needing* to kill the thing before him, no matter who it looked like. The demon was toying with him, getting inside his head in an attempt to throw him.

Dean wasn’t going to allow that.

The stakes were just too high.

“I bet you thought you’d never see your baby brother again, did you, Dean? Not outside of the County Morgue, at any rate...” Haris smiled, and it was almost more than Dean could bear. The demon knew just how to hurt. How to dig in the mental knife it wielded just that little bit deeper. “I sense you want to kill me, Dean...but then, wouldn’t that mean you’d killed poor little Sammy *twice* in one day?”

“My Sammy’s not going anywhere.” Dean struggled to keep his voice low – in control. Haris was baiting him, and he’d learned the hard way not to rise to it. “Unlike you,” he added with a small sneer. “I have something *real* special planned for you.”

“I’d been wondering about that, big brother.” Haris moved closer until he was standing across from Dean, the hatch on the floor the only thing between them. “You do realize that a sidekick like you really shouldn’t be rising above your station? Summoning demons of *my* power? You’re really nothing special, just because your brother is.” Haris pushed up his sleeve, mockingly checking the time on an exact replica of Sam’s watch. “Or maybe I should say, just because your brother *was* special. Past tense, and all that jazz...”

“It’s not sunrise yet, you bastard. Sam still has time.” Dean didn’t try to check his own watch. He had to trust in his instincts. Sam couldn’t be dead, not yet, or all this was for nothing.

The demon stared at his quarry. Being summoned aboard the rotting carcass of a ship had been somewhat surprising, but he had thought he knew the reason. Why else would Dean summon him here if not to make a deal for Sam’s life? And yet, so far the hunter had made no such plea.

In fact, Dean’s icy hazel orbs just seemed to stare into the demon, boring through his non-corporeal presence like a lighthouse drilling through a thick ocean fog.

Something was off.

“So, do you want to deal now, Winchester?” Haris pushed, trying to sense the hunter’s intentions from his body language if not his actions. “Sammy made a deal for your worthless life and now you want to do the same.” The demon sighed, mimicking Sam so well it made Dean flinch. “This whole ball game is fun I’ll give you that, but playing tennis with your souls back and forth over and over? Really, Dean, it’s quite tiresome.”

“And I thought you liked sports. Oops, my bad –”

Haris shrugged Sam’s huge shoulders, eyes morphing from hazel to gold and then back again as he blinked. “Oh, I do like sports. *Blood* sports.” Haris flexed his fingers, threatening silently that he could crush Dean with one flick of his hand, just like he had back in Missouri. “You see, my problem is I don’t want to deal, Dean. I *want* Sam dead. He’s just getting too powerful for his own good. For me to risk his continued existence on this pitiful planet, I would need something substantial in return –”

Dean watched the demon's hands, reliving a night his scarred body could never forget. It would be so easy for Haris to pin him against a compartment wall and tear his insides out, so easy for the demon to just take the Seal if he didn't use it correctly. And the problem was Dean wasn't even sure he did know how to use the damn thing.

If Haris sensed that, it was all over.

Dean's eyes marked every movement Haris made in the false image of his brother, and when the thing that truly had no substance began to pace around the open hatchway, he still refused to acknowledge its ramblings.

"Maybe I'll let Sammy live. I can take away those abilities of his – take away the thing that makes him such a pain in the ass – but there's a price, Dean. A price you may not want to pay." Haris paused, eyeing the hatchway as if it was simply an annoyance that he had to walk around in his current form. "I can't allow both Winchesters to live. Your soul and the Seal for Sammy, that's the best I can offer. Do you really want that, Dean? Little Sammy, alone, vulnerable? Do you think you'd really be saving him?"

"He'd be alive." Dean ran the back of his hand across his mouth.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for. He could feel sweat drenching his t-shirt from the sudden heat in the metal compartment. He could feel his nerves tingling as if the chamber was somehow filled with a bizarre electric charge.

"And you'd really call that alive?" Haris taunted, cocking his head into a sneer. "I can see him now, all broken up and in bleeding heart mode about your sacrifice. Sobbing at your graveside right alongside those of poor Mom and Jess. Do you think he'll burn your remains, Dean?" The demon laughed. "Oh, the poetic justice of it all..."

"Dude, I so don't do poetry."

"You should," Haris flexed his fingers again, this time stretching them at eye level as if the motion was somehow transfixing to him. "I think little Sammy would appreciate you reading something more substantial than those top shelf magazines you're so fond of."

The demon let its gaze fall on the hunter.

"So, what's it going to be, Dean? Your soul and the Seal for poor little Sammy? I really am running out of patience...and, heck, it's not like I don't have other *interesting* deals to make elsewhere. You're not the only one cornering the soul trading market."

"Just the handsomest," Dean retorted, some inner-calm keeping his voice steady even though he feared the daylight he knew was threatening to steal away the night outside the confines of the ship.

Haris snorted so hard a thin shower of spittle showered the air around him. "So, what's it to be, Dean? Are you ready to deal, or do we wait a few more precious seconds and let Sammy boy die a somewhat agonizing death? Trust me, I know Ferinacci's poisons well. It won't be pretty..."

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

It was still there.

The Reaper. The presence. Something in Sam's room that felt horribly familiar but he just couldn't get his eyes to see.

He was convulsing again, a crushing weight squeezing out what little air he had left in his lungs, pushing his chest against the bed as his back arched in another painful spasm.

A nurse was gently stroking his forehead, making soothing noises because that was all she was able to do for him. She was here to see him through to the end. Somewhere in Sam's pain-wracked mind he knew that, but wasn't able to acknowledge it.

He wasn't going out like this. He *wasn't*.

He just needed to give Dean more time...

"It's alright, Sam."

Sam's eyes slid to the nurse, but she had turned away, gone to fetch Dr. Hoffe, and it took him a second to realize the voice had come from someone else; someone else who was standing where the nurse had been, a gentle hand still brushing back his hair even as the door closed behind the only other person who had been in the room with him.

He blinked, eyes refusing to focus on the ghostly ethereal presence at his bedside, able only to discern long, golden locks of hair and sparkling blue eyes amidst a blur of bright white light.

And for a second, Sam could think only of angels.

Angels and his mother.

"Mom?"

She was smiling, but he knew it wasn't her. Someone else. Another face he recognized.

"It's time, Sam," she said, reaching again to touch his forehead. "It's time to go."

Compartment inside the Last Hope

"What's it going to be, Dean?" Haris waited, poised to take the Seal and yet another soul for his vast collection. Dealing like this always gave him a buzz, even if he did have better things on the agenda right now.

Dean didn't answer, but instead slipped a hand inside his jacket pocket. The thing he'd placed there felt cool to his fingertips – not quite inviting – but reassuring nonetheless.

The hunter jiggled the signet ring over his finger and sensed it slide into place as if it had been made for him. As the brass touched his skin, he felt a short static charge like the day he'd first been given the amulet, and his hand jerked with the abrupt sensation of electricity dispersing through his flesh.

Haris' eyes narrowed. He had expected the hunter to be pleading with him, but instead the elder brother simply stared at him. The demon opened his mouth, about to remind his quarry that time was running out, but something stopped him.

Something was *wrong*.

"I think it's time you took a little trip..." Dean pointed to the open hatch, leaving the hand that bore the Seal out of view in his pocket. He pointed downwards with the flashlight in his other hand, illuminating the cavernous space below. "Down the ladder," he ordered, smirking slightly.

"You mock me, Winchester? Not a very smart idea, considering your brother's current predicament." Haris' head flew back and he cackled, suddenly looking nothing like Sam even though he still held the young hunter's form. "You have the nerve to summon me, and now you think I should *obey* you?"

"In there. NOW!" Dean moved until he was at the edge of the hatch, fearless, and yet terrified inside at what he was doing. He was following Sam's instructions, keeping his promise, but at what price?

"You –" Haris faltered, his raucous laughter unexpectedly muted as he realized his mistake. "You can't make me do anything...I *own* you..."

"Nobody owns me." Dean pulled out his hand, holding it outstretched in front of the demon. Tiny shafts of light seeping in through unfilled rivet holes reflected off its surface, making it appear to almost glow and pulsate at Haris' presence. To Dean, the effect reminded him of the way Kryptonite glowed near a certain Clark Kent.

Not that Haris was any kind of hero.

"Into the garbage chute, demon boy."

Haris groaned, but Dean had no way of knowing if his resistance was causing actual physical pain, or if the creature was simply voicing its mental anguish. "You can't do this to me. You're *nothing*." The thing that wore Sam's face seemed to shimmer as it fought the urge to climb into the hatchway and onto the ladder below.

“Yeah, well, then I’m the nothing that’s gonna can me some demon ass.” Dean held his hand higher, allowing the light that emanated from the Seal to wash over Haris’ strained features.

The motion agitated the demon more and his face contorted until it seemed he might revert to his more gaseous form. Even that choice, however, seemed to have been taken away from him.

Haris was trapped in the form he had taken, trapped like those he usually possessed.

“Do you really think you can hurt me with that thing? Do you think it will end here?” Haris slipped Sam’s tall frame onto the ladder rungs, defiant, even though his body was no longer controlled by his will. “I’ll make sure Sammy dies in agony. His screams will be heard two corridors away, and no one will be able to help him.”

Dean hunkered forward over the open hatch, still unnerved by the fact he was speaking to Haris in his brother’s mortal form. It was too much of a reminder of the time John had been possessed by the thing – even though this time a Winchester was on the winning side.

“Sam’s not gonna die. But you know what? He told me it would be worth it just to get rid of you, you sonofabitch. Just remember, none of your little black-eyed kids are gonna be able to come near you. You’re screwed big time, dude.”

Haris snarled an inhuman growl, his façade morphing from human to something akin to a gargoyle and back again. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He was a master, not some pathetic human.

Still, the demon was compelled by some strange force to climb, climb until his boots hit the metal floor below. He looked around, realizing that the hatch led into a sealed storage area. There was only one way in, and one way out. “I see you’re familiar with the legends.” His eyes sparked with a new intensity, a new respect for his enemy.

“Hey, what can I say, I watched *Sinbad* way too much as a kid.” Dean’s face almost cracked into a smile, but somehow humor didn’t seem quite so appropriate when the sun may already be up outside.

Sam may already be...

Dean placed a hand on the hatch, pulling at the heavy metal door until its rusted hinges screamed in protest. He paused midway, using the threat of enclosure to draw Haris into conversation.

“Feel like talking yet?” Dean raised a brow questioningly, keeping the hand that sported the Seal in the demon’s view. “C’mon, don’t you just want to spill your guts before I lock you in there with no one to talk to for say, oh, *all* eternity.”

“I’m not much of a talker, Winchester. I prefer the thrill of the kill. Something your mother felt first hand –”

Dean clenched a fist at the mention of Mary, wishing he could climb down and punch out Haris like he was human. In all probability, though, his hand would simply pass through the creature and give Haris the opportunity of grabbing the Seal.

No, it was better to stay topside.

Better to stay *focused*, for Sam’s sake.

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? Dude, you got more talk than George Bush on Election Day. Maybe all those monologues are what pissed Ferinacci off enough for him come after your ass. I mean, he was after *you* with those special bullets, right?” Dean didn’t expect an answer, but Haris moved to the bottom of the ladder again, placing one hand on a chest-high rung in an act of rebelliousness, even in the presence of the Seal.

“Me?” Haris chortled. “Oh, Luciano was after me, yes. But, he was after you too. You really have no idea who you’re dealing with, do you? Why do you think he let you escape with the Seal, even after he knew who you were? Why do you think you’re still alive?” He shook his head in disdain. “He’s using you, Dean. Using you to

do his dirty work – you see, he knew you'd come after me. He knew you'd have to avenge poor little Sammy. And here you are..."

"Sam's not dead." Dean's teeth ground as he spat out the sentence with an air of finality he dared the demon to defy.

Haris didn't disappoint.

Twisting his wrist, the demon flicked off his watch strap and flaunted the timepiece up at Dean, his yellow eyes awash with pleasure.

"Can you hear it ticking, Dean? Can you hear the last seconds of Sam's life ebbing away while you waste time here? Any time now, Dean...any time..."

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

Sam blinked at her. Seeing her. *Knowing* her.

"Please," he gasped, struggling now for every breath as the sun rose slowly beyond the window, illuminating the unearthly figure beside him. "Please. I just need a little more time..."

"Shh, Sam," she said, continuing to stroke his hair, fingertips like electricity on his forehead, voice a mixture of regret and hope. "You don't need to fight it anymore. Come with me. It's over. It's over, Sam. Just come with me."

"No. There are things – I need – I need to do. Things I need to say. My brother needs me. I can't leave him. He'll die without me, I just know it!"

She paused for a moment, staring into his eyes with a gaze like starlight. "You can rest now, Sam. You've earned that. Maybe Dean's earned that too."

Sam sucked in another labored breath. She knew him. She knew Dean. "I can't leave him..."

"Come with me Sam. It's over..."

Compartment inside the Last Hope

Dean turned his back to the hatch, letting the metal doorway slam down as he moved away. Through the thick metal frame he could hear the demon screaming in fury, its screeching voice sending a chill through him. It was like fingernails down a chalkboard, high pitched and grating, but worse still, the thing's words reminded him of Sammy.

Even though Haris was trapped, his muted but scathing taunts brought back the truth that Dean had probably – no, definitely – just condemned his brother to death. It was what Sammy had begged for, but it didn't make the burden any less painful to bear.

"You can't leave me here, Winchester! Your brother will scream as his lungs burn. He'll beg for it to be over..."

Dean pushed away the words, trying to focus on the duffel bag he had discarded while he released the hatch. Opening the bag once again, he delved inside and pulled out a small portable blow torch and a hunk of lead.

Twisting the gas to the "on" position he used his faithful Zippo to fire up the torch, turning the nozzle until the orange glow faded into a much hotter, almost cobalt flame.

Securing the lever on the hatch until it was in the fully locked position, Dean placed the bar of lead he'd brought between the handle and the door's base, using the blow torch to melt the bar until hatch and compartment floor melded into a blur of metal.

Before the lead could completely set, Dean quickly pulled off the Seal and pressed the upper part of the ring into the soft ore, leaving the imprint of a pentagram behind as a permanent "Devil's Trap."

"Sleep tight, you freaky sonofabitch!"

Dean began to clamber up from where he'd squatted. Haris was entombed forever, just like Solomon had entrapped demons all those years ago in a bottle.

Maybe this wasn't exactly a copper vessel, but it was a vessel – at least, figuratively speaking.

What was even more poetic was the fact that the Last Hope was about to be scuttled, sinking forever like the bottle Solomon had tossed into the lake.

Finally.

It was over.

Dean should have been happy. He should have been relieved, but somehow banishing the brothers' nemesis didn't seem important anymore. Not without Sammy.

There's still a chance. The Seal is supposed to have healing properties. What if I just wish Sammy better? What if it's as simple as ordering Haris into the hatch was?

But were the Winchesters ever that lucky?

A rumbling shook the Last Hope and Dean felt his body sway with an unnatural motion. He teetered, grabbing the wall beside him to keep his balance.

The deep-seated groaning noise continued, and the hunter realized with a grunt that the ship was moving, and that the sound he could hear was a diesel engine growling as it fought to tug the ship out of port.

Shit!

Leaving the duffel bag, torch and other items behind, Dean took one last glance at the sealed hatchway before heading for the doorway. The port authorities had begun towing the Last Hope into the Atlantic, and if he didn't hurry, Sam's vision of his death may well come true.

The container ship rocked, the abrupt swaying of its hull pitching Dean sideways. He stumbled, trying to catch himself before his head cracked into a long-dead instrument panel.

"Sweetheart, I'm starting to get the feeling you don't like my sorry ass..." Dean missed the corroded controls by an inch and managed to twist his body back just enough to stay on his feet. "C'mon, big gal, what's not to like about me? Hell, I got a soft spot for classic metal, just ask my wheels..."

Using an inset where the radio used to be for support, Dean managed to reach the swinging door that he entered via. He stopped, peering out beyond the metal portal as the sun hovered over the horizon.

Shafts of orange and yellow light streaked across the open ocean like some maelstrom of vibrant color. Each beam reflected back over the rippling tide until the waves seemed alive with the very presence of the new day.

Alive.

Dean rubbed the back of his hand across his face, but he refused to shed any more tears. Sam wasn't going to die alone. He wouldn't allow it. Neither sea, pitching ship, demon, nor mob lord would keep him from his brother, because right now that was all he had to hold on to.

"Hang in there, lil' brother."

The Last Hope bobbed again, her stability in the water compromised by lack of maintenance and sheer age.

She was near enough to port for Dean to be able jump and swim back to the harbor, but the propeller shafts from her engines were still dangerously close to the water's surface – still easily able to kill should Dean miscalculate his dive and hit them as he landed in the ocean.

But then, if he had to jump overboard into the swirling current below, risking his own life on the huge iron screws for Sam, he'd do it.

Better to die trying than to let his brother die alone.

"I'm coming, Sammy. You just hold on..."

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

"Doctor, is there *nothing* we can do for him?"

Sam heard the nurse's voice as if down a long, dark tunnel, eyes closed tightly shut against each new spasm that took his body, aware of her as a presence in the same way as he was aware of the doctor, the tall orderly, the chaplain... And the Light.

She was brighter. Brighter than anything now. He could see her through his closed eyelids, an imprint on his retinas, and he knew. He knew.

He was losing.

He was losing this fight.

Can't give up. Not until Dean... Not until... I can't leave him... He'd never survive it...

"No," Dr. Hoffe's low tones mingled with the light swirling around in Sam's head. "All we can do is wait. It won't be long now."

"But his brother—" the orderly's voice. "He needs to be here... At the end."

"It's too late. He doesn't have much time."

Sam opened his eyes at the doctor's words.

But instead of looking up at the medical staff crowding around his bed, all he saw was *her*.

The Reaper.

He'd never even suspected that was what she was.

If that was what she was.

Hovering above him, long golden hair splayed out all around her, all around him, that same bittersweet sadness in her eyes.

He knew her.

He *knew* her.

But all he saw when he looked up was a beautiful blonde woman splayed out above him and suddenly he wanted to hold Jess, hold his mom so bad it hurt even more than the poison destroying his body.

"You'll see them soon, Sam. Just take my hand."

"No," Sam whispered. "Dean. Dad. I can't..."

"Come with me, Sam. Just come with me. It'll all be over soon. You can rest. You can rest with them."

"Dean..."

Parking lot outside St. James Hospital

Dean swung the Impala in a squealing arc of burning rubber, narrowly avoiding mounting the curb and taking out a trashcan as he brought the big Chevy to an abrupt halt across two parking spaces just outside the entrance to St. James Hospital's ER.

Slamming the car into park and hurriedly twisting off the ignition, he barely noticed his uncomfortably damp clothes as he bounded out of the Impala, sparing her only the briefest of backward glances and a mumbled apology. "Sorry baby. Gotta get to Sam. When I get back, I'll treat you to a nice oil change and some new tires and clean up all that nasty sea water I got on your upholstery, how about that?"

Glancing behind him as the blood red sky began to turn pale gold with the arrival of morning, he heard rather than saw the big black sedan jerk violently to a halt right in front of him, his attention snapping back in the direction he'd been running as he skidded to a stop, almost falling face first across the vehicle's impeccably-waxed hood.

Backing up a couple of paces, he immediately recognized one of four muscle-bound heavies exiting the vehicle as Stefan, Ferinacci's goon who had been following him and Sam around earlier that morning. He grimaced, vividly recalling their last encounter inches from Ferinacci's acidic hot tub, cursing himself mentally for not noticing he'd picked up a tail on the way back from his encounter with Haris.

He didn't have time for this. Sam could be *dying* in there...

“Sorry, fellas,” he said, raising his hands in a gesture of mock surrender, “or should that be *goodfellas*?” he added, with a nervous laugh. When none of the four goons even cracked a smile, Dean turned his attention to Stefan. “Hey, man,” he blustered on. “I’m flattered you enjoyed feeling me up enough to chase me halfway across New Jersey, but really, flowers would have been enough.”

Stefan growled at him, literally baring his teeth, and Dean forced another nervous laugh. “Okay, I get it, it’s early and you guys probably haven’t had your mochachinos yet, right? Sooo, I’ll just leave you to find the nearest Starbucks, and I’ll be on my way —”

Spinning hurriedly back the way he’d come, he stopped short as two behemoths in expensive black Italian suits exited another identical sedan which had pulled up behind him, effectively blocking any chance he had of escaping back to the Impala.

“Hey, nice of you to join us,” he greeted them, backing up a step, one hand still held aloft as the other slowly reached for the .45 tucked into his waistband at the small of his back. “But really, I so don’t have time to party with you guys right now, so if you’ll just —”

The next thing he knew, he was face down on the hood of the first sedan, Stefan having grabbed his wrist from behind and spun him back in his direction before slamming him bodily against the car, twisting his arm up his back as his other hand pressed down on the back of his neck.

Wind knocked out of him by the sudden assault, Dean sucked in a breath as the goon bent down towards him menacingly. “Go on, kid,” he hissed in his ear, yanking Dean’s handgun from its hiding place and tossing it carelessly into nearby shrubbery. “Gimme an excuse to break you into bite-size pieces...”

Dean grimaced as he followed the trajectory of his .45 before shrugging as much as he was able with a two hundred pound wiseguy shoved against his shoulder blades. “Hey, it’s your paint job, see if I care,” he muttered, air shoved out of him with a whoosh as Stefan rammed an elbow into his back.

“Where is it?” Stefan demanded, twisting Dean’s arm so hard he almost expected it to pop out of its socket.

Dean took a breath, trying to blink away the stars flickering at the periphery of his vision. “Where’s what?” he asked innocently, attempting to turn his head enough to flash the goon his sunniest smile.

A kick to the back of his left knee was the thanks he got, but instead of letting him fall to the ground, Stefan yanked him back onto the hood roughly. “Don’t play innocent with me, kid,” he snarled, releasing his hold on the back of Dean’s neck in order to begin searching his pockets.

“If you’re hoping to get to third base this time,” Dean managed to gasp out, “it’s gonna take a helluva lot more than flowers, honey —” The rest of his sentence was choked off as Stefan suddenly grabbed his still-damp hair, yanked back his head and slammed his cheekbone hard against the warm hood.

“Where. Is. It?” the wiseguy demanded, gesturing for one of his henchman to come help with the search.

“Not that I’m opposed to threesomes,” Dean spat, head spinning and eyes refusing to focus as the second goon began helping Stefan rifle through his pockets. “And it’s nothing personal, but you guys just ain’t my type —”

“Shut your yap or I rip out your tongue,” Stefan snapped, mouth suddenly inches from Dean’s ear. “Now gimme the goddamn Seal or —”

“I’ll be sleeping with the fishes?” Dean suggested helpfully, trying not to think about how close he’d come to doing just that.

“No, you’ll be in a concrete block at the bottom of Newark Bay with your brains splattered halfway to Jersey City,” Stefan corrected him.

“You say the nicest things,” Dean commented, earning a kick to the back of the other knee. “Jeez, can’t a guy make a little conversation?”

“Here.” The second goon withdrew his fingers from the front pocket of Dean’s jeans, pulling out the innocuous-looking brass ring that not so long ago Dean had been wielding against Haris in the bowels of the Last Hope.

Dean grimaced as Stefan snatched the Seal from the second mobster’s fingers, raising it in front of his eyes like an expert jeweler examining a priceless diamond. “This is it?” he demanded, roughly shoving his elbow once again into Dean’s back.

Dean grunted. “Found it in a box of Lucky Charms,” he insisted. “I swear.”

“Lucky for you,” Stefan told him, “my boss is a forgiving man.” Dean snorted and Stefan flipped him onto his back before driving a fist into his stomach with a sickening thud, Dean doubling over as the goon released his death grip on him, allowing him to slump to his knees.

Before Dean even had the time to suck in a breath, Stefan had grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back, face only inches from his captive’s. “All Mr. Ferinacci wanted was his ring back. We could have been civilized about this, but you just had to be a wise-ass, didn’t you?”

“It’s genetic,” Dean mumbled. “Only happens whenever I get within three feet of an asshole like you.”

He knew he was asking for it, so when Stefan’s fist connected with his already purpling cheekbone he really shouldn’t have been surprised.

He wasn’t expecting the kick the mobster aimed at his stomach, however, or the rabbit punch to the kidneys thrown his way by the second goon.

Crumpling slightly, Dean folded in on himself, trying to force air into his lungs as he waited for the next assault, the coppery taste of blood mixing with the bile in the back of his throat as Stefan again grabbed him by the hair and snapped back his head.

“Mr. Ferinacci doesn’t like you, kid,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “I’d keep out of his way in future. He catches you within a hundred miles of New Jersey and you’re gonna be on the express elevator to Hell before you can even say ‘sorry.’”

“Yeah, like I’d apologize to him,” Dean returned. “I met scarier things than your boss before I was outta kindergarten.”

Stefan punched him in the face again, allowing him to collapse back onto the asphalt. “Kid, you really gotta learn when to keep your mouth shut,” he admonished him, shaking his head before aiming one more kick at Dean’s back and motioning for his cronies to return to their vehicles. “Now you get out of Jersey before Mr. Ferinacci changes his mind. I wouldn’t want to have to come back here and —” he laughed hollowly at his own joke, “— hurt you.”

Dean didn’t look up at him, just rested his forehead against the asphalt as he listened to the sounds of heavy car doors slamming and the two big sedans squealing away.

“Believe me,” he muttered to himself, “if I never see New Jersey again as long as I live it’ll be too soon...”

St. James Hospital Newark, NJ

Dean padded down the brightly lit corridor, his face smarting as he squinted his swollen eye, shielding it from the overhead fluorescent tubes. He was hurting everywhere, but mostly in a place no doctor or hospital could heal.

He was hurting for Sammy.

For not being *here* when his brother needed him.

Dean felt the metal of his favorite .45 press against his stomach and he moved it slightly under his jacket. He could have left it in the shrubbery where the goon had tossed it, but then, if anything had happened to Sammy, he might be needing it soon enough.

Turning the last corridor to the ICU room where he’d last seen Sam, Dean paused. The door was open and the bed his lanky brother had lain on was empty.

It took a moment to sink in.

Sam was gone.

Still, the reality didn't register. Dean turned in confusion, suddenly uncertain if he'd gotten the right corridor. That was it. He must have taken a wrong turn. His vision was blurry from the scuffle with Ferinacci's men. He'd gotten the wrong room.

Dean stepped forward uncertainly, pausing again in the ICU's doorway.

The bed had recently been stripped clean, but a watch still lay on the side table, waiting to be placed in a bag with the missing patient's other personal items.

It was Sam's watch, and it had stopped – at the exact time the sun had dared to peak over the horizon.

"No, Sammy...no..."

Dean's hand instantly reached back under his jacket, his rough fingers caressing his Desert Eagle with a new kind of respect. He'd let Sam down. He'd let John down.

He wouldn't let anyone else down.

Ignoring the ache in his back where he'd been punched, Dean's gait picked up speed until he was tearing down the hospital passageways fast enough to draw attention to himself.

Dean wasn't concerned by the onlookers.

Patients and staff began to turn and look as he pushed rudely through a crowd waiting at the nearby nurse's station. He was angry, on the edge, ready to give in – and most of all, he didn't give a rat's ass what anyone else thought of him.

A small brown door presented itself to him and he headed for it, hoping it was some small, private storage area where he could end it all.

Dean elbowed the stained wood with a grunt, only realizing at the last minute that this was no stock room, but the medical center chapel. It was a small chamber, dark, and yet somehow still inviting.

Its shadows were the perfect place to hide from his shame - the perfect place to use his .45 so that he never hurt anyone again.

Dean took a seat on the last pew and huddled into the corner, making sure the gloom enveloped him, hid him from all but the shrewdest visitor. In the end, this was what it all came down to.

Dean had found himself in a place of religion, a place of faith, when he himself held no such illusions. If there truly was a God, why had he taken Sam? Sam deserved better.

"Why didn't you take me? *Why?*" Dean looked up to the crucifix on the wall and his hands began to shake. He was coming apart, and he didn't even care anymore. He fumbled with the Desert Eagle, pulling it from his waistband as a slew of tears began to ebb down his face.

Dean wiped the moisture away with the back of his forearm, eyes glistening as he opened his heart to something, someone he didn't believe in. "Why can't you look after people like Sammy? Why did you let this *happen?*"

Realizing all he could do was pose questions that would never be answered, Dean let his gaze shift back to the silver automatic in his lap. He was alone, and there was an almost serene silence.

Peace.

He didn't need to check the chamber or clip. He knew the gun was ready, safety latch off and simply awaiting his forefinger's command.

Dean felt a lump form in his throat and he swallowed, licking his lips as he suddenly recalled Sam praying for him in a small Dakota church not unlike this one. The church had been Kyle's home, and Sammy had been praying for Dean's release from Haris' bastard child.

Even then, God hadn't answered, had he? Or why had Sam been forced into making the deal that had cost him his life?

Dean choked back a sob. Eyes reddening, he refused to go out crying like a girl. It wasn't respectful of his brother's memory, and above all else it was not the Winchester way.

Even though he hadn't been there at the end, Dean knew Sam had shed no tears over his own demise. Sammy was selfless to the end.

The end.

Dean closed his eyes. He just couldn't think of what his brother had gone through. How alone he must have felt.

The coolness of the .45 abruptly became inviting again in his palm, begging him to lift it and place the muzzle against his temple.

"Can I help you, son?"

Dean hadn't heard any footsteps, but then, his mind had been elsewhere. Stifling the urge to still pull the trigger, he stealthily slipped the pistol back into its hiding place and placed an arm over the back of the pew.

As he turned slightly, the owner of the soft, mellow voice came into view.

The priest was a short man – middle aged – but without the usual midriff pouch to prove it. His hair was already graying, and he sported a short-cropped beard and glasses that instantly reminded Dean of an older version of Kyle Williams.

"No one can help me," Dean answered honestly. "I ...I shouldn't really have come here." He moved to push up from the tiny wooden bench, shame making him want to run from the chapel. It was one thing not to believe or pray, but another to actually consider suicide inside the confines of a house of God.

The priest ignored Dean's move and perched himself down beside the hunter. "Anyone is welcome here. Even those who have...misgivings..."

"Padre, no disrespect, but your God? He couldn't cure my brother, no one could."

The holy man smiled meekly, nodding his head as if he already knew the answer to his next question – like some palmist rather than a priest. "I suspect that although you came here, young man, you don't exactly *believe*?"

Dean's eyes narrowed. It really was like talking to Kyle. Maybe "Old Moses" was a distant relative? Still, even Kyle could have no words of comfort today. No one could.

"You'll have to forgive me, but all I ever see in life are bad things –" Dean's eyes seemed to go vacant, as if he was staring into some vast void where all his past memories were regurgitated for him to see, to feel, to live through again. "There are no miracles, Padre...no angels..."

The priest took down a long breath and shifted his gaze to the crucifix on the wall. He smiled again, rubbing at the wispy grey whiskers on his face before continuing. "Son, just remember that sometimes good things come in unlikely packages. You don't need my kind of faith to trust in that."

"There's nothing out there in the dark. No one to protect those that need it."

"Then what about you?" The priest raised a brow knowingly. "What about your brother?"

Dean looked away. Even the stark wooden floor was better than snapping back at the holy man. And that was what he wanted to do. He wanted, needed, to tell the priest that, yeah, they were out there in the dark. And, hell, they saved as many as they could.

But who was there to save them? Where were the angels when Sammy had been in need of salvation? Where was good to balance against the evil?

Dean opened his mouth, finally finding the words to tell the priest that faith would never be his thing, but as he lifted his gaze he realized he was alone.

Just as he had entered, the little holy man had exited the chapel without a single squeak from his shoe, or rustle of his jacket.

"What the..?" Dean clipped his sentence short, somehow having respect on sacred ground, even if he wasn't sure who or what that respect was for.

Embarrassment once again washed over him. He had considered taking his own life in this hallowed place. Sam wouldn't have wanted that, because, heck, Sam did believe.

Rising from his seat, Dean squeezed out of the narrow pew and headed back through the wooden door. There would be arrangements to be made. John would need telling.

Would there even be a funeral? Or would their father insist on the usual funeral pyre that kept the unearthly spirit from returning?

Dean clutched at his forehead as the spiraling storm of fears began to make his head spin.

He was alone.

The only person he'd ever cared about was gone.

"Mr. Wilkinson?"

Dean pulled his hands away from his head, hiding his momentary lapse into weakness. He turned, recognizing the voice of Dr. Hoffe even before he saw her.

"Mr. Wilkinson? I've been looking for you." Hoffe walked closer, a smile washing over her features as she gestured with her hand towards a private room at the end of the corridor. "I have good news."

Good news?

Dean wasn't even sure his ears were working correctly anymore. How could it be good news when Sammy was gone? *How can she be freakin' smiling?* "Good news?" He drawled, wondering if the doctor had gone insane.

"Sam was quite ill for a while." Hoffe explained. "It really was touch and go, but then he began to miraculously improve. I've really never seen anything like it. Your brother has recovered sufficiently to move him from the ICU and I've ordered another tox screen."

"Tox screen..?" Dean fumbled out the words, but he wasn't really listening anymore.

Sam was alive!

Hoffe paused outside the closed room door, placing her palm on the handle. "We think the original test results were contaminated somehow. It's the only explanation for Sam's recovery." She realized the details were going over the elder brother's head. "Mr. Wilkinson?"

"He's going to be alright, right?" It was all Dean needed to know.

"I see no reason why he shouldn't make a perfect recovery now. He's still quite weak from his ordeal, so just a few minutes with him for now, okay?" Hoffe refrained from pushing the door open until she got a quick nod of affirmation from Dean.

Once the hunter agreed, she gently twisted the handle, swinging the door inwards to reveal Sam lying on his side lightly dozing.

The sight of his brother's chest smoothly rising and falling was almost too much for Dean to take in. Only a few short hours ago, drawing even the smallest breath had been agony for Sam. *How..?*

"No poison, huh?" Dean raised a brow, thinking of the priest's encouraging speech. Unless Sam's gifts had saved him, then maybe miracles did happen. *Yeah right, and Paris Hilton's gonna be a friggin' nun...*

The doctor shook her head, keeping her voice low for fear of waking her resting patient. "As I said, I've never seen anything like it." She reached over, checking the chart at the bottom of Sam's bed before smiling again. "Maybe it was the visit from your sister that did the trick."

"Sister?" Dean tried not to look taken aback, but he couldn't help but notice the look of surprise on Hoffe's face at his sudden reaction. Then it hit. "Pretty gal, blonde, blue eyes?" He asked, his mind abruptly thinking back to a sewer and one very sassy immortal.

"Yes, that's her." The doctor looked puzzled, curious as to why a brother wouldn't know his own sibling was going to visit. She shrugged, uncertainty replaced by

urgency when her pager began to beep. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m needed elsewhere...”

Dean nodded, watching as the white-coated physician hastened from the room.

“D...Dean?”

Dean turned to see Sam looking at him through bleary, unfocused eyes. There were still dark rims beneath them, hanging like two small pouches – the only real tell-tale signs that Sammy had been seriously ill only hours previously.

But he was alive – and smiling somewhat meekly.

“Hey, Sasquatch, how’s the hotel?” Dean crossed the room in two strides, seating himself on the edge of his brother’s bed even though it really was against the rules. He wanted to hug Sam, to pull him tight and know by his warmth that he had defied death, but somehow those kind of moments just never seemed fitting. Tears of joy briefly welled in his eyes, but those too were girlie luxuries he wouldn’t allow now that Sam was safe. Blinking to quell the moisture, he kicked back into joke mode and asked, “Sweet talk any of the nurses while I was gone?”

“Dude, there were so many in here you wouldn’t believe earlier. I couldn’t get their hands off of me.” Sam grimaced as he rolled back onto his pillows, realizing that the statement was all-too true – but not in a good way. He closed his eyelids, briefly seeing Erika in the same shimmering bright light that had enveloped her at his bedside.

“So, banishing Haris...I guess it saved you somehow?” Dean didn’t see how bottling up the vaporous creature could possibly have cancelled out the poison, but what other explanation was there? Something had.

“You did it? He’s gone?” Sam wriggled on the bed, feeling bruises on his body where he hadn’t even realized he *could* bruise. The convulsions had done more than just leave him fatigued, they’d actually wracked every muscle and tissue fiber until he felt like he’d been stretched on some medieval dungeon rack.

Dean grinned. “Let’s just say that fiery-eyed freak has taken a *long* cabin cruise straight to Davy Jones’ locker. I might not have had a copper bottle, but dude, I canned his smoky ass.” He looked at his watch, thankful that it hadn’t chosen to stop after being dunked in the ocean. “I’d say he’s talking with the fishes right about now.”

Sam closed his eyes again, not quite believing how things had turned out. Somehow he had lived. Somehow they had defied the odds and banished the one thing they had chased since being kids. It seemed impossible, but it was over.

It was *finally* over.

“You left this in the other room.” Dean offered up his brother’s watch, even though it had stopped. “Dude,” his tone grew serious, emotional almost. “I’m just glad...glad...”

“Yeah, me too.” Sam rubbed a finger over the tape on his arm, feeling the IV needle beneath like it was some evil reminder of what had transpired in the ICU room. At the time, it had seemed real, but now, now he wasn’t even sure of what he’d seen.

“Sammy, when I was gone? What...what happened?” Dean didn’t like to ask, but he had to know if Erika had really paid his brother a visit, and why.

“I don’t remember much,” Sam thought of the medics swarming around his bedside, but most of all, he thought of the blonde that had visited him. “Dean...I think I saw a Reaper...”

“Man, you were hallucinating. Musta been the meds. You know those suckers never give in.” Dean tried to sound convincing, but the past day had taught him that anything could and did happen. “The doctor said you had a pretty gal in here, not some wrinkly old crone with a bad complexion.”

“Dean, it was Erika. She was the Reaper.” Sam attempted to push up on his elbows enough to manage a sitting position but only made it halfway before Dean had to intervene and prop him up on his pillows. “At least, I think she was a Reaper...”

Dean shrugged, recalling the almost perfect features of the pretty blonde. He really had found her attractive. It was a pity she probably fell into the category of “undead.” “Dude,” he finally offered. “Reapers are usually in the habit of taking lives. This chick gave one back...”

Sam thought about it, fumbling with the edge of his bed linen when he couldn't come to any sensible conclusion. Erika had been ready to reap his soul and take him to Mom and Jess. Had she changed her mind? Had something else saved him?

The young hunter had no answers, but at least he was alive, and that meant he had the opportunity to find the truth once he recovered.

Super 8 Motel, Stamford, CT

Five days later

Dean stretched out on the motel room bed, one arm thrown behind his head as he absently clicked through the channels on the surprisingly half-decent TV. “Can't believe we lucked out and got cable,” he muttered, shooting a surreptitious glance Sam's way.

His brother was sitting crossed-legged on his own bed, hunched over the laptop as his long fingers played a concerto across the keyboard. “Mm-hmm,” he muttered distractedly, squinting at the search results and clicking onto a promising link.

“Not a bad picture for free porn either,” Dean added, grinning as Sam finally looked up, eyes darting from the TV screen to his brother.

“Very funny,” he said, returning his attention to the laptop. “I was listening to you.”

“No you weren't,” Dean corrected him. “You were in Total Geekboy Hyper-Research Mode.” He shrugged. “But better to be in Total Geekboy Hyper-Research mode in Connecticut than in New Jersey I guess.”

Sam snorted. “I don't care if I never see New Jersey again as long as I live,” he said, unintentionally echoing Dean's declaration from five days previously when he had been splattered across the parking lot of St. James Hospital by Ferinacci's goons.

“I hear that,” Dean agreed, taking in a deep breath. “Which is why I brought us here,” he said, casting his arms about himself expansively. “You can't beat a little sea air when you're recuperating from nearly having your soul taken by a demon and then getting shot by a demonically poisoned bullet.”

“I've said it before and I'll say it again,” Sam muttered, shaking his head. “Our lives are weird, man.”

“Ah, you wouldn't have it any other way,” Dean told him with a grin.

Sam just looked at him before smiling slightly. “It may have been a crappy way to spend a birthday,” he said, “but at least I survived it.”

“Which reminds me.” Dean pulled his duffel up off the floor, withdrawing a small box which he shoved in Sam's direction.

Sam took it reluctantly, warily opening the cardboard lid and laughing softly when he saw the contents.

“Happy belated birthday, Sammy,” Dean said, grin widening. “But I expect you to share.”

Sam withdrew the single blueberry muffin from the box, righting the pink birthday candle stuck in the middle that had skewed to one side. “Thanks, man,” he muttered, eyes misting over unaccountably.

“Don't expect me to sing *Happy Birthday* to you though, dude,” Dean told him, attention snapping back to the TV as Ozzy suddenly appeared on some random music channel, screaming out a live rendition of Black Sabbath's *Valhalla* so hard it made Sam's throat ache to listen to it. “Although...” Dean shifted slightly on the bed, crossing his ankles and flicking his eyes briefly to his brother before pretending his entire attention was on the TV. “I'm happy as – I'm happy that – you know – you're...” He sighed. “I'm happy you're not dead and everything.”

Sam realized that that was as close to a chick flick moment and a hug from his big brother as he was going to get. "Me too," he said, trying to diffuse the awkwardness as Dean's ears turned a definite shade of pink.

Sam looked up thoughtfully, gazing out the motel room window onto the bright blue sky beyond and for a second absolutely convinced he could indeed taste the sea air drifting in from nearby Stamford Harbor. "I'm glad we came here," he said softly. "We needed some downtime after – after Haris." He pushed a couple of random buttons on the laptop before adding, "I can't believe you banished him, Dean. I can't believe he's gone."

"You better believe it," Dean insisted, failing to hide the smirk making its way across his face. "Big brother saves the day yet again..."

"With some help from our Reaper friend," Sam added.

Dean sobered somewhat at that. "You really think it was Erika?" he asked uncertainly. "You really think she was a Reaper? I mean – the way the doctor described her – the way *you* described her... It had to be her, right? You said you knew her."

Sam nodded. "I thought it was a dream at first. You know – delirium? But I know I saw her. Hovering over me. And at first, yeah, damn right I thought she was a Reaper. Then I thought – I thought she was Mom."

"You – did?" Dean sounded vaguely unsettled.

"Yeah," Sam admitted, cheeks coloring. "And then – then I – thought she was an angel."

Dean shrugged. "Maybe she was," he said quietly, picking at the dark blue comforter twisted underneath him.

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, like you believe in angels," he scoffed.

Dean's face remained completely neutral, and Sam shifted uncomfortably. "Whatever she was," Dean said, pointedly avoiding the subject, "Angel, Reaper – whatever. She saved you Sam. She saved your life when no one else could – when 'no human doctor' could save you." He averted his eyes and shrugged. "That makes her an angel in my book."

Sam swallowed, unable to think of a suitable reply.

Dean seemed to regain a little of his composure, finally looking back up at his brother. "Whatever she was," he continued, as if his last outburst had never happened. "I think it's a safe bet she definitely wasn't human."

"No," Sam agreed readily. "She wasn't." He indicated the laptop, and Dean sat forward on the bed, muting the TV absently.

"You found something?"

"Maybe," Sam replied, nodding slightly. "At first I thought she might have been Morrigan – a Celtic goddess of life and death." He inclined his head slightly. "But some of the pieces didn't seem to fit quite right. Then I came across this Norse myth –"

"Norse as in Vikings?" Dean clarified. "Rape and pillage and big-horned hats? Those guys?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, those guys," he confirmed. "I found a reference to this Norse demi-goddess – a Valkyrie who had the power to choose which heroes lived and which died on the battlefield –"

"Kinda like a Reaper," Dean offered.

Sam nodded again. "Exactly," he agreed. "A Norse Reaper, in effect. According to the legend, this demi-goddess left her heavenly home – Valhalla –" Dean snorted slightly as Ozzy continued to noiselessly belt out the song on the TV, and Sam ignored the interruption, "– to walk among mortals after her husband was murdered by a fellow Valkyrie –"

"Never trust a pissed-off chick with sharp objects," Dean muttered.

Sam frowned. "Anyway," he continued, trying to ignore the interruption. "After the demi-goddess's husband was murdered, she decided that taking only the lives of

good men, the heroes of her people, wasn't enough for her, and she began taking the souls of evil men, doling out her own brand of heavenly justice, I guess."

Dean nodded. "Okay, with you so far," he said. "So you're saying if this is what Erika was – this Valkyrie demi-goddess – then that's why she was hanging around Ferinacci? He was her next target?"

Sam nodded. "It'd make sense, right?"

"I guess," Dean agreed. "But what makes you so sure Erika is this Norse Reaper chick?"

"Her name," Sam explained triumphantly. "Erika Gudrun."

Dean looked at him blankly. "And...?"

"The Valkyrie's name – she was called Gudrun too."

Suddenly the penny dropped. "Kinda a big clue there."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Kinda."

Dean bit his lip before looking up at Sam again. "Of course, that would also explain why she chose to save your skinny ass."

Sam's face twisted into a question mark. "It would?"

Dean grinned. "Sure," he said. "If she was into saving heroes as well as reaping them."

Sam colored bright red. "I'm no hero," he muttered, attention again boring into the laptop.

"Bull," Dean countered. "You're exactly the sort of guy our demi-goddess would be looking to save. Think how many lives you've saved, Sammy! Just since leaving Stanford, not even counting – before," he stumbled on the last word, conscious of Sam's different take on their whacked out childhood. He looked up then, catching Sam's eye. "And you saved me," he added earnestly, the most earnest Sam had ever heard him. "You offered your life, death, soul and afterlife to that yellow-eyed creepshow, Sammy. For *me*. To save *my* worthless ass –"

"You're not worthless, Dean," Sam interrupted. "I'm sure Erika saw that too. After all, if she hadn't saved me, you might –" he cleared his throat before continuing, "– you might have been lost too."

Dean didn't respond to that, but he didn't contradict his brother either, suddenly reminded of the heavy weight of his .45 in his pocket as he sat in the hospital chapel thinking Sam was dead and considering the unthinkable.

"Maybe it was a reward," Sam continued, slightly intrigued by the guilty look on his brother's face but knowing he'd never get Dean to spill whatever it was he was thinking about at that moment.

"For what?" Dean asked, surprised.

"For dealing with Haris," Sam explained. "Erika was on our side from the get-go – remember, she was the one who told us where to find the Seal in the first place. She must have known what we were up against – the odds we were facing. She wanted to help us. I guess she just didn't expect us to capture her and tie her to a chair first..."

Dean chuckled. "Yeah, if I had it all to do again," he said, "I don't think I'd be tying up a Valkyrie demi-goddess with the power of life and death at her fingertips. Well, not unless she wanted me to." He grinned roguishly.

Sam rolled his eyes before musing, "Maybe she just figured it wouldn't be fair to let me die after you got rid of Haris. To you or to me. After all, we did her a favor – one less bad guy for her to deal with, right?"

Dean frowned. "So why did you think she was coming to take you?" he asked. "Why did you think she was a Reaper?"

Sam shrugged. "I think she was coming to take me," he replied. "At least at first. I think maybe she thought taking me would be the kindest thing she could do for me – you know, take me away to my eternal rest? Until I begged her not to."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You begged her not to?"

Sam nodded sheepishly, voice almost breaking. "I had to. I couldn't leave you." He laughed awkwardly before adding, "Think how much crap you'd get yourself into without me to watch your back."

That wasn't Sam's real reason, and Dean knew it. "And that's why she decided to save you instead? Because you asked her to?" Sam shrugged uncertainly, and Dean returned his attention back to the comforter, eventually mumbling, "So I guess she was kind of an angel after all."

Sam shrugged. "I dunno, Dean," he said with a sigh, glancing at the website still displayed on the laptop. "She's still taking people – reaping them before their time."

"Yeah, mobsters," Dean pointed out. "Who's gonna miss those guys?"

"Good or bad," Sam said, "no one has the right to go around killing people, no matter how evil they are."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Er, Mr. Pot paging Mr. Kettle," he said ironically. "Sam, what do we do for a living?"

Sam shrugged. "That's different," he said defensively. "We don't kill *people*, Dean."

Dean's mind drifted back to that guy in the alleyway in Jefferson City; to Meg. "For the most part," he said quietly. "Besides," he continued, mentally shaking himself. "I don't see how Erika can be evil. Not after she saved your life. As far as I'm concerned, that makes her a good guy."

"Maybe," Sam agreed grudgingly. "Still doesn't make it right what she's doing."

"Maybe it does," Dean countered. "Look, Sam, I don't believe in angels and heavenly choirs and some Higher Power looking out for the little guy. If that was true, then why would they have let that happen to Mom? To Jess?"

Sam looked away uncertainly.

"But," Dean continued, "when – when I first came back to the hospital – when I saw your room was empty? I – I thought..."

Sam's eyes returned to his brother. "You thought what?"

"I thought – I thought you were dead, Sammy," Dean admitted. "And this priest – he told me that – that good things happen when you least expect them – and sometimes *where* you least expect them. Maybe Erika is just – I don't know – some kind of counterbalance. Maybe she's just trying to bring a little light into a world full of darkness, a world full of evil."

Sam considered his brother for a long moment, surprised to hear Dean say something like that. "Maybe," he agreed a little reluctantly, before shrugging slightly. "Nice to have someone on our side for a change, anyway."

"With Ferinacci *and* Haris after us?" Dean said. "Man, I didn't think *either* of us was going to make it past your birthday. And without Erika..." He let the sentence hang, and Sam became suddenly very interested in his fingernails. "Anyway," Dean's tone brightened considerably. "I may have lost the Seal, but at least it served its purpose. Haris is gone. It's what we've always dreamed about, right?"

Sam's eyes drifted out the window to the bright blue sky again. "I wonder what'll happen to him."

"I don't give a rat's ass," Dean said with serious conviction. "As long as he's gone. He can float around at the bottom of the ocean until Doomsday for all I care."

Sam grinned. "We really ought to call Dad and tell him."

Dean faltered. "What, and have him yell at me for losing the Seal?" Dean puffed out his chest and did his best approximation of a John Winchester grimace. "So you offed the demon who's been plaguing our lives for the last twenty years, son. So what? You want a medal? You lost the goddamned Seal of Solomon, boy! Talk about careless!"

Sam snorted. "He's not that bad!" he burst out. "I think he'll be kinda proud of you."

Dean's eyes flicked over to Sam's at that, an almost painfully hopeful look on his face for the briefest of instants. "Yeah well. We should at least let him know you're alive. I'm sure he'll be kinda happy about that too."

Sam's expression mirrored Dean's for a second. "I guess," he said, almost sounding uncertain. He shrugged, not wanting to get into that little emotional minefield right now. "As for losing the Seal," he continued brightly. "Think how boring our lives would be if we could just control any demon we wanted! If we're gonna spend our time hunting evil, then the least evil can do is put up a fight, right? Keep us on our toes?"

Another flash of nervous hope lit up Dean's features, and for a second, Sam wasn't sure what he'd said to cause it. "You – so you want to carry on hunting?" Dean finally managed to ask. "I mean – now that Haris – now that he's gone... I thought you might – you know –" He shrugged awkwardly. "You always said you'd want to go back to school."

"I've not really thought about it," Sam lied a little too smoothly, studiously avoiding Dean's gaze.

"Uh-huh," Dean said slowly.

Sam still didn't look at him. "The future's an open book now," he managed at last. "And we got time. Let's just celebrate while we can huh? Before the next bad thing happens!" He finally looked up, and Dean grinned a little reluctantly.

"Little Sammy Winchester," he said, swinging his legs off the bed, turning off the TV and getting to his feet. "Ever the optimist. Come on, dude. I think we've earned a beer."

"Or six," Sam agreed, switching off the laptop and making to follow his brother to the nearest bar.

"One beer only for you, Gloria," Dean said, holding open the motel room door. "I have to sit through your karaoke version of *I Will Survive* one more time and you won't live to see your next birthday..."

Ferinacci Mansion

Luciano Ferinacci leaned back in his expensive leather chair, muted light from the desk lamp falling oddly on the small brass object he had been turning over and over in his hands for the past several minutes.

"You should have let us kill the kid, boss," Stefan grumbled, standing stiffly to attention on the opposite side of the expansive oak desk, feet slightly apart and hands clutched nervously in front of him. "Him and his kid brother."

"No," Ferinacci muttered, continuing his almost obsessive inspection of the Seal of Solomon, the little ring reflecting gold and orange in his hooded eyes. "They fulfilled their purpose."

"God only knows how that punk survived the bullet Gregorio put in him." Stefan shook his head. "No one's ever survived..."

Ferinacci chuckled softly to himself. "I don't think God had much to do with it," he said, reverently placing the Seal on the velvet display cushion positioned on the desk in front of him. "Although those boys did get some 'other-worldly' help I think." Fingers still ghosting over the brass ring, he glanced up at Stefan before adding, "That won't happen again."

He leaned back in the soft leather chair, his hand reluctantly falling away from the Seal. "As it is," he continued, sighing contentedly as the chair gave with a slight creak. "Things worked out better this way. The Winchester boys put down that little upstart's attempted uprising without me even having to lift a finger; he won't be bothering me again any time soon."

Steepling his fingers in front of him, Ferinacci pressed his long index fingers to his lips as his gaze lingered on the Seal of Solomon. "As long as those boys are taking out the competition," he reasoned, "why should I stop them?"

A dark grin stole across his features and his eyes once more flashed with reflected orange light. "At least, not yet anyway."

The End

